

IT'S THE SONG NOT THE SINGER

"Somewhere Over the Rainbow," before it became a punch bag, was a beautiful song.

The original, sung as we all know by a young Judy Garland, remains - for me anyway - the definitive version.

Then on the radio the other day, I heard a programme about bullying. It featured contributions from both victims and perpetrators and at one point it was suggested that the victims in some way attracted or even invited the abuse they received. This was firmly dismissed as trying to defend the indefensible and in some way justify unacceptable behaviour. It left me wondering, though. Do some songs attract assassins?

Some vocalists it seems, can't resist what they see as easy pickings. "Let me have a go at that," they seem to say, like the playground bully on spotting the new vulnerable-looking kid on the block. They launch an attack on the tune leaving its chords and cadences splattered against the walls of the auditorium like so much grape shot.

"Yesterday" attracts the same sort of treatment. Generally done too slow (McCartney's original is surprisingly fast) there are over 1500 cover versions so far. A simple song of regret is turned into an orgy of angst and lamentation featuring hernia-inducing vocal gymnastics. Such singers are taking liberties with one of the finest melodies in the history of the popular song. As with "Rainbow", if you want to know how to sing "Yesterday", listen to the original.

Recently while fiddling with the remote control, I happened upon the performance channel. I watched a long advertising feature on an album entitled "Tapestry Revisited." The record features a various artistes line-up manufacturing retreads of the songs on Carole King's monster, 70's, some say "seminal" album. I know I'll probably get hate mail for this, but I always thought "Tapestry" to be a tad overrated and I preferred Ms King when Gerry Goffin wrote the lyrics: "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow", "Natural Woman", and many more.

Anyway, as I was saying, it was a long advertising feature, and the reason for its extraordinary length was a rendition of "You've got a Friend" by a gospel outfit whose name I didn't catch - and who I wouldn't like to identify anyway because a couple of them looked rather hard.

The first line, "When you're down, and troubled, and you need a helping hand", took almost five minutes. Then the phone rang. So after agreeing to have my coal delivered by the milk marketing board, I went back to the TV.

"You just ca a a a a a all out my Na a a a a ame and you know wherever I a a a a a am.....I nipped out for a pint, when I got back they were up to "Winter spring summer or fa a a a a a all," and I realised it would be Christmas before they finished it.

"You've got a Friend" is a beautiful, simple song. The sentiment expressed is straightforward, but like the other songs I've mentioned here, it seems to attract the bullies. My message to them: pick on something your own size!