

Remixing the Ramayana: Literary Listening and the Curation of Contemporary Song Cycles

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Abstract

Listening is enhanced by a sense of purpose. Over almost twenty years, the author created annual compilations of music encountered during that year. These playlists were circulated as both journals and introductions to new music. In recent years, the 'playlist' evolved into a 'song cycle', in which collected samples are arranged or manipulated into reinterpretations of well-established literary narratives (including Valmiki's *Ramayana* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*). These have demonstrated that the literary epic narrative remains a valuable vehicle for collecting, isolating and re-purposing the audible 'found objects' of the Anthropocene, as well as guiding long-term reflective listening practices. As an extension of remix cultures, these contemporary song cycles are incidentally encountered and collaboratively sourced across a long-term research process. They enable the listener to form vivid and idiosyncratic engagements with the creative depth of the humanities. Just as "the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls", the epic Ramayana echoes along the aisles of supermarkets, the soundtracks of video games, and down the cavernous labyrinths of YouTube.

Keywords: Listening, Song Cycle, Ramayana, Dante, Aladdin, Translation, Music, Interpretation, Storytelling

Introduction

Over twenty years, I curated annual compilations of music I encountered during that year. These private playlists were assembled through a combination of aesthetic and stylistic elements, often with reference to recent events. In the informal and intimate tradition of the mixtape, these playlists were gifted to selected individuals as auditory journals and introductions to new music. However, the annual playlist evolved into a 'song cycle', in which auditory found objects (not limited to songs) are collected and arranged into reinterpretations of well-established literary narratives. These have included a retelling of Valmiki's *Ramayana* as an epic tragedy in 2018 (literally a '[Bad Romance](#)'), and situating the listener as Dante in the *Divine Comedy* in 2019, leading to an experimental fusion of Aladdin and Faust in 2020.

Each of these song cycles are curated through a process of active listening to incidental songs encountered over a year. The contributing voices do not know they have lent their words to the retelling of myths and legends, any more than the fundamental archetypes of storytelling can be found echoed across the lyrics of popular music. The challenge for the curator lies in assembling without modification – changing meanings as reinterpretation by positioning, without editing, any of the sounds encountered. This respects the integrity of the musicians who contribute to each collection, who are paid for their work, just as a curator would not modify an artwork for inclusion in an exhibition (and equally, would ensure the artist is credited and paid for their labour).

These song cycles demonstrate that the literary epic narrative remains a valuable vehicle for collecting, isolating and re-purposing the audible 'found objects' of the Anthropocene, as well as guiding long-term reflective listening practices. As an extension of remix cultures, songs

and spoken word poetry, conversations, and abstract sounds are serendipitously and collaboratively sourced following a long-term research process (since 2004). Using other people's songs to tell new stories enables the listener to form vivid and idiosyncratic engagements with the creative depth of the humanities, and challenges the settings of stories themselves.

In 1964, [Paul Simon observed](#) that “the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls.” My research has shown that the epic *Ramayana* echoes along the aisles of supermarkets, the soundtracks of video games, and down the cavernous labyrinths of YouTube. It takes extremely careful listening to seek and find it, and position ourselves to hear it. And in the process of retelling a familiar story through found objects, it changes into something quite new.

Context of the Song Cycle

A ‘song cycle’ is a sequence of songs intended to be experienced in a specific and coherent order. It is an ancient concept that can be found across global music histories, often linking poetry with music composition to create narratives. Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice’s [Jesus Christ Superstar](#) (1970) and Pink Floyd’s [The Wall](#) (1979) are rock operas that could be called song cycles, just as much as the collected covers of the jukebox musical *The Blues Brothers* (1980) or Baz Luhrman’s *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), or the historical re-imagining of Lin Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton* (2015). However, it should be noted that ‘song cycles’ are distinct from the Indigenous Australian concept of ‘songlines’, which are profoundly site-specific systems of knowledge and aural communication.

The first editions were essentially found objects, arranged with aesthetic intent. I did not see them as creative practice, but rather a process of selection and documentation. To my view, to become a truly representative model of creative practice research, I would need to develop something new from these objects. A summative reflection has value, but it was not invention.

