



ENGLISH CAFÉ – 305

TOPICS

Famous Songs: I've Been Working on the Railroad; Burning Man; irony versus sarcasm versus satire; agreement versus contract; to fall for (someone) versus to fall for (something)

GLOSSARY

folk song – a song that is often sung by ordinary people and is common among the people

* My father taught me some folk songs he sang as a child in Russia.

to date back – to be able to look back in history to when something appeared for the first time

* The invention of the modern telephone dates back to the mid-1800s.

railroad – the network of railroad tracks that allow trains to move over land

* The early railroads allowed people and goods to travel long distances, between cities and even between states.

to pass the time away – to do activities that are not productive or useful, but that entertain us a little and give us something to do during the day

* What do you plan to do to pass the time away once you retire from your job?

whistle – a device that makes a loud, musical sound with a single note when air is blown or pushed through it

* At the game, the referee blew her whistle each time a player did something against the rules.

to rise – to wake up; to get up out of bed

* On our farm, we rise at 4:00 a.m. to begin working in the fields.

radical – something that is extreme and not ordinary; something that is completely different from what people know or are used to

* Dying your hair orange would certainly be a radical change in your appearance.

self-reliance – how well people are able to survive and do things for themselves, without depending on other people or needing help from other people

* My parents taught me self-reliance and I'll never depend on someone else to earn money for food or to pay for a place to live.



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harsh – difficult; rough; severe

* Shin knew that it would be cold climbing the mountain, but he didn't know that the strong winds would be so harsh.

leave no trace – the idea that when people go into a natural area, they shouldn't leave behind garbage or anything else that may affect or damage the environment

* When we go camping, we try to leave no trace.

to burn – to light something on fire so that the fire consumes it and nothing is left

* The firefighters stopped the fire before it could burn any houses.

effigy – a model of someone; a sculpture made to look like a particular person or type of person, often made so that it can be destroyed in a symbolic way

* The voters were angry and burned an effigy of the mayor in front of city hall.

irony – words used to say something different than what they literally (by their dictionary definition) mean, usually used for humor; a style of writing in which words are used to mean something other than what they literally say, either for humor or for some other effect

* Quan uses irony in his article to make fun of people who drive very large cars.

sarcasm – words used to mean something different than what they literally say, especially to hurt or tease a person

* Carl's sarcasm about his wife's weight can be very cruel.

satire – the use of irony in writing, especially if it is meant to point out a flaw in people or society

* This play is a satire on our society's high opinion of beautiful people.

agreement – when two or more people have the same opinion; an arrangement between two or more people

* Our agreement is that if you cook, I'll wash all of the dishes, right?

contract – an arrangement between two or more people, especially if it is written down and/or protected by the law

* The sales contract says that we have 30 days to return the item if we're not happy with it.

to fall for (someone) – to begin to like or love a person in a romantic way

* I never thought I would fall for someone much older than I am.



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to fall for (something) – to believe a lie, trick, or joke; to have been tricked
* Did you fall for Jean-Paul’s lie about needing to borrow money for his sick mother?

WHAT INSIDERS KNOW

Freighthopping

Even with the “advent of” (invention of) airplanes, trains are still an important form of transportation across the United States. One type of train is the freight train. The word “freight” refers to “goods” (things intended for sale; merchandise) that are transported or moved by trucks, ships, airplanes, or trains. Across the U.S., freight trains move large “quantities” (amounts; numbers) of goods across long distances every day.

After the American Civil War (1861-1865), railroads were being built to reach further west. For some “migrant” workers, or workers who move from place to place to find work, freight trains became a way to travel from city to city, and even from state to state. These migrant workers, also called “hobos” during this time, didn’t buy a ticket to ride on the train, however. Instead, they participated in “freighthopping” or “train hopping.”

To “hop” means to jump on one leg. When the hobos freighthopped, they hopped onto slow-moving train cars as the train moved along the “track” (long metal bars that trains travel on) and rode on the train without paying. This was a “widespread” (common; done by many people) way of traveling for people who couldn’t afford other types of transportation.

The practice of freighthopping was not legal, of course, and although train hopping is much less common today, every state in the U.S. has laws that make it a crime to train hop. Some railroads have hired police officers called “bulls” to stop people from freighthopping. These bulls ride along the “route” (path; road) of the train in trucks or SUVs (sports utility vehicles; large, tall cars), or even police cars to “catch” (identify; find) freighthoppers.



COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT

You're listening to ESL Podcast's English Café number 305.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast's English Café episode 305. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development, here in beautiful Los Angeles, California, the City of Angels.

