

‘That’s how it’s supposed to make you feel’: Talking with audiences about ‘Both Sides Now’ and *Love Actually*

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Abstract

Exploring patterns of response across four semi-structured individual interviews, this article outlines some of the different ways that people heard and related to Joni Mitchell’s ‘Both Sides Now’ as it appeared in the soundtrack to Richard Curtis’ *Love Actually* (2003). The interviews were designed to explore how participants’ ways of ‘knowing’ the song connected with their ways of responding to the film, its characters, its structural organisation, and so forth. Analysis focuses on the kinds of knowledge the participants made relevant in their talk, and outlines what participants did with that knowledge as they discussed both the song and the scene from *Love Actually*, before finally considering what ‘Both Sides Now’ achieves for these participants within this excerpt of film. Both song and scene were variously located within the participants’ understandings of their life-worlds and identities: in this way, I argue, they present themselves as more or less “connected” knowers (Hermes, 1995) who discursively manage their involvement with the film and its soundtrack in complex ways.

Keywords: popular music, film, soundtrack, audience, interview.

Introduction: the research project and research methods

Although audiences routinely hear popular music in cinematic contexts, the processes by which they make sense of the soundtrack are rarely discussed. My doctoral research sought to explore how audiences hear and relate to popular songs in films, and the interviews that form the basis of this article were the second phase of that project (Anderson, 2009). The research was prompted by my observation that across the burgeoning field of film music studies, little attention was paid to how audiences hear and relate to popular music in film soundtracks. Emerging key works had examined popular music and film from a variety of

perspectives (for example, Romney and Wootton, 1995; Smith, 1998; Donnelly, 2001; Kassabian, 2001; Wojcik and Knight, 2001; and Inglis, 2003), ranging from discussion of textual relationships (between music and images) to analysis of positions offered by the text to an assumed viewer, to reviewing motivations for using popular music instead of a composed score. However, theory and supposition dominated much of this writing around film and music. Even those studies that started to investigate audience responses did not seem to allow audiences to account for their meaning making on their own terms,¹ while other accounts of audiences remained entirely theoretical (see, for example, Kassabian, 2001, and Smith, 1998)². My research, in contrast, took a qualitative approach to investigating audiences, using semi-structured interviews that generated relatively naturalistic conversation about a sequence from a commercially released film.

Having completed a first phase of interviews in March 2007, with friendship groups distinguished by age and gender (see Anderson, 2011) I decided a second round of interviews would be useful to explore the themes of self-definition, vernacular categories and theories³, and emotional or affective factors that had emerged from the first round of focus group interviews. These second interviews, conducted in January 2008, had an explicit focus on music, in contrast to the more general discussion of the focus groups. The follow up discussions involved one member from each focus group, and focused exclusively on 'Both Sides Now' by Joni Mitchell and the scene in which the song appears in *Love Actually*. This scene is the climactic point of the storyline focusing on Karen (Emma Thompson) and Harry (Alan Rickman): Karen realises Harry's infidelity when she receives a CD for Christmas instead of a piece of jewellery she had seen him buy earlier in the film.

It is important to note some of the sequence's particularities. While it is impossible to know how these details may have influenced the research material without having conducted comparison interviews about another scene, it is possible that the defining features of this sequence may have shaped the material analysed in this project. First, the 'Both Sides Now' sequence focuses on a middle-aged female character. As I will discuss later, age was a factor in how the participants related to the scene and the character portrayal, and the character's gender also became relevant: different responses might have been generated had I used a sequence that focused on a person from a different age or gender background. Second, the scene is dramatic and tragic in tone, especially in contrast to the romantic and comedic style of much of the rest of *Love Actually*. Representing a crisis point for Karen, this narrative moment makes emotional demands of the film's audience. It was clear in the focus group discussion that the groups of men and women related to such demands in different ways: the scene's invitation to an emotional response, then, proved a productive focal point to explore how music played into a range of audience responses.

Whether or not the participants liked the scene, the aim of the research was to explore how they expressed their relations to it, and how they talked about what the song and the scene achieved and what it meant for them. As I have explained elsewhere (Anderson, 2011), the key emergent strand of analysis for the focus groups was discussing where these films had 'succeeded' or 'failed' in the participants' estimations. Therefore, the

follow-up interviews were designed to explore the ways of categorising music and film that led to such evaluations: that is, the second interviews essentially tried to find out when and why music is deemed to 'work' in a film. My sense from the focus groups was that these evaluations were made according to senses of identity and authenticity, so the follow-up interviews were designed to elicit talk around issues of 'appropriateness' of music, using the chosen scene as a prompt, and to access a range of talk around how the participants made sense of a song and a film sequence in which that song appeared.

I opened the interviews by explaining that I wanted to explore an issue arising from the focus groups concerning how people engage with music in film, and how that relates to their engagement with it in other contexts, especially with how categorisations occur across these processes. I played 'Both Sides Now' (on a laptop with speakers attached), then asked a series of open-ended questions designed to encourage talk around how the participant made sense of that song, what they considered appropriate listening contexts for the song, and what 'sort' of song they thought it was (see Anderson, 2009, for the full interview schedule). We then viewed the clip from *Love Actually* (again on the laptop). The questions following the clip were similarly open-ended and broad in scope, and gave participants the opportunity to explain their understanding of the scene (its characters, and its place within the narrative), and their understanding of the music's role within the scene. In contrast to the focus groups, these interviews were more direct in asking about the participants' interpretation of the music within the scene: questions included "what do you think the music's saying to her? And about her?" and "what do you think the music does to the scene as a whole?"

I selected participants for these follow-up interviews based on their contributions in the focus groups, choosing to approach those whose responses I felt had evidenced potentially productive ways of talking about music: Mel from Focus Group 1 (under 25-year-old women), Kati from Focus Group 2 (over 45-year-old women), Gethin from Focus Group 3 (over 45-year-old men), and Ben from Focus Group 4 (under 25-year-old men)⁴. Another pragmatic factor played into these decisions: I selected participants with whom I had had firsthand contact before the focus group interviews, so I could contact them directly rather than having to go through the individuals who had arranged the friendship groups for me.⁵

The scene proved to be a very fruitful topic for the interviews, generating relevant and interesting research material. Clearly, no firm conclusion or model of audience response can be reasonably developed from just four interviews (even when taken in conjunction with the earlier focus groups, one can only point towards particular directions for future investigations). However, the interviews still reveal intriguing emergent patterns and complexities, which the remainder of this article outlines. Through my analyses of these interviews I have sought to answer three guiding questions: what kinds of knowledge did participants make relevant about the song and the film; what did the participants do with that knowledge as they listened to and talked about 'Both Sides Now' and the scene it accompanies; and what, in light of that, did the song achieve for these participants within this excerpt from *Love Actually*? The following account shows the participants engaging

with the film in a variety of ways, drawing on a range of vernacular theories of popular music and film soundtracks, and positioning themselves on a scale of what Hermes (1995) refers to as 'connected' knowing. Their responses ultimately reveal the complexity of audience relations to popular music in film soundtracks.

'Knowledge' and meaning making across the four interviews.

It is important to acknowledge the awkwardness of the term 'knowledge'. Jeff Smith's (1998) implicit definition of 'knowledge' in the context of film soundtracks centres on publicly available information, and not personal or localised understandings. However, the term remains a the most succinct and practical way to refer to the full range of understandings, recognitions, relations, and information that a person might draw on in making sense of a cultural object, and it is for this reason that I continue to use the word here. I am thus approaching the sort of definition that Joke Hermes draws on in *Reading Women's Magazines*:

[Knowledge] has to be conceived in the broadest possible sense; not as the result of ratiocination nor in the sense of clarified and distinct knowledge, nor clear perceptions of truth. The term rather includes all kinds of beliefs: from the unfounded, blind belief to the well-founded conviction, from the assumption of mere chance or likelihood to the confidence of empirical certainty. Thus, knowledge may refer to the possible, conceivable, imaginable, to what is feasible, or practicable, workable or achievable, accessible or obtainable, what can be hoped for and what has to be dreaded (Schutz, in Natanson 1986: 31, cited in Hermes, 1995: 23).

Across the four individual interviews, a variety of "knowledges" were made relevant in the participants' talk, including knowledge of popular music history, personal memories and associations, interpretations of the song's theme, understandings of age-appropriate music categories as well as life stages more generally, awareness of film music conventions, and general senses of musical sounds and styles. Not only were a variety of knowledges evident, but the knowledges were mobilised in varying ways, such as to create critical distance, to add meaning or closure to a scene, to relate more closely to the character, to critique the film's use of music, and to manage the film's perceived call to emotional response. The relation between type of knowledge and use of knowledge is not always direct: as will become clear, different participants used different types of knowledge to achieve the same end, or used the same type of knowledge to achieve different ends.

For example, both Gethin and Kati knew the song before hearing it in the interview and their first comments about it are revealing. Gethin said "Well, I mean.. I know it, because it's.. it's Clouds by Joni Mitchell" while Kati noted immediately that the song played was a "nice version" (indicating an awareness of other versions), but then moved straight into relating the song to her own life: "Way back, I think this was one of the ones that

Roberta Flack sang when my husband and I first met!". Gethin's immediate identification of the song suggested at the outset that "knowing" the song in this factual and definite way is important to him⁶, while Kati's comment reflects her tendency to locate popular culture within the context of a life trajectory (whether her own, or a generalised sense of life stages). However, even though Gethin and Kati were both what Smith might call "informed viewers" (Smith, 1998: 167), they used their pre-existing 'knowledge' in markedly different ways.