The process of music compilation develops skills required for creative practice, including journaling, collecting, reflecting, editing, and sharing / communicating results of works in progress, as well as a determination of when the project is ‘finished’, or as Marcel Duchamp described his *Large Glass*, “[definitively unfinished](#)”. Indeed, Duchamp’s analogy of the readymade is a critical element of creative practice with found objects, in which the attribution of aesthetic value is established by a series of decisions. As allegedly noted by the artist in a letter regarding the readymade *Fountain*:

Whether Mr Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, and placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object (Ades, 127).

Following this model, ‘literary listening’ provides a model of active research towards an objective which changes as the search progresses. It is informed by serendipity, collegial introductions, chance encounters and direct intervention.

The ongoing [Global Melody Project](#) by Michael Agzarian (2016-present) provides a comparative example. Agzarian approaches strangers who are wearing headphones and asks what they are listening to. With their consent, he documents and shares a series of inner worlds and listening habits through a combination of portrait photography and Spotify. His exhibitions encourage further participation by sharing hashtags and music, drawing on both knowledgeable and incidental music consumption, guided by deliberate reasoning (connoisseurship) and predictive algorithms.

Following Bloom's taxonomy (1956), one can see that the curation of playlists requires variable knowledge and comprehension of music, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Or, using the revised model (2001), the person developing a literary playlist must remember the story, understand it and each song, apply new ideas to a canonical interpretation, analyse the implications of translation, evaluate the sequence as a coherent entity, and finally, create a new story; a homage or 'love letter' to all the original sources.

Methodology of the Mixtape

Since 2004, the rules of selection have been that the music, poetry or sampled sound was:

- First *encountered* in that year (not necessarily written or published in that year)
- One of my 20 favourite songs from that year (i.e. subjectively *good* music)
- It must contribute to sequential *aesthetic values* across the album as a whole

Since 2016, the third rule has been enhanced to 'must evoke a *coherent narrative* through their lyrics, structure, and sequence'. This requires a deeper understanding of each song and the original reference. These compilations have changed from background music to active listening, more like an audiobook than an atmosphere.

This process is by no means original, nor is it uncommon. The creation of individual 'Top 10' voting lists for the TripleJ Hottest 100 music awards can follow a similar process. For Australians, this reflective exercise demonstrates active participation in what has been described as 'the world's largest musical democracy' (Kelly and Pollard), in which the actual Hottest 100 song list provide an eccentric annual census of cultural changes in Australian music (for listeners of that radio station, at least). Wikström & Burnett have noted that from a studio perspective, the rise of the compilation album (typically in the form of an artists' 'Best of' album was driven by commercial agendas more than a creative exercise. Through this exercise, sharing individual taste becomes a manifestation of shared values, if not populism in music consumption – through which Pierre Bourdieu's principles of cultural distinction can be applied (Prior and Bourdieu).

Even without the final rule, as a mode of creative practice, this systematic methodology of informed and applied connoisseurship draws from the "Rules of Play" by Desmond Morris, which are:

- You shall investigate the unfamiliar until it has become familiar
- You shall impose rhythmic repetition on the familiar
- You shall vary this repetition in as many ways as possible
- You will select the most satisfying of these variations and develop these at the expense of others
- You shall combine and recombine these variations one with another
- You shall do all this for its own sake, as an end in itself.

It should be noted, further, that "These principles apply from one end of the scale to the other, whether you are considering an infant playing in the sand, or a composer working on a symphony" (Morris, 138-140).

Since 2004, my methodology remains open to all sources. I could search for songs referencing specific ideas or ask friends for recommendations, but primarily (with the support of the Shazam app for identification and archiving), I listen actively to the radio, the scores of films

and podcasts, as well as meandering through music videos on YouTube or the vicissitudes of Spotify's algorithms. Personal, national and global events from that year can be referenced in the selection, but just because a song is popular does not automatically mean it will be included on the annual compilation.

Working with Found Sounds: Intimacy and ethics

The curation and sharing of a mix tape is an intimate act that blurs ethical boundaries. During the 1980s and 1990s, tape cassettes were mixed and distributed through an illegal circulation of piracy that bypassed the creators of the original music. Songs were recorded from live radio or television (on VHS), downloaded, and arranged to suit individual consumers. The act of sharing these was either criminal (a black market), subversive, or an intimate gesture that shared one's own taste in music with others. As noted by Robin Wright in their discussion of the history of the tape cassette from a social design perspective:

The development of the audiotape cassette gave music consumers a new, very personal way to interact with recorded music... Users could cheaply and easily design and program their own interaction with recorded music, and create an object that reflected their own personal media identity. With an audiotape cassette, fans could change the order of play, add sounds and effects, draw or write on the label, and take and play the tape anywhere. Most importantly, they could create an individual expression of their own musical experience that could be shared with others.

