

Is This The Greatest Lyric In The History Of Popular Music?

Written by Andy Owen



If it isn't, it comes pretty damn close...

Of course, the question is impossible to answer. Lyrics are subjective.

Everyone will have their own favourite, which has particular relevance and meaning to them. I have loads of songs that mean so much to me. So do you.

These songs have played a big part in our lives. They will be with us forever.

But for me, somehow, this particular lyric always seems to rise above the greatness and significance of all the rest.

It is called '*Amelia*'.

It was written by the peerless Joni Mitchell.

Joni is a poet. She tells stories with astonishing wisdom, precision and grace.

She takes us to places, introduces us to people and situations - and we are transported into another place and time.

I was reading an opinion the other day, that Joni's lyrics would stand on their own without being propped up by music.

Just listen to her albums and you will agree.



Amelia is a track from her album Hejira.

The album is a masterpiece.

It is its own universe.

If you don't have it, buy it today.

And while you're at it, add *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*, *Blue* and *Court and Spark* too.

Amelia is a visual and emotional panorama, delivered as only Joni can do.

The song is sung to Amelia Earhart, the pioneering female aviator who in 1932 became the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean.

She vanished over the Pacific Ocean in 1937 and she has never been found.



Joni herself explained how the song came about, in two interviews – with Mojo magazine in 1994 and in 1996 with the LA Times:



"I wrote Hejira while travelling across the country by myself and there is this restless feeling throughout it - the sweet loneliness of solitary travel.

In Amelia, I was thinking of Amelia Earhart and addressing it from one solo pilot to another, sort of reflecting on the cost of being a woman and having something you must do.

Basically the false alarm was the end of a relationship. Two Scorpios who couldn't let each other go. It was done, but we couldn't let go; we belonged to each other.

I think of Amelia and I think solo flight. I can't remember how many hotel rooms later it was complete."

David Crosby covered Amelia on his 2017 album Sky Trails, and talked about the song in an interview with Uncut magazine, many years ago.

"I love that song. What a stunning piece of work.

The two levels of it talking about Amelia Earhart and talking about her own love life at the same time, so eloquently, with such a beautiful set of words."

OK, here's Amelia. Prepare to be transported to another place...

AMELIA by Joni Mitchell

*I was driving across the burning desert, when I spotted six jet planes
Leaving six white vapour trails across the bleak terrain
It was the hexagram of the heavens, the strings of my guitar
Amelia, it was just a false alarm*

*The drone of flying engines, is a song so wild and blue
It scrambles time and seasons if it gets through to you
Then your life becomes a travelogue of picture postcard charms
Amelia, it was just a false alarm*

*People will tell you where they've gone, they'll tell you where to go
But 'til you get there yourself, you never really know
Where some have found their paradise, other's just come to harm
Amelia, it was just a false alarm*

*I wish that he was here tonight, it's so hard to obey
His sad request of me to kindly stay away
So this is how I hide the hurt, as the road leads, cursed and charmed
I tell Amelia, it was just a false alarm*

*A ghost of aviation, she was swallowed by the sky
Or by the sea, like me, she had a dream to fly
Like Icarus ascending, on beautiful foolish arms
Amelia, it was just a false alarm*

*Maybe I've never really loved, I guess that is the truth
I've spent my whole life in clouds at icy altitude
And looking down on everything, I crashed into his arms
Amelia, it was just a false alarm*

*I pulled into the Cactus Tree Motel, to shower off the dust
And I slept on the strange pillows of my wanderlust
I dreamed of 747's, over geometric farms
Dreams, Amelia, dreams and false alarms*

It's a truly astonishing lyric, enhanced by a unique vocal phrasing, amazing guitar tunings and voicings.

It devours you emotionally and transports you to the place where three lives intersect without even meeting.

How can anyone write something as incredible as this?



Amelia Earhart was the epitome of female courage.

She was a trailblazer and an inspiration to so many. Her final journey was intended to be the first circumnavigation of the world by a woman in an aeroplane.

Joni's line "*Amelia, it was just a false alarm*" is genius. And, in the context of the song, it displays her own vulnerability.

"Amelia" is incomparable and timeless.

I have been greatly moved by so many superb songwriters. I was very lucky to start my musical education in the best era that has ever been – and will ever be.

The 60's.

Many of those wonderful songwriters and those great songs have stayed with me. They have formed the soundtrack of my life.

I am still hugely inspired by these great people.

Paul Simon. Jackson Browne. James Taylor. Michael Franks. Al Stewart. John & Paul. George. Brian Wilson & Van Dyke Parks. Becker & Fagen. Bob Dylan. Hal David. Jimmy Webb. Billy Joel. John Prine. The Gibbs. Waters & Gilmour. Henley & Frey. Ray Davies. Randy Newman – and many, many more...

And then, when I started to look back to learn and discover where their influences had come from, I found more gold.

Hoagy. Sammy Cahn. George & Ira Gershwin. Cole Porter. Johnny Mercer. Irving Berlin. Oscar Hammerstein – and many others.

It's not hard to see how words came to play such an important part of my life and work after being so heavily influenced by people like that.

I suppose Paul & John were probably the most influential to me. But that of course, was down to the fact that these four guys from Liverpool changed my life in 1963.

(As they did to pretty much all the current crop of writers I have mentioned above.)

Just read John's lyrics in *'In my life'*. It is a stunning piece of work.

And Paul's lyric for the boys' final goodbye in *'The End'*.

'And, in the end, the love you take, is equal to the love you make'

A momentous line...

But, as this article is about Joni, let's return to her.

In my view, her entire body of work is pure genius.

'Amelia' is extraordinary. As I said earlier, how anyone could write such greatness is amazing to me.

I hope this article may influence you to either pull it out of your collection and play it right now, or buy it for future enjoyment.

I send my love to Joni, as we are all so sad to see her in poor health.