Gethin

Gethin spent some time evaluating the song, deeming it not as good as the rest of Joni Mitchell's output: "I think she's done a lot better stuff than that. Stuff with a .. that.. that [stays] a little bit more scratchy and not quite so sentimental". Ultimately, though, Gethin made most use of his familiarity with the song to discursively decline the invitation to emotional response he saw in the *Love Actually* scene. His associations encompass other music that fits within his taste bracket at a particular time of his life, other music that sounds like this song, and a broader memory or nostalgia for the time of his life when this song would have formed part of his 'soundscape'.

Gethin indicated that he perceived both song and film as inviting or suggesting a particular type of response or level of participation or engagement. For example, near the start of the interview he said he had tried to imagine where the song might appear in a film: while he did not mention *Love Actually*, he did predict that it would be used "as a filler in a part of the film where somebody is enjoying some sort of sentimental romantic experience [...] And that could be used then to try to give the impression of.. you.. yeah, I suppose to heighten the, kind of, emotion of the people that are actually watching it, you know?". This statement indicates his understanding of the type of response (heightened emotion) he thinks is expected of the viewer of a film in which this song would feature. Watching this clip during the interview seemed to confirm his assumptions: "... it hasn't altered my view. I still don't like listening to it at that.. you know, played like that. And it's quite interesting that *because* the arrangement is sentimental it does heighten people's feelings I think. It *does* have an effect". The sense that the song had been chosen to encourage a stronger emotional response to this particular scene recurred later in the interview, when Gethin asserted that "they" were trying to use the song to set the scene, build emotion and give extra impact.

Gethin's own responses are complex. He uses his knowledges (about the song's era, style, performer, and so on, and about the type of role he feels he is being asked to perform) to manage his own emotional response to the scene. He partly declines the invitations by using generalisations and discursive displacements and through claiming an expertise by evaluating aspects of the film/song relationship. At the same time he conditionally accepts some invitations by using his range of 'knowledges' about this song to defuse or avoid the sentimentality trap.

There were points where Gethin's talk indicated that he does allow himself to respond emotionally to the scene. In these moments where the force of the invited response cannot be denied or displaced, he manages his own emotional response by using his knowledges to make such a response safe. Thus, any emotional response on his part would be deemed acceptable because he has established a relationship with the characters through their similar musical tastes: he says "So you sort of think 'oh, so.. so, yeah, they listen to Joni Mitchell as well', and you think 'oh, well that's interesting'". Gethin thus seemed to be making two links between himself and the characters: one is age-related (he refers to Karen as a "girl of my age") and the other taste-related.

The following extract illustrates one way Gethin managed his emotional response (sympathy) to the scene during the interview:

- LA Mm-mm. Erm, what do you think we're meant to feel about her?
GSympathetic.
- LA Mm-mm?
- G **Definitely done for sympathy.** Erm, the way it's.. the way it's set up, erm, also ... m.. maybe .. a little bit of, erm .. (breaths out: struggles to find word?) th..if..may.. **maybe it depends again on how old you are. (laughs) and maybe if you.. if you're of a similar age, then the sympathy thing is more important.** If.. if you're younger, then maybe it's more of a reflection on what happens to relationships, you know? And, er, how.. they can run into difficulties over a period of time, maybe. But that's guessing really.
- LA Mm-mm. So, if that's what we're 'meant' to feel, what do you think, or feel towards her as a character?
- G What did I feel?
- LA Mm.
- G **I felt.. yeah, I th.. I think it worked with me. I think I felt very sympathetic.** Erm ... Mainly because, erm, the husband, er .. gives the impression of ... I'm not thinking about that sequence, but what had happened before.. of really losing his way a bit, and .. basically, making a bit of a fool of himself, you know. **And so, you know, you feel sympathetic, and you feel, yeah, she probably deserves a little bit better than that** ... because.. you know, it's not as if .. he's got involved with another woman of a similar age, he.. he's chasing after a girl who looks about half his age, you know, and it doesn't look like a good idea (laughs)

The difference between Gethin's account of what we're "meant" to feel and what he does feel are revealing. His explanation of how the film invites a sympathetic response seems to centre on the age of the viewer, but his own response is tied more to his evaluation of

Harry's digression: in fact, it is not entirely clear whether he sympathising with Karen or with her husband. Gethin's sympathy for Karen is mediated through his assessment of how far Harry is making foolish mistakes. Gethin's resistance to the music thus reflects something of a disinclination to be 'on her side'.

Despite acknowledging his own sympathetic response, overall Gethin constructed the film's perceived demand for a strong emotional response as something that might snare an unwitting audience member against their will. Gethin carefully weighs and balances factors that might play into his reaction, and seems ready to dismiss anything that risks being 'overdone'. At several points across the interview, Gethin displaced his evaluations on to other audience members: this was evident in his use of generalised pronouns such as "they" or "people" in his talk (instead of "I" or "me"). Two excerpts are of particular interest here (the first of which has already been quoted above):

G [...] *because* the arrangement is sentimental it does heighten **people's** feelings I think. It *does* have an effect

[...]

G Er. And obviously.. I s'pose .. I mean, I don't know if the film was aimed at, sort of **forty-stroke-fifty-somethings**, but (laughs) if it.. if it is, and I suppose to a certain extent it is, really, **that's the sort of audience** they're probably looking at.. to use a fairly well-known singer from the 60s, 70s, and to actually give the CD with that singer's name as part of the sequence, it does, erm ... keep **people's** interest, you know?

Gethin draws here on his knowledge about musical styles to declare the arrangement 'sentimental'. He acknowledges a (strong) pull for a certain type of emotional response ("It *does* have an effect") but because he does not want to respond that way himself he displaces the response on to "people". Notably, he even makes this distancing move when discussing the "forty-stroke-fifty-somethings" target audience, his own age-bracket. That is, he denies the emotional effect on him by deeming it too sentimental, but he cannot deny the force of it entirely so he depersonalises it and displaces it onto other "people". The unwitting audience member might be caught in the sentimentality trap, but Gethin will not be, because he has these defences firmly in place.

Kati

Kati, in contrast, maintained a close relationship to the song throughout most of the interview. She did not spend much time describing her own associations with the song, apart from the comment relating to her husband quoted earlier. Instead she moved on to discussing the theme of the song:

- K Yeah, I thought, I've always actually loved that one. Er, I think just because ... I guess it reflects something that everybody .. feels one way or another at some point .. that, they've.. you know, you go through life thinking one thing and then something happens just to turn it over, and .. you find it's something different.

It is worth briefly noting the shift between third- and second-person pronouns here: Kati starts making a generalisation about "everybody" ('they') but moves back to the more familiar and inclusive "you". I see this as her implicitly including herself in the generalisation, rather than displacing the process on to other people (as was Gethin's tendency). This shift in pronouns reflects a wider pattern of inclusiveness in Kati's approach to the song: she draws the song in to her own life, and despite occasional attempts to be objective, does not seem able to maintain such a critical distance for very long.

Kati's reading of the theme continued after this initial comment: she interpreted the song as "somebody reflecting on their various experiences". It seemed important to Kati that this person was not pessimistic about the negative experiences (and here again the talk shifts between third- and second-person, reflecting a 'drawing in close' of this theme):

- K Erm. ... I just guess somebody reflecting upon their.. various experiences and.. and .. erm... and yet not being entirely down about .. the negative aspects ... Erm. Yeah, the.. the last verse is actually quite hopeful, I think.
- LA Mm-mmm.
- K But, er. ... That's .. that's always very nice is .. to.. to think that there is whatever at the end you know, that you.. you aren't .. what's the word, ermmm, spoiled by bad experiences?

Thus, one key type of knowledge that Kati draws on is her interpretation of the theme of the song, and her understanding that it reflects a phenomenon she sees as widely-experienced.

This interpretation of theme carried over into Kati's discussion of appropriate contexts for listening to this song. She describes a potential listening situation as follows:

- K [...] perhaps romantically involved couples who might think of it as 'their song', and .. that they, you know.. they've had their ups and downs, or they.. they've come together having had different partners or whatever, and .. and, er, this is something that they now feel that they've reached, there's a point at which they've ... had their ... their visions knocked off a bit and then they've found something else, which is .. yeah. That they now feel.. perhaps more settled.

Kati further uses her ‘knowledge’ of the song’s theme in the way she relates to the scene from *Love Actually*. Kati’s ‘knowledges’ related to the song – of its theme, of the experience it reflects, of people’s emotional management techniques, and of the song’s appropriate listening contexts – underpinned much of her talk about the scene as a whole. Rather than relating to the whole film, though, Kati related the theme of the song to Karen’s situation only (she barely mentions Harry, Karen’s husband, in contrast with Ben and Gethin who focus on him more in managing their relations to the scene).

Kati’s knowledge of the theme of the song comes to the fore again in response to my asking ‘what do you think Karen’s thinking of the music, if she can hear it?’:

- LA Right. Erm. What do you think she’s thinking of the music, if she can hear it in there?
- K In her head, she’s hearing the music, erm ... That she’s been in a fool’s paradise?
- LA Mm-mmm.
- K That she was.. she took things, perhaps, her relationship for granted.. or took it for granted that her husband was feeling the same things as she was, and then .. found that there was a different side to his life.