The homemade mix tape became a standard trope of musical communication, connecting with friends and family at home, in the car, at a party, or on the beach. The choice of what would go onto a tape was a matter of serious import for romantics across the globe, as they recognized that every mix tape is a love letter (Wright, n.p.).

My first encounters with compilations originated in Damascus during the mid-1980s, where a pirate music retailer (NAI) sold professionally designed tape cassettes of music in English and Arabic. The holistic excellence of *NAI's Mix: Sweet Rock* was the soundtrack of my childhood in Jordan and Syria, an incongruous cinematic score for camping expeditions in Wadi Rum, Petra, Palmyra, and exploring ancient ruins across the desert. It featured tracks like a cover of Led Zeppelin's (1971) [*Stairway to Heaven*](#) by Far Corporation (1985), [*Russians*](#) by Sting (1985), [*Temple of the King*](#) by Rainbow (1975), [*Wasted Sunsets*](#) by Deep Purple (1984), and other songs from Pink Floyd, Black Sabbath, Scorpions, and Supertramp. It was an elegant, layered and evocative album, though none of the artists probably knew about it.

The ethical parameters of the compilations are the primary reason why I did not regard their formation as an expression of creative practice. For the record, I always legally purchased personal copies of the music that was featured on annual compilations, and I have *never* sold them. Created in the spirit of the mix tape, they live in cars until they wear out. All contributors are studiously credited.

The songs, or 'audible found objects' (which includes spoken word poetry, movie quotes, audio memes, snippets of conversations and lecture extracts), are not exclusively mine. However, they are savoured. Their inclusion is a mark of the highest respect for the joy it has given me, and my desire to share it with others is part of that process of collecting. But to become a manifestation of creative practice, some degree of intervention is required. One must learn from the process of development and adjust accordingly, as an end in itself. Through this, something *new* is both invested and apparent.

The Emergence of Narrative

The 2016 Compilation evoked a loose narrative of events across a 24-hour period; from waking, through a working day, the rest of evening, and falling asleep. Building subtly on this tentative approach, the 2017 Compilation was a story of a couple entering and ending a romantic relationship (given the nature of popular music, this storyline was easy to curate). However, none of these narratives were explained to the listener. They were simply things I noticed that informed the aesthetic arrangement of collected songs, poems, and quotations. Simple narratives were the start of a world-building process through audible found objects.

To instil ‘a sense of wonder’ (Carson), one can create a situation in which an epiphany can occur. This epiphany must reveal how smaller observations become part of a much larger whole – a sense of connectedness. If it is sufficiently ambitious, then this process instils awe. In that spirit, in 2018 I arranged a full decade of annual compilations to create a singular story – the *Ramayana*.

The Epic Ramayana

The original *Ramayana* was composed by the sage Valmiki in Sanskrit about 2,400-2,700 years ago (the 7th to 4th century BCE). When combined with the *Mahabharata*, it becomes the Hindu sacred text called the *Itihasa*. The story has many versions as it crosses languages, cultural, geographic and chronological zones. Usually associated with India, it is retold across South and South-East Asia, and also echoes across Persian and Central Asian legends. It is an exceptionally versatile narrative, performed using *wayang kulit* (shadow puppets) across Malaysia and Indonesia, celebrated in dance and artworks across Thailand as the *Ramakien*, and televised as a long-running Indian television serial (*Ramayan*, developed and directed by Ramanand Sagar in 1987-1988) (Variyar). This archival series was re-released to vast audiences during the coronavirus lockdown in April 2020, acknowledging the potential of the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity for reviewing a very long story of national and religious significance.

I adapted Valmiki’s *Ramayana* as an epic song cycle because it was a ten-year anniversary of my systematic annual compilations. At least one song from each collection appeared on the 3.5 hour ‘Full Sequence’ epic version, though the ‘Abridged’ 80-minute version (the duration of one CD) consisted only of songs first encountered in 2018. I chose it because it was a famous and ambitiously long story, carried by powerful emotional events, striking characters with vivid interactions, and richly layered textual and melodic meanings. During this year, my wife Melinda Bowker’s simultaneous study of opera and the history of classical music composition contributed to my appreciation of this depth, and I am indebted to her insights.

