

The Wrong Stuff

In the 1960s, it was common to be told “never trust anyone over 30,” at least if you weren’t. Well, next month (June 2001) brings the 60th birthday of Rolling Stones’ drummer Charlie Watts, so maybe we should soften the warning. (Or should mistrust be doubled, or even squared, at twice the dreadful age of 30?) I am tempted to write about the aging of our heroes, but that strikes a little close to home since I am of a generation that considers that the Stones passed their prime when the ‘60s ended, in 1972 or so. (Such a great decade, according to Abby Hoffman, that it failed to end until two years into the next one.) Of course, like most rock ‘n’ roll bands, the Stones’ repertoire was (still is, I suppose) based on a couple of simple tricks—the three-chord song, and a heavy reliance on catch phrases as the basis for their lyrics. Songs like “Play with Fire,” “Heart of Stone,” “Off the Hook,” “Under my Thumb,” “Mother’s Little Helper,” “Salt of the Earth,” “You Can’t Always Get What You Want,” “Time Waits for No One,” “Hot Stuff,” “Beast of Burden,” “Wild Horses,” “Brown Sugar,” “Rock and a Hard Place,” “Dirty Work,” and “Out of Control” come from phrases in common use at the time of writing. Other catch phrases can be found within the songs, too. Many of them are not suitable to be printed on the cover of a record album, and have been heavily euphemized for that purpose. Of course, this is all part of the tradition of popular music. (Even the terms “Rock ‘n’ Roll,” “Jazz,” and “Funk” were originally slang terms for an activity not appropriate for polite conversation, or more than an obscure hint in this column.) Many popular bands of the ‘60s used similar writing techniques: While the Beatles probably created more catch phrases than they “borrowed,” even the great poet of the pop singers, Bob Dylan, resorted to using “Don’t think twice” as a song title and catch line. Among the masters of the art were the Who, or at least their principal songsmith, Pete Townshend. (Why IS there an “h” in that name??) Rather than just using a stock phrase, Townshend would often twist it slightly, giving a new shade of meaning. The Who’s second hit “Substitute” includes the immortal line “I was born with a plastic spoon in my mouth,” simultaneously capturing the teenage angst of the time and a wealth of cultural assumptions about new materials, too.

This is a creation in the great tradition of materials-oriented catch phrases—particularly those based on obviously wrong choices of materials. I think the first one that I actually noticed was the term “glass jaw” applied to a boxer whose

fight seemed to end with a fractured mandible. I was but four years old at the time so this may count as a formative experience. I recall thinking that the poor man in question had suffered a particularly strange form of prosthetic surgery, somehow related to the horrific fate of the “man in the iron mask,” until my older brother explained the metaphor to me. Maybe this is the event that nucleated my lifelong interest in materials, their uses, and properties. (We might also wonder about the effect of watching boxing matches on the development of a young child, but it’s too late to worry about that. At least for me.)

Materials metaphors (“materiaphors,” perhaps) are very interesting forms of speech because they reveal the ways in which the lay public understands the properties of materials. Or misunderstands them. Continuing with the prosthetic theme, the guy who eats the fieriest chile or the hottest vindaloo curry is sometimes described as having a “cast iron stomach,” irrespective of the relatively poor corrosion resistance and general durability of that material. Those who are “cool under fire” are sometimes characterized by their “nerves of steel”—which would be a poor choice, in many respects, according to my medical friends. Neurons transmit signals much more slowly than steel would, and are immune to electromagnetic interference. A bionically enhanced human with actual steel wiring would probably be a very nervous individual, indeed, and subject to almost every outside stimulus, rather than being “cool, calm, and collected”—another phrase used for a song title by the Rolling Stones.

There are some particularly nice materiaphors based upon paradoxical choices of material—stuff that should not really work, but somehow adds a special property. Consider *Steel Magnolias*, for example, a play by Robert Harling, made into a 1989 movie starring Dolly Parton, Shirley McLaine, Sally Field, and Julia Roberts. This paradoxical materiaphor is also a synecdoche: a paradomateriaphoric synecdoche! The phrase describes flower-pretty “Southern Belles” endowed with unexpected toughness, despite their seeming fragility. The most familiar paradomateriaphor, however, is the glass slipper which is so central to the fairy tale “Cinderella”—never mind that the story is set at a time before glass could be made tough enough to withstand even a truncated night of dancing. The idea of such an unyielding material, and the impossibility of stretching it to fit the wrong foot, now seems essential to the plot, but the

idea of the glass slipper may have crept into the popular version of the story by mistake. It seems that when the brothers Grimm set about collecting fairy tales for their definitive compilation, first published in 1812, they relied upon a French manuscript, by Perrault, for the text of “Cinderella.” Perrault’s text is the only source in which the glass footwear appears, and it appears that he may have mistranscribed the word *verre* (glass) for *vair* (an old French word with very similar pronunciation, meaning ermine). A fur slipper would have been reasonable in the context, and would certainly have been more comfortable to dance in, but how much better and more magical is glass for the purpose of this story!

Winston Churchill (one of the all-time great phrasemakers of the English language) coined the paradomateriaphor “iron curtain” to describe the isolation of eastern Europe from the west during the cold war era. This was adapted into the “bamboo curtain” to describe the Asian communist block, and China’s Chairman Mao responded by describing the Western alliance as a paper tiger.

Sometimes the unlikely materials enshrined in a popular phrase really do get used. As unlikely as they are, concrete canoes are constructed and raced each summer by U.S. engineering students; and the State University of New York at Stony Brook hosts an annual regatta for cardboard boats on its Roth Pond, marking the end of the academic year and the beginning of summer.

In the world of business and administration, where “golden parachutes” are common, it is not uncommon to present a “straw man” proposal, which can be burned (metaphorically, anyway) without serious consequence. Copper-bottomed agreements are the preferred kind, but the price of winning such security is often a distasteful series of “rubber chicken” dinners.

A joke that is as funny as a rubber crutch is likely to go over like a lead balloon, which eventually returns us to rock ‘n’ roll. The story goes that following the breakup of an earlier group, guitarist Jimmy Page tried to explain his concept for a new “heavy metal” band to Who drummer Keith Moon. Moon was unimpressed and exclaimed that the band would “go over like a lead balloon,” then corrected himself, saying that it would be a spectacularly larger failure than that, more like a “lead zeppelin.” A small variation of spelling gets you to the paradomateriaphoric name that Page eventually gave to the meteorically successful band.

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