This interpretation of the song in the scene bears marked similarity to Kati’s interpretation of the song at the earlier point in the interview: the theme is again evidence of a person reflecting on experiences and coming to a realisation of the truth of his or her situation. It is worth noting that Kati is far less concerned than Gethin with whether Karen is actually listening to the music within the scene. Kati seems more accepting of the music’s presence in the scene: even though she says Karen is hearing the music in her head, she goes on to explain its relevance. Gethin, on the other hand, stressed the diegetic impossibility of the music, explaining that Karen had not had a chance to put the CD on, and that this made its presence less “convincing”.

Notably, at this stage of the discussion, the hopefulness that Kati had noted in the lyrics to the song is not translated to the scene:

- K Erm. For her? It’s returning her to the, I suppose, the reality of the fact that she’s.. you know, she’s got to keep going and doing whatever it is she’s doing, and accept that perhaps she was a bit .. blind.
- LA Mm-mmm. So, that would be what the music’s kind of saying to her?
- K Yes, that she’s been .. merrily going along and ... in her own way and thinking everything was fine, and that there was no ... no trouble between them.

Kati's interpretation here of what the song might be doing in this scene seems less linked to her earlier comment that "you aren't spoiled by bad experiences", and more tending towards an idea that Karen has to keep going, no matter that she might feel like falling apart. Kati's discussion at this point is centring on the moment depicted in the scene rather than looking forward to what might later happen to Karen: that is, she identifies this moment as one stage within the broader process represented within the song. The more positive or settled feelings, therefore, might come much later for Karen: at the moment she is in the middle of her very raw emotions and would not be able to see any potential for hope.

This sense of 'just getting on with it' is repeated in Kati's next comment, but then she begins to move towards the more hopeful view that Karen "is capable of surviving":

- LA Sure. Mm-mmm. So would you say the music says anything different about her, if that's what it's saying.. says, sort of, to her?
- K Says about her. Well, it certainly .. dates her! (laughs) And, erm ... and that she's a very stoical sort of woman who .. I suppose if things .. go pear-shaped and the husband does go off with the secretary then **she will just have to cope and get on with it.**
- LA Mm-mmm. What is it in the music that says that to you?
- K I guess the erm, the looking at things from both sides. The, erm, [how does it go?] (muttering) 'it's life's illusions I recall, and I really don't know love at all' (normal voice) erm ... I suppose it's the.. you.. you know there's always the .. ethereal.. no, not ethereal, the sort of ... this is the romantic version, and this is what's actually happening, and you have to .. or **the music is saying that she is .. capable of surviving, if you like, the er, whatever traumas might come about.**

Here, then, Kati reads the song as starting to take Karen through this difficult transition in her life: at the beginning, the song was telling her that she had "been a bit blind"; now, however, it is telling her that she is "capable of surviving". This interpretation of the character and the scene reflects Kati's interpretation of the theme represented in the song's lyrics. The music functions in two ways here: first, it encourages Karen to keep going; second, it reassures Kati that Karen will be alright. This means Kati can bring her full understanding of the theme, including the hopeful element, to the scene, even though the scene does not portray the entire process she sees represented by the song.

Mel

Although she wasn't familiar with the song, like Kati and Gethin had been, Mel also made use of her interpreted theme of the song when discussing the *Love Actually* sequence: she interpreted the song as "peaceful [...] after something dramatic's happened [...] it's almost like the calm after the storm". As I discuss below, this duality between peace and trauma

can be traced through much of Mel's talk about the song and the scene. I would also argue that it relates to points in her talk where she distinguishes between surface or appearance as opposed to depth or inner emotion. Through these interpretations, she draws on knowledges that seem to be related to aspects of the human emotional condition: Mel utilises her understanding of emotions and their complexity, ideas about development of personal strength, and the notion that a person's surface presentation may not be a direct reflection of their inner feelings.

Mel's relationships to both song and scene are, overall, the most straightforward of all four follow-up interview participants. She said that she liked the song, and responded positively to the scene: she made no obvious moves to point out shortcomings or inconsistencies, or to adopt critical or distanced positions, and there are virtually no inconsistencies or puzzling remarks in the interview. Moreover, Mel clearly involved herself very closely with the scene: at some points she seemed to be responding to Karen as if she were a real person that Mel knew (of course, Mel does 'know' Karen by virtue of having seen *Love Actually* many times). This close relation or investment in the film was also revealed in Mel's comment about being caught up in the character's life: "you obviously know the storyline, cos [you've?] just watched the film, you're kind of entangled in her life". This provides a clear image of involvement in the narratives while watching: Mel is describing an intense and closely felt encounter with a fictional storyline. Moreover, the comment is given in 'you' form, indicating that she sees this as a generalised assumption of how people react. She does not speculate about how 'the audience' would react, but rather extends her own mode of response to all who might view the film.

Mel's detailed interpretation of the theme of the song suggests that even when an audience member is not very familiar with a track, they can make complex interpretations of it in a viewing context. Although Mel sometimes struggled to articulate her interpretation, she made use of both lyrical and musical elements to make meaning from the song text:

M (quietly) Erm. Mm. I like it. (normal volume). Erm, it's quite a peaceful song .. but almost like.. **something traumatic's happened then it's like peaceful after that.**

LA Mm-mmm.

M Erm. ... Yeah. Obviously the lyrics are quite interesting.. like, erm. And ...(pause)... **Yeah, cos she's obviously talking about something quite painful, and like.. that she's learnt from it, but then the melody's quite, erm.. and the.. the instruments and stuff are, yeah, as I said, quite peaceful** and ... I don't know whether calming's the right.. I suppose almost like, er ... (quietly) oh, what's the word (normal volume, definitely) melancholy, erm, in a way.

LA Mm-mmm. So, erm. Can you say a bit more about what it is about the, like, the erm.. there's quite a contrast there between what

you're saying.. she's singing about this, and.. but the music's that. Is that .. ?

M Yeah, er, I.. I think it's that whole thing about what.. what I said before about it being peaceful, but almost like.. after something dramatic's happened. Like, say she's.. **it's almost like the calm after the storm.** Er. So she's obviously still reflecting on that, but the music seems to be reflecting a more peaceful [element?] of it. Er, and she's obviously reflecting on.. on it afterwards. So although it's like this underlying ... (struggles for word) or.. not.. not disturbing, **but there's like this underlying kind of ... not-peacefulness, but the ... but then... when it all comes together it seems to be quite peaceful then..**

LA Oh, OK.

M Cos.. like the instruments that are used and the melodies and stuff.

The lyrics are understood as being sung by someone who is “talking about something quite painful” but the melody and instrumentation are “peaceful”, lending the song a calmness overall, and suggesting that the painful thing is no longer raw but can be safely reflected upon.

Shortly after these comments, Mel explained further that this peacefulness conveyed by the song is “more meaningful” because of the trauma that is described in the lyrics:

M Erm, yeah, I like the sound, the ... [quiet comment – indist.] As I say, it's .. oh, I keep saying peaceful, I'm trying to think of a better word for it, but erm, it is kind of that .. calming thing, but the not in kind of just a .. it's quite a .. **you can tell that something deep, or something has happened, and so it's.. almost seems more meaningful, the calmingness that happens out of it. Erm, rather than it just being like 'oh, everything's fine'. It seems a bit more substantial.**

This suggests that Mel values the notion that the singer has worked for this calmness: the vocalist does not dismiss the past problem (“oh, everything's fine”) and so the calmness or peacefulness now displayed represents a personal achievement of overcoming the “something dramatic” or “traumatic” that has happened. Here, Mel again alludes briefly to the tension between surface and depth that underpins a lot of her talk about this theme.

There is also marked similarity between Mel's responses about her own feelings and responses to the scene, and her responses to my question of “what do you think we're meant to feel about her?” This potentially arises out of her generally positive engagement with *Love Actually*: she does not need to distance her own responses from the ones she sees the film requesting. That is, she is happy to occupy the role of ‘implied audience member’ that she sees set up by the film: this position sees the scene as a crisis or dilemma that has

to be lived through and experienced (albeit vicariously) rather than rejected (for example, for being too sentimental).

Mel stated that the music reflects Karen's feelings, explaining that the lyrics were "quite important" because they highlighted the idea that Karen "thought that she was really happy and that everything was sorted, whereas now she knows that it wasn't". Thus, Mel returns again to the contrast between contentment and trauma that underpinned her talk about the song, seeing that process of realisation depicted quite literally in the scene.

It seems that the lyrics are most important for reflecting Karen's feelings, but Mel made an interesting comment that suggested the music as a whole also gives special insight to Karen's thoughts:

M Erm, yeah, I mean in.. in that instance I guess **the lyrics are quite prominent** cos obviously she's not saying anything and it's a very.. quiet piece and, like, she's just standing in the room at one point. Erm. But then.. and also because the music is quite, er ... Erm, not unimposing, but kind of just, er ... Not calming really either, but kind of just .. you're co.. **you're focused on the lyrics, whereas being aware that there's kind of this .. other music [in the background?].**

LA Mmm. Erm. ...

M ...Yeah, and the lyrics themselves.. like, she's not.. she's obviously saying them quite emotionally, so it's.. it's almost like the tone of her voice as well being.. erm, emphasising that at the time. Erm, and she's not speaking through them, either. **So like there are gaps where you just hear the music and you can just see the pictures and stuff, and you.. you kind of glimpse what she's thinking more.**

I have interpreted Mel's last statement here as referring to the parts early in the scene where the camera passes across the family photographs on Karen's dresser, before it pulls out to focus (for the remainder of the scene) entirely on her crying and attempting to compose herself before returning downstairs to her husband and children. Mel is thus suggesting that the music provides insight to Karen's thoughts, even at the points before these are explicitly expressed in the scene. The music also suggests the particular form of her thoughts when we do eventually see Karen crying. That is, the song as a whole lends insight to the specific nature of Karen's inner feelings: the lyrics and the sound of the music combine to give a particular sense, for Mel, that Karen is upset because her sense of stability in her marriage has been shaken.