The technological affordance of the CD – which plays as an infinite recurring loop – inspired a different version of the story, as the song cycle itself was embedded in an endless cycle of pursuit and recapture. In other words, it starts where it ends. This drew on imperfect analogies to concepts of reincarnation, as well as the principle that the *Ramayana* is essentially a love story, or a story about love –and so Margaret Atwood’s aphorism goes that all love stories that last long enough will become tragedies (Atwood). Hence, my remix of the *Ramayana* in 2018 is a tragic epic, where the narrative changes upon the second listening.

My own attempt to remix the *Ramayana* was inspired by the vibrant 2010 graphic novel by the Pixar animator Sanjay Patel (*Ramayana: Divine Loophole*), which in turn was inspired by Nina Paley’s autobiographic animated film *Sita Sings the Blues* (2008). Paley’s work combined multiple interpretations of the *Ramayana* with a 1920s jazz song cycle by Annette Hanshaw,

revealing intriguing parallels to the Ramayana story. This is particularly evident when seen from Sita's perspective, which other scholars have noted is a rich source of re-interpretation; such as Samhita Arni and Moyna Chitrakar, *Sita's Ramayana* (2011) and Paula Richman's *Many Ramayanas* (1991) and *Questioning Ramayanas* (2001). The copyright and licencing of Paley's film – including the right to synchronise images to Hanshaw's recordings – provides a remarkable case study in the complexity of open-source distribution and rights management. (Indeed, this precedent is one of the reasons why I believe the curation of other people's work into 'song cycles' is not more widely seen as a mode of creative practice).

Beyond these contemporary remixes and re-interpretations of the Ramayana, I also read the original story from multiple perspectives. These included the scholarly and literary work of Krishna Dharma (aka Kenneth Anderson, 2004), Paula Richman (1991 and 2000), Arshia Sattar (2018), Robert and Sally Goldman (2018), as well as summaries provided by the British Library and other cultural institutions.

However, in the spirit of distillation, I was also challenged by a friend to send them a limerick alongside the compilation, which resulted in this 27-word summary of the epic narrative:

There once was a hero named Rama
 (And also the demon Ravana)
 He loved poor sweet Sita,
 But he would not greet her.
 Their story became Ramayana.

The shared identity of the ambiguous singular 'he' is also a foreshadowing of the significant change in my retelling of the story through contemporary music. For this was no longer Valmiki's original words, but rather the setting of the *Ramayana* in a very different medium – songs written and performed by musicians who did not know that they were collectively retelling one of the greatest stories ever told.

The Roles of Sita, Rama and Ravana

Within this retelling, as it has been for many other re-interpretations, the role of Sita is pivotal. Nina Paley situated Sita as a character whose agency was constantly overshadowed by the importance, nobility, and mythic magnitude of Rama. Within *Sita Sings the Blues*, Sita suddenly exits the story rather than returning home with Rama. In the original story, she is rejected by Rama shortly after he rescues her, as Rama suspects she had committed adultery with her kidnapper Ravana. To prove her innocence, Sita walks into a bonfire in a dramatic action reminiscent of the practice of *sutti* (the burning of widows on their deceased husband's funerary pyre). Being innocent of Rama's allegations, and in some versions of the story even more 'pure' than the fire itself, Sita emerges unscathed. Honour restored, they happily travel home together, heralded by colourful lights that originated the festivals of Diwali.

Yet Rama's accusation of infidelity against Sita is abrupt and jarring, and her trial by fire is deeply disturbing. This is an individual who has travelled across the world, commanded an army, and invaded a fortified island in search of Sita, as well as defeating an almost invulnerable Demon King to rescue her. Rama's questioning of Sita seems hypocritical. So in the 2018 compilation, the rejection of Sita by Rama is more important than Ravana's kidnapping of Sita – it is a transition point of departure from Valmiki's authoritative version. At this point, which the Ramayana universe is literally fractured, for Rama has broken the golden rule: Rama loves Sita and Sita loves Rama.

Aided by the songs encountered during 2018, as well as other mixtapes inherited from friends and relatives, the solution was that Sita would be destroyed by the bonfire. Rama, having inherited Ravana's immortality through his execution (a nod to the film *Highlander*), would spend eons regretting his decision to doubt Sita's integrity. By waiting for the end of the universe, and surviving this cataclysm in reincarnated form, Rama returns as Ravana, seeking Sita.

