Let's Have a Party

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When rock and roll was young it was mainly about the sound, the rhythm, the seductive beat of the music. Lyrics tended to be simple and repetitive like their blues and country roots. Bill Hayley's *Rock Around the Clock* was released in 1955 to great excitement. No one thought much of the lyrics—"One, two, three o'clock, four o'clock rock" and so on—but it didn't seem to matter.

Songwriters were soon looking at their generation and examining their own lives and writing songs that spoke directly to young people like themselves. As rock evolved, the music became increasingly irresistible. The lyrics became more personal, more focused on the teenage experience, love and heartbreak, school, existential angst, and "barefoot girls dancin' in the moonlight."

No matter what kind of lyrics they were, kids like me wanted to learn them, memorize them, and be able to sing along when we heard them played on the radio or on someone's record player. Album sleeves in those days had not yet matured into the works of art they later became. They did not include the lyrics of the songs, so you had to listen carefully and frequently to learn the words. It wasn't always easy. Some performers emitted sounds that may have been words but were in any case completely incomprehensible. Even gods like Elvis could be a challenge.

Presley's movie, *Loving You*, was released in 1957 and was a huge success. One of the songs in the film was *(Let Me Be Your) Teddy Bear*, a popular mid-tempo piece with a marvellous rolling beat that went platinum that year. I had the vinyl LP of the soundtrack and played it endlessly, as one did in those days. Elvis was a bit of a mumbler and I sometimes found it hard to understand what he was singing. So, I spent hours listening to the difficult tracks, trying to make out the mysterious words. The only phonograph in the house at that time was my father's pride and joy, a very fine Garrard stereo set with a radio and gramophone housed in a polished wooden cabinet that sat, serenely, in the living room. This was where I spent hours listening to records, usually when my dad was out of earshot.

My mother loved rock and roll and was very much in favour of playing records any time the mood came upon you. She had been a fan ever since seeing *Rock Around the Clock*, the first big movie all about rock and roll. My dad loved classical music and was not a fan of "that dreadful noise."

One Sunday afternoon, when my parents were safely in the garden, I put Presley's *Loving You* soundtrack on the turntable, cranked up the volume a few notches, and settled into an armchair to listen with my notebook in my hand. I was paying particular attention to the song *Let's Have a Party*, which began quite simply: "Some people like to rock, some people like to roll / but movin' and a-groovin's gonna satisfy my soul / Let's have a party." But in a later verse there were some very knotty lyrics that had resisted all my attempts to unravel them. The troublesome stanza started with something that appeared to be: "I've never kissed a bear / I've never kissed a goon," but I had no idea what came after that. I simply could not understand it. For one thing, what it sounded like made no sense to me, and I suppose my brain wanted something it could understand. Montevideo was a long way from the American South, and I had had no exposure to the kind of language used by musicians like Jessie Mae Robinson (1918-1966), the Black singer-songwriter who wrote the piece. And then, out of the blue, it came to me. Very excited, I stood up and belted out the words: "But I can shake a chicken in the middle of the room."

My dad happened to be passing through the living room at that moment and heard me. He stopped dead in his tracks and looked at me, his brow furrowed in a questioning frown. "What?" he said.

"It's the line from the Elvis song I've been trying to decipher. He sings 'But I can shake a chicken in the middle of the room.'"

My father raised an eyebrow. "Shake a chicken? Good grief! I hope you're not thinking of doing that in *this* house."