While the above comments relate more clearly to the upset 'trauma' or 'storm' part of the calm/storm duality, Mel's discussion suggested that the song also goes some way to conveying the 'calm' that will come for Karen. For Mel, the song acknowledges Karen's feelings in an "affirming but encouraging" way: it does not wallow in them, but neither does it dismiss them. It accepts or permits Karen's experience of these "deeply sad" emotions,

but also reassures her, and by providing an opportunity for reflection, encourages her that she is going to come through the experience to reach the state of being “peaceful [...] after something dramatic’s happened” that Mel interprets from the song. In making this interpretation, Mel imagined her own reaction if she were in Karen’s situation:

M Yeah, in a way, yeah. Erm. Yeah, I suppose she.. if she was like listening to that, but I guess.. well, if I was listening to that if I were her, erm, you’d find it al.. almost like affirming but encouraging, so like, because you’re saying, yeah OK, that’s recognised, it’s not like someone going ‘no, that’s .. not there’ cos [you know it is there?]. Then, yeah, kind of encouraging and kind of moving forward, in the sense that you’ve been encouraged, therefore the next step is to move forward.

For Mel, the question of whether Karen can hear the music within the scene is irrelevant. The imagined reaction instead indicates her close relation to this scene and its characters. This closeness is also evident in Mel’s reaction of feeling like she wants to help Karen: Mel recounted that her initial responses to the scene were sadness at and disappointment in Harry, but she then added “Then.. you’re kind of like, you really want to encourage her, and kind of help her and stuff”. Mel’s report of her strongly-felt emotional response to this scene is real and direct; there is no acknowledgment of the fictional status of the character.

Mel returns to the concept of strength in this discussion of how the song acknowledges Karen’s emotional turmoil:

LA OK, yeah, right. Erm. So if that’s what it’s sort of saying to her, what would you say that the music’s saying about her?

M Hmm ... I think.. by saying that, it says about her that **she’s quite strong**, because many people wouldn’t .. erm.. maybe take the time.. because I.. I guess the peaceful element of it is kind of.. she’s actually stopped and.. **took the time to think about it**, almost, erm, and recognised that she feels sad, or, you know, recognised her actual emotions at the time, erm .. erm, and I guess it shows the experience that’s.. that she’s had, and.. again the song like, kind of, says that. Erm. Yeah, so it.. I don’t know, it brings out that kind of strength .. element, but not almo.. **not like a brash strength, kind of a.. OK, this is my experience, but she uses it to kind of get stronger.**

The stopping to reflect on emotions is important to Mel: it lends a quiet strength to Karen’s character (rather than ‘brashly’ pushing through the upset, she takes the time to acknowledge it, and in doing so gains strength to continue). The song is again making clear Karen’s internal processing at this point.

Ben also made comments about the way 'Both Sides Now' "takes you through" the scene in *Love Actually* (see discussion below), and, like Mel, Ben was not familiar with the song before listening to it in the interview. Both Mel and Ben had clear senses of what 'type' of song 'Both Sides Now' exemplified, however: they each drew on clearly understood vernacular categories of music. This indicates that whether or not a person "knows" a particular song, he or she can still draw on a wide range of "knowledges" about music in making sense of it.

Mel and Ben each related 'Both Sides Now' to their own music tastes. Mel explained that the song would be one she might put on while "pottering about" at home: "I suppose I would be in quite a calm mood to start with. Erm. Yeah, just some nice background music, I guess". Her evaluation of appropriate listening environments or situations seemed to be related to the musical qualities and mood of the song, rather than its lyrical content: "it's not a bouncy, happy, clappy song. But then, it's not completely depressing". Her evaluation was overall based on the song's "peaceful" quality. Ben, on the other hand, did not think he would listen to this song himself: while he would potentially "appreciate" it in a film, it wasn't the sort of song he would "kick back and listen to in [his] room or anything like that". Ben put this down to a matter of taste: while he said "there's nothing unlikeable about it, I suppose, it's not like a.. a fil.. a song that I would detest", overall he thought it was "little bit sort of soppy, and just not something I'd choose to listen to, I'd normally to a bit more, sort of, high tempo stuff [...] Just not quite in my taste bracket I suppose."

Despite these differences in taste, both Ben and Mel made use of age-related categorisations in relation to the song. When asked "who else might listen to [this song]?", Mel replied "I imagine.. older rather than younger people". Ben likewise described the track as "a song for the older age group". Despite this similarity in attribution, Mel and Ben gave different reasons for their age-related classifications. Mel drew on an understanding of the lyrics, explaining that the singer was referring to experiences that younger people may not be able to relate to as well as older people might, and that the 'older/younger' division was not a specific age bracket, but rather an "experience bracket". So, "people who can relate to it better would choose to [listen to it]" while "young teenagers, or generally teenagers, might not". Mel placed herself in the "younger age of the older bracket", thereby allowing herself to relate to the song as a whole, but also displaying an awareness that she might not yet have had the kinds of life experiences that would enable her to relate fully to all aspects of the lyrics.

Ben's age-related evaluation remained focused on the sound of the song. He describes it as "a slow, sort of ballad-y type song". Initially he suggests it might be "an older couple's, like, 'their' song, sort of thing", and then continues to explain as follows:

- B [...] it's quite hard to sort of, stereotype it, but I ju.. I don't know why, it's the sort of.. as I said it's the slow tempo to it, erm, the fact that it does seem like quite a slow sort of moving song, and .. erm ... I dunno, **it just seems like something that isn't quite out of these.. this day**

and age, sort of music, you know, erm. You categorise sort of this day and age as like **the young scallies and.. all.. all the oldies thinking ‘what are you listening to, that’s just noise’** and the parents, and things like that. It sounds like something that’s more from the.. **what they would call ‘that’s real music’ sort of thing.**

While Ben indicated a reluctance to try to attribute taste to groups of people because it is “such a varied thing”, he does outline some stylistic features of his definition of “older people’s music”: it is slower tempo, sounds like a ballad, and has string instruments. He draws this categorisation around a wider stereotypical distinction between “young scallies’ noise” and “older people’s ‘real’ music”: the reference to parents suggests that he might even associate this distinction with conversations within his own family about musical tastes (or perceived lack thereof!).

Ben

Across most of the interview with Ben, his talk revealed a relatively non-invested way of talking about the song and scene when compared to the other three participants. Ben did not seem to have encountered the song before, and did not recognise it as Joni Mitchell (her name was never mentioned during the interview, even after Ben had seen the clip). Unlike Gethin, Ben did not seem to identify as much of an emotional pull created by the combination of song and scene, and unlike Kati and Mel he did not seem to closely relate to the emotions depicted in this sequence from *Love Actually*. Rather than drawing on specific associations about this track, Ben utilises his more generalised, but apparently quite extensive, knowledge about music and film.

Ben’s lack of pre-existing knowledge specifically related to this song meant that his talk about the film scene seemed more rooted in the present situation: although he had seen the film before, he did not seem to have reflected on this scene as Kati and Mel had (perhaps due to its “easy watching”⁷ status) and so it seemed that his discussion during the interview was more immediate, as if this might have been the first occasion where he had thought in more depth about this particular sequence. However, although he had not reflected on the scene, he did seem to have some firmly held views on the film/music/audience relationship, upon which he drew in making his interpretations.

Immediately after hearing the song in the interview, Ben said he had been trying to imagine where the song would fit in a film, wondering broadly if it might be “more like an ending to a film than a beginning”. He later became more specific about where the song might be heard, saying it might be an introduction, or a long love scene in the middle, or a dramatic ending, but also stated, somewhat contradictorily, that this scene would not be a “major” incident or turning point in the film. He related this to the style of the song: its tempo and the way it was sung made it sound “soft” and “emotional”. The most specific imagery was explained as we came to the end of this first section of the interview:

- LA OK. Erm.. is there anything else that .. popped into your head?
- B Erm. No, I dunno, I just (clears throat) one.. one of my first impressions was that it would be.. like, the very ope.. before it actually started the lyrics and things, and started singing and getting a bit more into it, it just.. like the opening for a couple of, er, minute or so was.. the first thing that popped into my head was it would be like, I dunno, like a helicopter shot⁸ from a film, or something, or.. or, like I said, like a slow ending to a film, or an intric.. an introduction to a.. spanning across landscape or something. I dunno why, just the way.. the way it was sort of structured and.. erm.. the way it was very soft, the opening as well.

Although Ben says he does not know why these images come to mind, I suggest he is drawing on his 'knowledge' of film music conventions: he makes use of his previous experience of watching films and listening to their soundtracks to posit a potential cinematic location for this song.

Across Ben's interview, a rather structured vernacular theory of film music emerges: a film/music/audience relationship based around four key elements underpins Ben's discussion of the scene from *Love Actually*. The first tenet of his vernacular theory is that film can make a song "work" in a way that it might not when it is heard on its own. That is, *Love Actually* "sets you up" for this song to mean more than it would if you were listening to it without a context. The 'setting up' process relies on narrative structure: information had been given in the lead up to this moment so that "if you've seen the whole thing in a row [...] the film sets you up emotionally for the fall that she's about to have". This relationship to the film makes the song "work" for Ben: "I think without the context of the film and the scene that they've built up like that, I don't think it works very well."