For we first met Ravana in an island citadel, commanding an army of demons, fixated on Sita. Ravana's kidnapping is no longer an assault, but a desperate intervention, knowing that Rama would ultimately be responsible for her death. Ravana, trapped in a perpetual circular narrative, forever intervenes without realising the futility of this mission.

By November 2018, the remixed *Ramayana* was being assembled when the author encountered the use of a comparable narrative device (twist) in the first season of the HBO television series *West World* (2016). This is also an example of a multi-modal story adapted as a book, cinematic film, and television series, with corresponding layered interventions in each retelling. Specifically, the deceptive representation of a leading character as two different characters simultaneously – William (Jimmi Simpson) and the Man in Black (Ed Harris) – when in fact they are alternating between two different points in time, unknown to the audience. They occupy the same universe, but in different ways.

In a sense, the 2018 compilation's narrative was 'gazumped' by this twist, but it came from a different affordance. A tape cassette needs to be manually rewound, so the action of listening to them requires an intermission as the tape is exchanged or returned to the beginning, accompanied by an audible click and fast reversal of rolling plastic film. By comparison, a CD is almost silent as it automatically loops back to the beginning, signalled by a subtle buzz. The remixed *Ramayana*'s reference to reincarnation, and re-telling of the story as it is heard for a second time – now from Ravana's perspective – is comparable to the re-reading of the story from an opponent's view. Our relationships with the characters have changed, and through this, new lyrical and structural elements become evident in the collected songs.

Dante's Divine Compilation (2019)

Following the 2018 precedent, my 2019 compilation was based on Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Inferno, Purgatory and Paradise) of 1320. It was a journey through hell, but it ended on a high note.

Dante Alighieri's original poem was written in Italian cantos of structured form, laden with political, symbolic, historical, religious and personal allusions along with acerbic satire and memorable encounters (Kirkpatrick, 2013). It is customarily translated with annotations to the events and individuals he meets, creating a hypertext of relationships and subsequent referencing. The plot follows the journey of Dante and his guide Virgil through the layers of the afterlife (the canyons of Hell and the mountain of Purgatory) in order to be re-united with Beatrice, but the narrative arc is a commentary on the entire world as it was known to him, past and present.

Despite being largely set in Hell and containing relatively few jokes, Dante's magnum opus is a comedy because it is the opposite to a tragedy. A tragedy starts well but ends badly, a comedy "begins badly but ends well" (di Lauro, 2017). In this sense, Dante's journey is also the opposite to the remixed *Ramayana*, which was interpreted as a tragedy, unlike the original by Valmiki.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* (especially the *Inferno*) has been extensively remixed by illustrators, composers, film-makers, video games designers, tattoo artists, translators and scholars, as well as actors, playwrights, and theologians. As far back as Giotto's frescos for the Scrovegni Chapel during the very early Renaissance, we see Dante's ideas manifested in different forms. Sandow Birk, for example, set the *Inferno* in a post-apocalyptic Los Angeles, whilst Gustave Dore's 19th century book illustrations have profoundly informed subsequent re-tellings of this story.

Music historians such as Francesco Ciabattini have studied the original text and found the trumpet and the drum (evocative of war) were the main instruments associated with Hell, especially given that prior to the invention of brass valve in the 19th century, trumpets could only play a single note, typically D-. Not only this, but as medieval manuscript illuminations highlighted, demons were expected to play the trumpet with their flatulence, a diabolic inversion of music emanating from the mouth. Angelic choruses contrast with these strident singular notes through their vocal polyphony, linked to the ideals of plainsong or 'Gregorian chant', and harmony. The tri-tone, or the Devil's Chord, is another invention of music history that can be found in the 2019 song cycle.

I chose the *Divine Comedy* because I was pleased with the result of the Ramayana, and wanted to keep listening reflectively to music I encountered across the year. It is a search that starts with a close review of the original story, including commentaries upon it and other re-interpretations. During this research I imagine how the scenes and characters might be divided, and continually ask myself if any song might represent that moment – or if it changes the moment, offering a perspective not seen in the original text. I originally expected it to just be the *Inferno* story, but apt songs for Purgatory and Paradise serendipitously came to my attention, so the compilation expanded to accommodate them in abbreviated form.

