

A Review: “The Symbology of Popular Song” by Albert Mason, MD, FIPA

On Friday evening, June 17th, 2011 Albert Mason, MD, FIPA presented his paper, “The Symbology of Popular Song” to a large and receptive audience of psychoanalysts, candidates, and psychoanalytic psychotherapists. Dr Mason has had a long and distinguished career as a psychoanalyst, first in London and then in Los Angeles. He has over the decades provided COR, NPSI, and the psychotherapy community here in Seattle, invaluable guidance, support, and wisdom. On this evening, he presented a paper brimming not only with the acquired knowledge of an elder statesman, but also warmth, mirth, and humor.

Dr. Mason used an art form as a vehicle for illuminating the deeper truths of the unconscious. But, it was not “high art” that Dr. Mason chose for his presentation. It was art for the masses—popular songs, from the early part of the 20th century. In so doing, Dr. Mason seemed to be emphasizing that the psychoanalytic concepts he was discussing are not rarified, arcane or esoteric, but ubiquitous aspects of being human.

Recorded musical excerpts were interspersed throughout his presentation, providing aural examples of an array of emotional states and psychological phenomena, including greed, depression, mania, envy, jealousy, projective identification, fetishism, and somatization. For instance, the female oedipal conflict was exemplified with the 1938 tune, “My Heart Belongs to Daddy”, which begins, “While tearing off a game of golf/I may make a play for the caddy/But when I do, I don’t follow through/Cause my heart belongs to Daddy.” The songs were at times poignant, evocative, and occasionally hilarious. It is a rare psychoanalytic paper that elicits guffaws from the audience!

Why have people, throughout the ages and across cultures, been so drawn to music and song? Mason suggested that it may, in part, be due to the early development of the aural sense in utero—of the prenatal experience of the mother’s heartbeat. Popular song, with its combination of lyric, melody, and orchestration can evoke deep emotional experiences. They take us to emotional places, but, like children’s play, with just enough distance to make emotions bearable. Like a dream, songs are mysterious, ephemeral and powerful.

Dr. Mason is much older than me and the songs he chose for his presentation are those he grew up with. At first pass, they can sound dated, to someone of my generation. Similarly, I suppose the psychoanalytic ideas of Freud and Klein may seem dated, particularly to the unaccustomed ear, as compared with more contemporary theories of neurobiology. However, upon closer examination, it seems to my ears that these old songs are gems. So too are psychoanalytic theories. Both have stood the test of time.

Popular songs are products of their time. Their popularity is often because of their ability to capture the zeitgeist of the moment. As a result, popular songs often have a short shelf life. Psychoanalytic theories can suffer the same problem.

Although at times lighthearted, Dr. Mason's presentation and the songs he chose to amplify his ideas brought fresh meaning to classical psychoanalytic concepts. His deep and steadfast appreciation of psychoanalytic ideas, for bringing understanding to the human condition, was unmistakable to all who attended this special NPS event.

David Parnes, LICSW, is a child and adult psychotherapist in Seattle. He is an analytic candidate at NPS. His undergraduate degree is in music.