Ben comes closest to clarifying what he means by this idea of "work" when he states "the song works so much better in a film than it does on its own sometimes. Unless you're feeling that particular emotion, but that's the great thing about film is that it sort of sets you up for the song to work with it, if you see what I mean." Thus, one can infer that for a song to 'work' means it must make you feel something you would not have otherwise felt. 'Both Sides Now' "worked" within this film because the scene gave the song's lyrics and sentiment a context in relation to which to 'mean' something, and thus potentially to make Ben feel something.

The second key element of Ben's conception of the film/music/audience relationship is an assumption that audiences will likely concentrate on the acting or the action in a scene rather than the lyrics or meaning of a song, but that even if they have not closely attended to it while watching the film they will still make an interpretation of the song based on the context in which it is played. This is closely related to the above idea about context making a song meaningful. According to Ben's model "the way they're acting is trying to tell you what kind of song it should be". He posits a situation where soundtracks are not usually

read as closely as the screen action, which can lead to misinterpretation of the ‘actual’ meaning of the song (he and Gethin both place importance on the idea of a song having a singular fixed message). In such a scenario, a “happy scene, like a final kiss at the end of the film” would lead to the audience “naively” reading the song as happy, whether or not the lyrics or instrumentation would be interpreted as such on their own.⁹

The third element of Ben’s understanding of the film/music/audience relationship is the view that a wide range of songs might work for any given scene, or that each film/song relationship has a certain arbitrariness to it. However, Ben tends to accept a song’s use in a film because he assumes the music supervisor chose it for a good reason. In the case of ‘Both Sides Now’, he explains that many other songs could have achieved the same things with regards to structure and emotion: “it works very well, it’s very nice, and very typically British, it just sort of does its job and sort of .. moves along nicely and sort of.. fits its place, it does its job, basically. It’s nothing that’s sort of stand-out amazing”.

Ben uses the figure of the music supervisor to deflect some of his own criticism of the song, as if to say ‘I don’t like it, but if someone finds a use for it, then that’s fine – that’s their job and they’re the expert’. Later, in one of his final comments, he referred to the multitude of songs available to use in any given scene, and drew on the notion of differing tastes to account for the music/film choices that might be made in any given situation:

B: I suppose any, erm.. it’s the same with any film, I suppose, you could use this.. there’s probably a plethora of.. of songs you could use for every scene in every film, and .. you could always say that one would have been better, or that one would have been better, so.. I suppose it.. again, it’s down to taste of the actual person who does that job

This relates to Ben’s dismissal of the song as neither loved nor hated: he remains ambivalent about it, but ultimately accepts its place in the film because someone in the industry has made the decision to put it there. Ben declines a strong response by drawing on a notion of taste: he does not object if someone else’s taste is different to his own. He feels it is fruitless to debate their choice, and moreover, he does not care all that much because he is not particularly invested in the film.

At one point in the interview Ben offered an extensive account of the structural parallels between the song and the film sequence: the mirrored structure “moves [the scene] along quite nicely” and “eases you through”. This is markedly different to Kati’s or Mel’s account of the song taking a viewer through Karen’s emotional transition. For Ben, it seems more a matter of keeping the film “easy watching” by letting the song do the emotional work for him. This mode of talking also allowed Ben to maintain some distance from the scene: he seemed to step back to analyse its structure and form, rather than its content or significance within the characters’ narrative. It thus became central to his overall engagement with this song and scene, as I will discuss below. Despite this critical distance, however, he does note that the structural similarity extends to the “emotional side”. The

fourth aspect of Ben's film/music/audience understanding, then, is that listening to music can create "emotions or whatever" in you while you're watching the film.

As I suggested earlier, "feeling something" seemed to be at the heart of Ben's definition of when a song "worked" properly. In relation to this scene from *Love Actually* he stated that the song was "helping the audience to feel how she [Karen] feels I think". Later, he expanded further (still keeping the emotional effects at a distance by using third person pronouns):

B I think.. as I said, it works very well with it, it does what it's supposed to do and it creates the right emotions in the audience, I think, so.. it.. it sort of ties in well with the whole, erm .. the whole sort of feeling of the scene I suppose.

[...]

B Yeah, well, that.. I think that's.. that's what they're trying to portray with the acting as well this sort of.. the.. erm.. the slowness of it [the song], and the tone of it being quite romantic, and, erm.. her acting as well making it very emotional to the audience, you know. Seeing a woman cry is never .. never a good thing in whatever context you're talking. But especially the way she sort of tries to cover it up which makes you feel even more sorry for her cos you're trying to put on a brave face in front of the children. And I think that the song's context with regards erm, emotion, and how love works and stuff is quite sort of, complementary to the.. to the way the scene is acted, cos.. you.. you could write a scene in any sort of.. in any sense, but it's always the way that it's acted is the way that it comes out [and/in] things. And that's how it's supposed to make you feel, which goes in well with the song, I think.

It is not just the song on its own that creates these emotions in the viewer; Emma Thompson's portrayal of the "distraught woman" is crucial to the emotional response. It is almost as if the song is an add-on; the acted portrayal of the character's emotions is what seems to invite the emotional response here, as evidenced by Ben's mention, again, of the idea that within another scene the song could suggest something quite different. It is notable that Ben refers both to the portrayal of emotions within the scene ("distraught" or "sad" woman), and the feeling of emotion by the audience ("feel sorry for her"). The music plays a role at both levels, according to his evaluation, but it does not play this role on its own: Emma Thompson's acting is also of paramount importance.

Although he was clear that the song "creates the right emotions in the audience", Ben seemed less clear about his own emotional response to this scene. Apart from the couple of instances above ("You feel sorry for her") most of his talk about emotions was in relation to "the audience". As was clear in Gethin's talk, this third person mode has the effect of

displacing the emotional response on to others: Ben's talk suggested that he did not feel much in relation to this scene. Even when explicitly asked¹⁰ Ben's response dealt in generalised or displaced terms, rather than directly stating what his own emotional response to the scene was. He described Karen's emotional characteristics ("she must be very very strong emotionally [...] not to burst into tears as soon as she opens the present"), after indicating that he "respect[ed]" the fact that Karen held her feelings in until there was an appropriate time to talk to her husband (not in front of the children, and not on the way to an important Christmas function).

His subsequent comments are interesting and worth reproducing in some detail as they reveal some of the negotiating processes Ben goes through in trying to settle upon his own response to the scene:

B [...] Erm. But.. er, I don't know.. I feel that.. **you always feel sorry** for someone who's being cheated on, or that thinks that they're being cheated on, because it's.. it's the worst thing to happen. Erm. But **whether you can feel sorry for her in that sense is .. is quite difficult** because you know that she's obviously .. stronger than that, and she's .. a little bit like, I think eventually she gives the impression that she would come around and say 'right, bugger off, I don't need you, it'll just be me and the kids now' sort of thing. And that she's above all that, **and she wouldn't really sort of take any .. er, effects from it. Or she would.. obviously she would, but it wouldn't sort of stop her life,** it wouldn't be the end of her, sort of thing, it would be a case of, 'right, OK, he was stupid enough to go off and do that, then it's just me and the kids now' and you get the **impression that she'd move on quite quickly, and that she'd sort of just dismiss it and be quite strong about it, even if she wasn't actually feeling that, she'd give that impression off I think.**

LA Mm-mmm.

B Err. And I think this is why she.. she plays the character quite well, because of the way .. she sort of, erm.. you see her in.. in an emotionally unstable state when she's upstairs, but she's only ever portrayed to her family as being the strong one I think. Cos even though the husband there is.. as we said, the boss and.. of something, we don't know what.. you get the impression that she's sort of the one in charge of the family and he just sort of goes along with what she says. Which is why **I think she'd come across as the stronger one if they were to break up, and it would be him, sort of, picking his life up, whereas she'd be moving on quite quickly I think.**

He begins with the premise that “you always feel sorry” for someone who has been betrayed, because this is “the worst thing to happen”. It is almost as if this is treated as a logical proposition: a sympathetic emotional response necessarily follows awareness of someone’s betrayal. However, Ben then posits a counter-premise that seems to be to do with measuring whether it is necessary to feel sorry for such a strong person, as he sees Karen, who will in fact survive this upheaval. He does not seem to arrive at a clear conclusion either way: he does not make any explicit statements here about what he is feeling. He seems instead to be reflecting in the abstract on what the consequences of infidelity might be.

Moreover, Ben also measured his response in light of his appraisal of the husband’s actions, as Gethin did:

LA Mm-mmm. Erm.. Can .. when you watched this film the first time, can you remember what you were thinking about what she was thinking?

B Erm. I don’t thi.. obviously it’s quite hard to relate to, obviously, because .. you know, never been in that situation myself, or anything like that, but at the same time, you know that marriage is always sort of.. a .. a .. a sort of a win and a lose [place?] when so many end in divorce these days anyway, but .. **I think it’s different in that situation, because it’s not like they’re just a newlywed couple, or it’s, you know a young man that’s gone off and led astray, it’s a .. it’s a guy who’s like forty- or fifty-odd chasing after his secretary when he’s got what would.. most people would say was a good-looking middle-aged woman and two kids, and a house, and stuff, and .. If I remember he’s quite successful in the film, as well, I think he’s like a.. does he work for a newspaper or something?**

LA Yeah, I.. I never quite figured out what he does...