Structurally, both the *Ramayana* and the *Divine Comedy* are diverse collections across genres. The lyrics are critically important, as is their tone. The *Ramayana*'s melodic structures are intricate, and there are elements of Bollywood soundtracks in the numerous elaborate and layered soundscapes. In the first song from each of the three 'Books' of the 'Full Sequence' version, the opening notes recreate the syllables from the name of each leading character – Rama, Sita, and Ravana. Coincidentally, a similar syllabic device to establish character themes is used in *Hamilton* and other stage musicals.

By contrast, the song cycle for the *Divine Comedy* is deliberately sparse. The recurring leitmotif of the 'Descendant' (Act 1) is a series of well-spaced repeating notes at the beginning of most songs set in Hell. These, like markers of time, increase in their gravity until we reach the climactic centre of hell, where we encounter an insistent machine-like crushing, the crunching of Judas in the mouth of Satan ([Keir, Squeeze Me 2017](#)). The first signal that we have left Hell is that these isolated opening notes and chords become melodies. The theme of the 'Ascendant' (Act 2) is the word 'Together', whereas Hell is occupied in solitary confinement.

Unlike the closed loop of the *Ramayana*, Dante's journey features a clear start and climactic conclusion. Instead of recurring characters with developing personalities and changing motivations, we travel as Dante (who is played by us, the listener) and the songs are sung by those we meet. In this sense it is more a 'revue' than an 'opera', as each scene has a different singer and set. Their roles are fixed for all time, a realm of constant stars.

One of the most distinctive visual features of Dante's allegorical journey are the numerous attempts to depict a cartography of Hell. This staged sequence of Cantos is readily adapted to a song cycle, as each layer of the afterlife contains a distinctive setting, new characters, and

justifications. Studying these provided a comparative process of selection, not unlike the completion of a jigsaw puzzle.

Lyricaly, this enabled the inclusion of Laura Marling’s adamant lyric “All of this can be broken” (from the song [‘Devil’s Spoke’ 2009](#)), which was situated as an explanation for Virgil’s knowledge of the cartography of Hell, as well as an explanation of the first thing the Devil learned. Equally, the operatic exultation of [Kate Miller-Heidke’s ‘Zero Gravity’](#) provided as a soaring euphoric conclusion, just as it was in Eurovision 2019, where she was Australia’s representative.

Aladdjinn – Or, ‘I can’t believe it’s not Faust’ (2020)

Building on both *Ramayana* and the *Divine Comedy*, this song cycle is an experimental narrative that combines two stories through shared archetypes. In both stories, a man meets a supernatural entity that grants wishes.

Recent expectations of the Aladdin story have been profoundly informed by Disney’s 1992 animated soundtrack (revisited in live action in 2019). Rejecting this cultural monopoly required the pursuit of less familiar and earlier versions, including their literary and visual interpretation across the 19th and 20th centuries. When combined with elements of the Faust narrative, it creates a revitalised story that rejects orientalism and challenges the relationships between characters. The story mutates visual and auditory found objects through an ongoing research process of hybridity, serendipity, and fusion.

One of the most significant sources has been Yasmine Seale and Paulo Lemos Horta’s *Aladdin: A New Translation* (2018), from French and Arabic sources. Like the reinterpreted *Ramayana*, this text gives emphasis to women’s voices in the narrative. It notes the importance of Syrian storyteller Hanna Diyab in presenting this story to Antione Galland’s collection of the *1001 Nights* (of which only 202 stories exist) in 1712. Specifically to bypass Robin William’s ebullient portrayal of the benevolent blue Genie, the role of the djinn was re-assessed through scholarship of Arabian history and mythology, including the twitter threads of [Ali A. Olomi](#), in tandem with references to the extraordinary global events of 2020. These include lyrical references to the Black Lives Matter movement (including George Floyd’s final statement “I can’t breathe”), the horrifying ‘Black Summer’ bushfires of Australia, the destruction of the City of the Dead in Cairo to expand a highway, and the surprising rise of the medieval ‘Bardcore’ music genre. Notably, it also includes a subtle instrumental reference to [Markus J. Buehler’s *Viral Counterpoint of the Coronavirus Spike Protein*](#) (2020), which is “a musical representation of the amino acid sequence and structure of the spike protein of the pathogen of COVID-19, 2019-nCoV (protein data bank identifier 6VSB)”.

