Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics

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If, as has been suggested, trouble has a cousin — problem — the two might be confused for one another. The singer — the trouble singer — knows better, but isn’t telling the truth she knows. Problems have solutions, at least ’pataphysical ones; trouble is insoluble, even in/with whiskey. José González (as trouble singer, if not speaker) sees problems down the line, and knows he’s right. We hear trouble in the echo from “Trouble on the Line,” and we hear it in his voice, even as he promises problems.

A clue, then, to the difference between problem and trouble (or problem as trouble, or vice versa): A problem has

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60 Of course, ’pataphysics describes imaginary solutions to imaginary problems. (Thanks to Talan Memmott for the distinction.) And Trouble Songs are in our heads, if not only in our heads (like trouble itself, whatever it may be).

61 The couplet that opens “Down the Line” is a variation on the AAB blues form, where I know that I’m right takes the place of A-line repetition, simultaneously providing the B-line. Such re-placement is exactly the problem here. Repetitions (with slight differences) of the coming same mistake twice refrain will underscore the blues-form adaptation.

   a If we hear the line this way. If we believe the lyric sheet rather than our ears, the line is I know they’re not mine. It’s a better line, if perhaps less formally suggestive in a musicological sense (cf. the blues connection). On the one hand a hard rhyme (line/mine) replaces a more intriguing and less stable off rhyme (line/right). However, the lyric sheet version intensifies interpersonal tension, and positions the singer more explicitly as harbinger. The insistence of I’m right suggests disharmony and doubt, but they’re not mine is an ominous twist, even a threat. Close listening has the line both ways in the song, and the ambiguity is an improvement on either line.

62 and as reverb in the telephone game of floating versions (on March 8, 2014, an All Music Guide search retrieves 913,215 results for “trouble on the line”; by the time the echo drops “trouble,” results are 1,316,216)

63 Promises, promises…

64 that is, hidden trouble
a solution, but problems presents a series — potentially a whole lot of trouble. So “Down the Line” hides trouble: first in its title, then in the song — absence, then replacement. But the refrain that swallows the song — Don’t let the darkness eat you up — is all portent and no pretending. It’s also, after many listens, a cumulative warning — not an affirmation, as at first it might have seemed. The darkness is coming, the darkness has come, the darkness is here.

And here we are, in trouble again.

65 We — including the singer — may have troubles, but we don’t need them to have worry. Trouble is trouble enough.

66 The opening couplet, then, might be an attempt to avoid the AAB refrain (and the problems the couplet foretells) — where the repeated first blues line, which often sets up a problem as a series (or same problem, different day) that is repeated (or repeatedly foils the singer), would be the same mistake twice. The attempt seems to fail in several ways. We might hear that same mistake as the false assurance of the second line — in either variation, though it is particularly poignant on the lyric sheet. Either the first two lines are the same mistake twice (reiterated as I know I’m right) or the second line reads the first incorrectly (where they’re not mine fails to recognize problems as one’s own, and the sage is a fool). By song’s end, the problems of repetition (particularly if repetition — AAB — was to be avoided) worsen in accumulation, as the song is reduced to one line repeated over and over: Don’t let the darkness eat you up. Who then is the you in that line?

67 and cumulus, as gathering and compiling clouds-becoming-darkness

68 Thanks to Claire Donato for sharing this observation.