B Or a journalist or something..

LA ...but he’s.. he’s the boss, he’s...

B ...yeah, he’s the boss...

LA ...he’s the one in the corner...

B ...somewhere, I think. Yeah. **And you just don.. you don’t understand why he would need to go off and do that sort of thing, but .. Erm, initially I suppose I was.. well, I can imagine I was thinking very sorry for her, and.. what an idiot he was, sort of thing, but .. Erm.. but.. at.. at the end of it I suppose ultimately, it’s a bit of respect towards her as well, cos of the way she sort of, contained herself, and didn’t go off on one, and didn’t break down and cry completely in front of him, and erm.. managed to hold it together when they were going.. I think they were going to the play, aren’t they, with the kids?**

Here, he explicitly states that he is making this evaluation according to his broader understanding of the relationships rather than personal experience: his understanding seems to be that marriages can be susceptible to breakdown (he notes elsewhere in the interview that “so many end in divorce these days”). This relatively indifferent attitude means that he is again somewhat distanced from the resulting emotional response to the scene.

Ben’s general understandings are described similarly to the ‘premises’ outlined above. They are given in ‘you’ form, as if they are the accepted way of thinking or feeling, rather than his own personal, individual response to the scene. Ben does not understand Harry’s motivation for cheating on Karen, given their long marriage, his success at work, and her attractiveness, and so he was “thinking .. very sorry for her, and.. what an idiot he was”. Both this appraisal of the husband’s actions, and the process of weighing up whether one ‘should’ feel sorry for Karen suggest that Ben is not particularly comfortable responding emotionally to this scene: he indicates that he does feel sorry for her, while simultaneously “respecting” her ability to withhold or hide emotions (until an appropriate time), as if control over emotions is an ideal to aspire to.

It is not possible to say whether this lack of explicit emotion talk resulted from a resistance or unwillingness to discuss such subjects in the interview with me, or whether it is simply that Ben did not respond strongly to this scene. In either case, his talk seems to reflect his generally ambivalent relationship to the film. In the focus group, it was clear that Ben and his friends were not particularly engaged or invested in this type of film at all, and Ben’s responses in this interview reflected that lack of motivated engagement. Despite this lack of engagement, though, Ben did not seem to object to the film: he is quite happy to be “eased through” it, and to not have to do much interpretive work of his own. Classed as “easy watching”, *Love Actually* was neither loved nor hated; it did not seem to evoke particularly strong feelings at all. However, the close analysis of his talk suggests, as briefly noted earlier, that Ben conducts some discursive work in the interview to present the scene as ‘easy’, which serves to draw a kind of boundary around the emotional aspects of the sequence, keeping them distinct from his own responses.

What did the song achieve in the film?

As the above discussion makes clear, what this song achieves for these participants in their making sense of this scene from *Love Actually* is far from straightforward. A wide range of modes of relation to the song and the scene emerged, as did a variety of ‘knowledges’.

Gethin carefully holds the song and the scene at a distance in order to provide a critical evaluation: from this perspective, the song is not ‘achieving’ much at all, because it is too sentimental. On the other hand, however, the song does seem to tap into a certain set of associations which Gethin uses to manage his response to the film as a whole. Drawing on these associations and the expertise he claims as a result is one way Gethin can be seen to be making the emotional pull of the scene safe.

Gethin seems to permit certain emotional responses only when he feels he can identify aspects of himself in the character, and this reflects his overall response to the music in the scene. The very specific associations and ‘knowledge’ he has about this song *save* the scene from being overly sentimental. He seems to be balancing the factors finely here: on the one hand, he says that people who know the song and who identify as a similar age to Karen would be prepared to “accept a little bit of sentimentality in it”; but on the other hand, if you do not know the song, the scene would come across as overdone, “a bit slushy” and too sentimental. Thus, because he has recognised Karen as someone of a similar age, and of similar tastes, his own sympathetic response to the scene is acceptable, although only just: “maybe because I know the.. know the song, and, erm, associate maybe with.. with people of that age then.. it’s.. the.. it *does* work, I think, they do.. they.. you know, the.. the way they’ve produced it means that they do just about get away with it!” However, he thinks younger people, like his own sons (he does not say how old they are) would think the scene was funny because the music was “overdoing it”.

The points where Gethin seemed to draw most explicitly on his ‘knowledge’ about the song seemed to be the points where he was most carefully weighing up his level of engagement with the film. Talk in the earlier focus group suggested that Gethin, along with Mike, Peter and David, did not generally enjoy watching romantic comedies because they disliked films that were predictable, drew too heavily on generic conventions, or were too heavy-handed in conveying their narrative (see Anderson, 2011). Instead, they preferred originality, “something a bit different” and a sense of imperfection that would make the film closer to their conception of ‘reality’. I would argue that a similar notion underpins talk in this follow-up interview, evinced by, for example, Gethin’s preference for Joni Mitchell’s more “scratchy” songs, and the general sense that this scene could be read as over-done. Gethin uses his extra-filmic and extra-musical associations with the song to mitigate the emotional effects he thinks the scene is inviting.

Overall then, Gethin acknowledges the invitations made by the film (“I think that they were trying to suggest this”) but ultimately rejects most of them (“I’m not entirely convinced by that”). His previous associations with the song allow him to safely negotiate the emotional response he perceives the film requesting: he describes his previous knowledge as both permitting a safe amount of sentimentality, and as saving the scene with this song from being perceived as over-sentimental. He himself provided a neat summary at the end of the interview:

- G But, in.. I think what I found interesting really now, is that listening to the music first .. and then superimposing the music back onto the film, I’ve come to the conclusion that it’s.. could easily fall into a trap of being a little bit too sentimental. And maybe because of the fact that we know the song, and we know the singer, they’ve got away with it. But for other people who don’t, I think it might not have worked at all well. Yeah, that’s all.

Ben also maintains a kind of critical distance, and uses the song to safely navigate Karen's emotional experience. He explains that 'Both Sides Now' reflects the structure of the scene, and he spent some time outlining how it "takes you through" the sequence, making it flow more smoothly and effectively reducing the amount of interpretive work required. For Ben, the song thus seems to be something that can steer him safely through Karen's raw emotions (because "seeing a woman cry is never a good thing"). Following the song's trajectory, with its formal similarity to the structure of the scene, permits space and distance: it is one step removed from the hard-hitting betrayal, and so focusing on the song's work in this regard is one way Ben can be seen to be keeping the scene "easy" to watch.

What the song 'achieves' for Ben can be mapped out along several lines. The song provides information about Karen (her emotions and reactions) that is consistent with the visually depicted acting. However, despite this appropriateness, many other songs could have done the job just as well. His comments about the apparent unimportance of the song, combined with his emphasis early in our conversation about the importance of context to whether a song "works", lead me to reverse the question: it seems just as appropriate here to ask what, from Ben's perspective, the film 'achieves' for the song, as it was the filmic context that gave the song added meaning for Ben. 'Both Sides Now' "worked" in the film (that is, it conveyed some emotion or feeling), where it did not "work" heard on its own. The film thus seems to give some space to listen to and interpret a song to which Ben otherwise would not closely attend.

Kati also strikes a careful balance in her account of 'Both Sides Now' and Karen's storyline in *Love Actually*, evident in the following statements:

K And.. happens in everything in life, love, I guess, and er ... Haven't noticed it with clouds, I must admit, but (laughs) I don't spend a lot of time cloud-gazing!

[...]

K And .. when it is brought home to you then you ... I suppose have to think quickly and, you know, she obviously did in that scene, erm .. possibly more quickly than it would happen in real life!

[...]

K Cos, you know, lots of.. lots of women go off and have a little weep in a corner, and go back nobody kn.. realises, or whatever. I thought it was amazing the way that the makeup didn't run, but there you go!

(laughter)

K Mine would! (laughs)

The jokes all refer to a disjuncture between her understanding of 'reality' and the film's or the song's depiction of it. Although the song generally overcomes these points of tension so

Kati perceives an overall 'believability' of theme (evident in her idea of a couple claiming 'Both Sides Now' as 'their' song), these moments where Kati makes jokes and laughs seem to me to be points where she reduces her investment in her response to the song, the scene, or both.¹¹

These shifts reflect a key dynamic within the talk overall, which centres around whether emotions are let out or kept in. In some ways, for Kati the song allows emotions into the scene that Karen otherwise has to hold back for the sake of the children: the song expresses the emotions (of a type of disillusionment) that Karen is trying hard not to let out so that she does not ruin the children's evening. Kati also stated that the song added 'pathos' to the scene: I neglected to ask her to say more about what she meant by this term, but its original use in Greek rhetorical philosophy centred on qualities of emotion which were used to persuade an audience, and that seems apt here (as does the more contemporary understanding of the term as an attempt to evoke pity or sadness). In other ways, however, Kati reads the song as telling Karen that she has to return to the reality, that she will survive, and so on: these interpretations seem more about holding emotions in rather than letting them out. Thus, for Kati the song seems to take Karen through this traumatic transition: it both acknowledges the emotions and allows space for them, and gives her hope and reassurance that she will survive. This transition again reflects the theme that is so central to much of Kati's talk throughout the interview, that no matter what crisis might befall you, "you aren't spoiled by bad experiences".