With reference to Disney, the concept of ‘When you wish upon a star’ is a leitmotif across this compilation, via the soundtrack of *Pinocchio*, not *Aladdin* (Edwards, Harline and Washington, 1940). Throughout this song cycle I asked myself, ‘what do stars sound like?’ From the twinkling of piano keys to the delicate thrum of strings, this selection was shaped by the conventions of cinematic science fiction and documentary soundtracks.

But to conclude by distilling this story as briefly as possible. After capturing the falling star, Aladdin made his first wish – “for the love of the beloved”. This wish was granted, but in exchange, the Djinn of the Stars quietly transformed his soul into a star. Aladdin did not realize the terms of exchange until he made the second wish – “for everything he ever wanted” – and he saw the soul of the beloved transformed into yet another shining star. Since the beginning of time, hundreds of wishes had been made, and the sky was painted with just as many brilliant

stars. Thousands of dreams lay ahead, all people, damned for all to see, for all time. Realizing the conditions of this Faustian pact, Aladdin summoned the Djinn for the last time.

His third wish: “I wish to undo all previous wishes”.

As the final wish was granted, the ancient Djinn replied: “Do you know what you undo?

Do you know what you have done? You’ve rolled a 20 and a 1. Thief of stars, you have erased the night. Don’t you recall the very first wish was “Let there be Light?”

And with every wish that was undone, the stars went out, one by one.

This conclusion references the final line of Arthur C. Clarke’s short story [The Nine Billion Names of God](#) (1953), which in itself is derived from the Islamic concept of the 99 Names of God (*Al Asma al-Husna*). The cataclysmic Third Wish is also a reflection on the cognitive bias implicit in global responses to the coronavirus pandemic, as noted by Yascha Mounk, who wrote “In a pandemic, what is individually rational can be collectively disastrous” (Mounk, 2020). However, the final song in this cycle is *Astronomia* by Tony Igy and Vicetone, which was released in 2010 but popularised in early 2020 through the [Dancing Pallbearers meme](#) from Ghana (Paquette, 2020). In other words, the 2020 song cycle ends with a Millennial *memento mori* punchline; the inverted smiley face emoji, or simply “everybody dies”.

But do these Song Cycles make any sense?

I develop the song cycles by extensively thinking through the many issues they represent. I review the literary sources, the collected and rejected songs, and segues between them. As the curator of the complete song cycle, there are no gaps in my re-imagining of each story.

To filling these gaps for new listeners, I write a succinct summary of plot points against each artists’ name and song title. Further to this, I write a context document to reveal the depth of research involved in each compilation. For the Ramayana in 2018, this was a 6,000-word annotated essay detailing quotations, references to different sources, character decisions, and background context. For Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in 2019, it was a digital zine of around 2500 words and thirty images. For *Aladdjinn* in 2020, this taking the form of an applied quilt inspired by the ‘story quilts’ of the [African-American quiltmaker Harriet Powers](#).

If a listener were to review a song cycle with no knowledge of the intended narrative, they would still perceive a journal-like selection of music, songs and audio samples. These share an ambience as an eclectic compilation album, and, given the literary archetypes that inform each cycle, it’s possible that a listener could choose their own adventure. This result is also satisfying, as it raises the possibility of an epiphany through another original interpretation.

Conclusion

Listening is enhanced by a sense of purpose. The literary remixes of 2018, 2019 and 2020 are the result of active listening to incidental music. Curatorial interventions through the lens of literature have inspired new narratives through serendipitous discoveries, disciplined research and journaling. This ongoing process has deepened my appreciation for song writing and music composition, innovative narrative design, and the rich complexity of the human condition – from medieval authors to postmodern remix cultures. Sharing them through this article extends their purpose from intimate statements to an expression of a creative practice. The ‘song cycle’ method asks us to incorporate the profound depth of the literary, visual, and auditory humanities in our daily lives, and tell old stories anew.

Appendix – Song Cycles via Spotify

These are the Literary Song Cycles curated by Sam Bowker at time of publication:

Ramayana: Full Sequence (2018)

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/7CovypkuTDxOnXINi2CFzH>

Dante’s Divine Compilation (2019)

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2Kdh1fCHulGysJGFo16ZmB>

Aladdjinn (or, “I can’t believe it’s not Faust!”) (2020)

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3RYGpPI4sSR0b7VZjdthEw>

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