Emotions were important to Mel's interpretation of the song and sequence too. First, as discussed earlier, 'Both Sides Now' relates to and reflects Karen's emotions at this point in her story. Importantly, however, the song does not "distract you" while it is doing this, and it thus allows the viewer to feel those emotions as well:

M [...] because it's not.. it's not, like, overimposing.. although like, you're aware what's going on, and you're aware of the lyrics that are being said, cos they're quite, erm, not calm, but quite, almost soft .. I think it just, erm, yeah, enhances what's going on. And you're not too distracted by it either, so you can kind of feel what she's feeling, I think.

(Again, Mel draws on the inclusive 'you' form). Because the viewer's attention is not "distracted", that is, it is not divided between several different things, the song permits a close, intense and coherent experience of the film for the viewer, according to Mel.

Second, for Mel the way the music is edited into the sequence also functions to tie this event to Karen's family life:

M [...] I think it erm.. yeah, it just brings it all together, and kind of by .. cos it starts before she's even got the CD, it kind of ties it all in. It's not just a separate, like, incident, it kind of ties it to her life with her

family, and brings all of those characters in. Which I think helps, cos then it's not just her isolated, it kind of shows how.. er.. her reaction to it really, erm, involves the whole family.

The song in part functions structurally for Mel, in that it links this particular scene to the broader family narrative. In doing so, it highlights another facet of Karen's character: she is not selfish, and thinks of her family at all times even when she is in the midst of personal crisis. Mel also referred to this in her comment that Karen was "looking after everyone else" in the way she carefully confronted Harry later in the film.

Finally, the music also "really makes" the scene for Mel: this quality, which is not especially clearly articulated (Mel stumbled and paused often in her initial response here), related to the overall emotion and feeling of the scene, as these comments indicate:

M ...[pause]... I think if it wasn't there, the .. erm .. the emotion of the scene wouldn't be as much.

[...]

M I think even if it was just silence it .. and you kind of just saw her standing there ... erm. It just wouldn't be.. you wouldn't.. I don't know, it really enhances the.. the feel of the.. that scene, and just like.. all of that. [...]

LA Mm-mmm. And.. in what way do you.. would you say it 'enhances', can you say a bit more?

M Er.. I guess what I was saying before about it, like, being quite a.. almost reflective piece, but with that kind of, erm, underlying .. deepness, or underlying trauma, I don't know, underlying 'other current', erm, I think that comes through as well there, and because you're seeing her and you obviously know the storyline, cos [you've?] just watched the film, you're kind of entangled in her life, and that kind of just .. brings that element of the music as well. And so I think, yeah, the two come together.

[...]

M I think it really brings it together. Like it really makes it. [...]

Here, Mel explicitly links the theme she has interpreted from the song to the scene's overall story arc: the two "come together" to create something greater than the sum of the parts, but this 'something' is difficult to define. It is related to the intensity of emotion both represented by and felt in response to this scene.

Overall then, for Mel 'Both Sides Now' with its calm/storm duality, acknowledges the emotional turmoil Karen is currently experiencing, and yet also suggests she is on her way to attaining the acceptance and "peacefulness" that Mel hears depicted in the song. All the elements combine to achieve a kind of unity of viewing experience for Mel: there is

closeness between the song and the scene, as well as closeness between Mel-as-viewer and the scene.

Overview and conclusions

Several interesting patterns emerge out of the talk in these individual interviews. Because the questions I asked were explicitly focused on the song, the participants' responses revealed much about how they make sense of 'Both Sides Now' and what it achieves for them in the scene from *Love Actually*. The first striking element of the interviews was that all four participants speculated, without prompting from me, where the song might be used in a film. By this stage of the research they did know the topic of my project, so perhaps such speculation is not especially surprising. What particularly struck me, however, was that none of them, even those who knew the film well, recognised the track as being from *Love Actually*: that is, having heard the music, and having seen the film before (in some cases, several times over), and in Mel's and Kati's case having discussed this scene in the focus groups, they still did not remember its situation in the film when I played the song on its own. It is possible to think of explanations, for example, that it was nearly twelve months since the focus groups, or that this story might not have been as memorable for all participants. Nonetheless, it raises the important question of whether hearing a song in itself is a different experience to hearing a song in the context of a film. Notably, the participants' understandings of the song on its own did often carry over to their understanding of the scene. Although that might be a result of the structure of the interview, it does also indicate that the associations about the song could be usefully made relevant in discussing the film scene. In addition, the speculations about potential filmic placements for 'Both Sides Now' did suggest that the participants had at their disposal broad understandings of film music conventions.

Participants' vernacular theories of popular music soundtracks

Such understandings might, following Thomas McLaughlin (1996), be termed "vernacular theories" of popular music soundtracks. One vernacular theory had to do with different age- or experience-related reactions to the song. Gethin asserted that his long-held associations with the song prevented it becoming too sentimental, but that a younger person would not have access to such defences. Mel and Kati explained that one's stage in life might make this song more or less likely to be listened to. Ben deemed this style of song "older people's music" (as opposed to "young scallies' noise"). All four spoke about these distinctions in different ways, but the common assumption was that one's age or stage in life influenced how one would make sense of the song and the scene in which it played.

This vernacular category is also important in so far as the participants seemed to be responding from within their occupation of these roles, and in this way the deployment of 'knowledge', if not the 'knowledge' itself, cuts across age and gender lines. There are evident differences between Gethin's and Kati's responses to the song on the one hand, and

Ben's and Mel's responses on the other. Gethin and Kati were both very familiar with the song: they recalled multiple versions, and recognised it as a song they had heard during their youth. In their talk about the track, there was more evidence of drawing on wider popular cultural associations. Ben and Mel, in contrast, made no claim to recognise the song, and their talk about it was much more closely focused on the song itself (its lyrics, tone, sound, style, etc.). At first glance, the different responses would seem to map neatly on to Jeff Smith's (1998) dichotomy whereby 'knowledge' of a song in a film soundtrack results in a more complex reading of the sequence, drawing on a wider range of references, whereas lack of knowledge means a simpler reading is determined from the sound of the song. However, my analysis of Ben's and Mel's talk shows that the meanings they make in relation to the song are far from simplistic even though they do not claim to 'know' the song at all. Their talk reveals attempts to place the song within their own complex understandings of the field of popular music and its listeners by relating it to existing music they do know well. Such locations are not based on the sound of the song alone, nor on associations specifically linked to this song and its era, but rather draw on a far broader range of understandings that encompass both of these areas.

Ways of knowing

The key emergent pattern across the four interviews is related to this complexity of 'ways of knowing' a song, and feeds into the ways these participants interpreted and talked about the song within the film scene. Despite the generational difference in familiarity with the song, Gethin's and Ben's talk seemed to be more technical, focusing on the structural and formal relations between song and scene (for example, Gethin extensively discussed lyrical relevance, and Ben gave an account of the close match between song and scene structure). What their talk revealed overall, however, was a perception of a call, from both song and scene, to an emotional response that needed to be carefully managed and kept distant. The two men showed different levels of investment in the distance however: for Gethin, it seemed very important to convey the distance he wanted to maintain between himself and such a response, while Ben seemed somewhat indifferent, even though he still worked to keep the film "easy watching". The necessary distance is achieved precisely by talking in critically objective technical terms, and by evaluating the scene along those lines.

In contrast, but again despite a significant age difference, Kati and Mel both focused on the emotional and relationship aspects of both the song on its own, and as it appeared in the scene (as well as the scene's broader placement within Karen's storyline). For example, Kati discussed the song's theme and its representation of a particular wisdom that comes later in life, while Mel appreciated the song's simultaneous depth of emotion and peacefulness. They both talked of Karen as both ideal- and every-woman: Karen represented the 'typical' woman in her initial raw emotional response to her husband's betrayal, and the 'ideal' woman in the way she composed herself, acknowledged her emotions, and moved on with dignity. Crucially, it was the song that seemed to convey Karen's ideal characteristics: it showed that she will not be "spoiled" by this experience, and

reassured Mel and Kati that she will attain peacefulness and wisdom after the crisis. It was important for Mel that the song did acknowledge the crisis: by representing the storm as well as the calm afterwards, it gained more depth and meaning. Overall, then, Mel and Kati seem to closely relate to the song and its scene in *Love Actually*: they see represented things they value and aspire to, and thus they do not feel the need to distance themselves from it, or diminish the emotions involved.¹²

These patterns of involvement and distance are markedly similar to those Joke Hermes (1995) found in her interviews with women and men about reading women's magazines. Hermes outlines a range of interpretive repertoires on which readers draw, including repertoires wherein women's magazines are 'putdownable', and the repertoire of practical knowledge which involves picking up useful household tips and tricks (although Hermes points out that these repertoires "feed fantasies much more than they help develop real skills" (1995: 40)). Particularly relevant to my follow-up interviews is the repertoire of "emotional learning and connected knowing", the key aspects of which are "human emotions and how to deal with them" (Hermes, 1995: 41).

Underpinning this repertoire, wherein women's magazine reading becomes a "quest for understanding" (Hermes, 1995: 44) is Mary Field Belenky et al's distinction between 'understanding' and 'knowledge'. Hermes cites Field Belenky et al's study of women's epistemological development, with its distinction between 'understanding' on the one hand, which is equated to the French 'connaître' and the German 'kennen' and defined as personal acquaintance with someone or something that involves intimacy and equality, and 'knowing' on the other hand, equated to 'savoir' or 'wissen' and involving distance from the object and mastery over it.

The concept of the "connected knower" is also drawn from Field Belenky's work:

[Connected knowers] develop procedures for gaining access to other people's knowledge. At the heart of these procedures is the capacity for empathy since [they hold the view that] knowledge comes from experience, the only way they can hope to understand another person's ideas is to try to share the experience that has led the person to form the idea (Field Belenky et al, 1986: 113, cited in Hermes, 1995: 44).

Mel's and Kati's talk about the song and the scene is characterised by this perceived closeness and empathy. In the case of Hermes' women's magazine readers, the 'connected knowing' involved learning about others' problems as well as learning about their own feelings. In the case of Mel and Kati's talk about Karen it involves empathising with the character, and recognising the strong emotions as the betrayal is revealed. Mel and Kati seem to use the scene as an opportunity to reflect upon and learn about the best or ideal way to respond in such a situation. They also partly experience the resolution to the crisis through their interpretations of the song as offering wisdom and peacefulness: the song

seems to provide the added detail necessary for them to locate this particular crisis within a wider understanding of women's life stages and processes of emotional management.

Field Belenky et al assert that "Understanding ... entails acceptance. It precludes evaluation, because evaluation puts the object at a distance, places the self above it, and quantifies a response to the object that should remain qualitative" (1986: 100-101, cited in Hermes, 1995: 44). Ben's and Gethin's responses were characterised by such evaluative processes: they created distance between themselves and the emotion depicted in the scene by evaluating it according to complex sets of criteria. Their responses also resemble those of the male readers of women's magazines in Hermes' study, who did use the repertoires of 'practical' and 'connected' knowledge, but were generally more critical of problem pages. The male readers "identif[ied] far less often with what others write or talk about within interviews. They tend[ed] to show distance rather than connectedness, as much about their own reading as about the content of the magazines" (Hermes, 1995: 58). Such distance is evident in Gethin's and Ben's talk about their interpretations of the song and scene, and it is also evident in their talk about their ways of watching and listening to the song and scene. As noted above, they keep the song and the scene at a certain critical distance which permits them to discursively deflect the invitation to engage on an emotional level.

Audiences' relationships with film music

In addition to this key finding about ways of knowing, when considered alongside the focus group research (Anderson, 2011) these four interviews suggest productive avenues for thinking about audiences' relationships with film music more generally. Although no firm conclusion can be drawn from only four interviews, clear patterns do emerge, centring around evaluation, sense of self, and different levels of investment, engagement, or distance.

The evaluative response was pronounced across both group and individual interviews (see Anderson, 2011, for a discussion of some of the types of criteria used to make these judgments). Evaluation emerges as a complex process, moving beyond simply judging whether something is 'good' or 'bad'. It involves determining who a song or film (or combination thereof) is for, and how it is asking one to respond; it involves attending to possible and probable 'uses' for the song or film, and declaring one's own attachments or detachments in relation to either. The act of evaluating in this multifaceted way consequently reveals much about how one sees one's position in the social realm of popular culture. The 'evaluation' response, then, is fundamentally connected with the other key patterns within the talk across this research, namely sense of self and investment.

The participants' senses of themselves, their life histories and personalities played important roles in their meaning making, deployment of ways of knowing, and evaluations. A participant's sense of self was not a static or fixed conception, but encompassed understandings of who they are now, who they have been in the past, and who they would like to be in the future.¹³ Kati's and Mel's talk about Karen's reaction to her husband's

betrayal was also closely related to a sense of self-as-woman: as I explained earlier, Kati and Mel saw Karen as typical and ideal, and her dignified responses were to be aspired to. In contrast, Gethin and Ben seemed to exhibit a sense of themselves as critical experts on film and musical form, with more distanced evaluations of the technical aspects of 'Both Sides Now' and Karen's scene from *Love Actually*.

Varying levels of engagement¹⁴ were evident across these interviews and the focus groups. In these individual discussions, Ben's response reflects a lower level of investment or engagement with the film as a whole, when compared to the other participants. He did not seem to care too much about the film one way or the other: Gethin, in contrast, was at pains to point out what was wrong with the scene, while Kati and Mel both emphasised what they liked about it and how moving it was. Participants variously displayed a 'closeness' or 'distance' between themselves and a film or scene, and this often correlated with their evaluations of success or failure, with strong investment or engagement frequently accompanied by a positive evaluation, and vice versa.

These four individual interviews have thus provided rich insight to the participants' meaning-making processes in relation to 'Both Sides Now' and the climax of Karen's storyline in *Love Actually*, and they connect with themes evident in the first phase of the research project. The participants' meaning-making processes are multi-faceted and complex: they draw on a broad range of understandings, relations, associations, and 'knowledges' of the song, and bring these to bear on their interpretations of the film scene in a variety of ways. They do not rely solely on information about the song's history or lyrics, nor do they read the scene as an independent or isolated filmic artefact. Moreover, both song and scene are variously located within the participants' understandings of their life-worlds and identities, and in this way, they are more or less "connected" knowers. Although an exploratory study such as this cannot provide an all-encompassing model, the different ways in which these participants' mobilise their various knowledges point towards an intricate relation between film, popular music, and audiences.

Biographical note:

Lauren Anderson's research interests include popular culture audiences and film soundtracks. Her doctoral research examined how audiences hear and relate to the popular music in three romantic comedy films. She is particularly interested in audience taste-making processes, including the intersections and contrasts between audiences' taste hierarchies and perceptions of cultural value. Lauren currently lectures in Media Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, and at Massey University Wellington, NZ. Contact: mslaurenanderson@gmail.com.

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Notes:

¹ See, for example, studies in *Psychomusicology's* 1994 special edition on film music, which draw on specially-constructed film clips rather than feature films, or focus on only one parameter of audience response (e.g. which mood respondents attribute to a character), as well as Tagg and Clarida's famous *Ten Little Title Tunes* (2003), which seems to provide more about the authors' analyses of the tunes than the audiences' responses.

² My doctoral dissertation provides a comprehensive overview of the figures of the audience deployed in such theoretical literature (Anderson, 2009).

³ See Thomas McLaughlin's *Street Smarts and Critical Theory: Listening to the Vernacular* (1996).

⁴ All four participants verbally gave me permission to use their first names, and to quote material in published work relating to the project.

⁵ In addition, Ben was the only participant from the under 25-year-old men group who was still living in the same town at the time of the follow-up interviews (the rest had graduated from University and moved to different towns).

⁶ Gethin has the song title incorrect, but 'Both Sides Now' was originally released on Joni Mitchell's 1969 album *Clouds*. I did not correct him during the interview.

⁷ "Easy watching" is the category Ben and his friends used to describe the three romantic comedies we discussed in the focus group (see Anderson, 2011).

⁸ I am assuming that here Ben is referring to the practise of filming broad sweeping landscape shots from the air (in his first comment about the song, he said he imagined something “panoramic”). Use of this semi-specialist terminology reveals his familiarity with filmic conventions.

⁹ Through his explanation, Ben moves from second- to third-person: he begins by positioning himself within his understanding of the audience by using the inclusive pronoun “you” when talking about the more general phenomenon of paying attention to the acting over the music and interpreting the song in light of that; later, he uses the third person when he starts to talk about misinterpretations that can result from not paying enough attention to the music. Using terms such as “people”, “they” and “the audience” by implication distances his own film reading, which sometimes does focus on the music, from the “naïve” readings he thinks are made by others who do not give the soundtrack enough attention. He does not specify exactly what would qualify as ‘enough’ attention to avoid the naïve interpretations, nor, indeed, whether these naïve interpretations are necessarily a bad thing.

¹⁰ The question schedule contained two questions: what do you think we’re meant to feel about her, and what do *you* feel about her? During this interview, I inadvertently substituted ‘think’ for ‘feel’ in the second question. On later reading of the transcript, however, I note that Ben has also made this substitution when he reflects the “what are we meant to feel about her” question back at me (he says “as to what we’re supposed to think about her...”).

¹¹ A number of things might be going on here. She might be wishing to let me know that she is aware that the film is constructed, and that her responses to it are carefully thought through: she does not want to be seen as reacting uncritically. She might be revealing that she is in fact not entirely comfortable experiencing such a response to a piece of popular culture, and so distances herself from the response by using these discursive moves. It might also be that she is simply not comfortable talking to someone she does not know about her emotional responses to things, and so is using the jokes as a defence mechanism to protect herself from exposing too much. It is not possible to make a firm conclusion in any one direction here.

¹² It is worth emphasising that neither Ben’s and Gethin’s ‘distance’ nor Mel’s and Kati’s ‘closeness’ should be seen as a preferred or favoured response. The project’s intention was to explore and describe how audiences hear and relate to film music, rather than to seek to place those responses against specific schemes or models, such as those which underpin existing film music literature. The differences among the participants’ levels of engagement with the films’ emotional narratives and representations reveal precisely the kinds of varieties and complexities among audience response that I argue are not sufficiently addressed in existing theoretical models of film music audiences (see Anderson, 2009).

¹³ The notion ‘sense of self’ connects with the concept of ‘identity’. A full account of the dense field of work surrounding this concept is beyond the scope of this article. See, for example, Hall and Du Gay’s *Questions of Cultural Identity* (1996).

¹⁴ For further discussion of audience ‘investment’ or ‘engagement’ with films, see Martin Barker and colleagues’ work on *Judge Dredd*, *Crash*, and *The Lord of the Rings* (Barker, Arthurs, & Harindranath, 2001; Barker & Brooks, 1998; Barker & Mathijs, 2008).