Visit our website at eslpod.com. Download the Learning Guide for this episode, an 8- to 10-page guide that we provide for all of our current episodes that will give you a lot of additional help in improving your English.

On this Café, we're going to continue our series on famous songs, focusing on a song named I've Been Working on the Railroad. We're also going to talk about something else related to music, the Burning Man festival. And, as always, we'll answer a few of your questions. Let's get started.

This Café begins with a continuation of our series on famous songs. Today we are going to talk about the song I've Been Working on the Railroad. This song is a "folk song," a song that was often sung by ordinary people, not professional singers; it was very common among a certain group of people. The song dates back to at least 1894, late in the 19th century, when it was first published. The earliest recording we have of this song goes all the way back to 1927, so it's an old song, more than 100 years old. The phrase "to date back" is used to talk about when something happened in history, or when something appeared for the first time.

"Railroads" are the network of railroad tracks that connect different places, allowing trains to move over land from one place to another. Railroads were very important as the United States expanded during the 19th and 20th centuries from the Atlantic Ocean in the east to the Pacific Ocean right here, for example, in California. Before airplanes, of course, railroads – trains, that is, were the easiest and best way to get from one place to another; they're still very popular in many parts of the world. Less popular here in the United States, and there are still many railroads here as well.

I've Been Working on the Railroad has four main parts, but I'm just going to sing the first one for you. I'll sing it first, and then we'll talk about the lyrics, or the words of the song:

I've been workin' on the railroad,



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All the live long day.
I've been workin' on the railroad,
Just to pass the time away.
Can't you hear the whistle blowing?
Rise up so early in the morn.
Can't you hear the captain shouting,
"Dinah, blow your horn?"

That's the first part of the song; I might actually sing the second part, too, in a minute. But let's go back can talk about what I just sang. I start by saying, "I've been workin' (I've been working) on the railroad all the live long day." You don't hear people use the phrase "live long," but it means all day or the entire day. The singer has spent the entire day working on the railroad "just to pass the time away." The expression "to pass the time" or "to pass the time away" is usually used to talk about things that you're doing that are not very productive or useful, but they entertain you, they give you something to do during the day. Some people pass the time away talking to their friends on the telephone. Actually, nowadays nobody talks on the telephone, everyone texts each other or updates their Facebook page or something – Tweets, I guess. Well, the man in the song says he was passing the time of day working on the railroad, which of course doesn't really make a lot of sense. He's probably not speaking seriously here. Working on the railroad would be very hard work, not the sort of thing you would do just for fun!

The next line of the song is "Can't you hear the whistle blowing?" A "whistle" is something that makes a loud, musical sound with a single note when you blow into. You can also whistle with your mouth [Jeff whistles]; that's whistling. I was whistling the first few lines of the song, in fact – well, the music for the song. So, the question the person asks in the song is "Can't you hear the whistle blowing?" A train whistle would blow very hard often if it's coming to a populated area, trains still blow their whistles when that happens. This person asks, "Can't you hear the whistle blowing?" Then he says, "rise up so early in the morn." "To rise up" means to get out of bed, to stop sleeping, to put your clothes on. "Early in the morn" means early in the morning. Then he asks, "Can't you hear the captain shouting, 'Dinah, blow your horn?'" The captain is usually the leader of some military group or the man in charge of a boat or a ship. I guess the captain here is the person who is responsible for the train, although normally we would call him the conductor. This captain is talking to someone named Dinah, and asking this Dinah to blow the horn – or blow a horn. In this case, the horn is probably some sort of musical instrument. We talk about the horn section of a band; that would be the trumpets and the saxophones and the – what do you call



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those things that go back and forth? Trombone, there you go. Those are horns. So, the man is asking if you can hear the captain shouting, yelling to someone named Dinah “blow your horn.” We’re not sure if Dinah is a man or a woman; it is, or has been a woman’s name. There was a famous TV personality named Dinah Shore back, oh, many years ago when I was young.

What does the song mean? Well, it doesn’t mean much! It doesn’t have a lot of significance, at least that we can understand. I’ll sing it again, and maybe talk a little bit about some of the other parts of the song, which unfortunately also don’t make a lot of sense.

I’ve been workin’ on the railroad,
All the live long day.
I’ve been workin’ on the railroad,
Just to pass the time away.
Can’t you hear the whistle blowing?
Rise up so early in the morn.
Can’t you hear the captain shouting,
“Dinah, blow your horn?”

This is a song that almost every child learns; it’s a part of American folk or traditional music. I’m also told that it is popular in Japan, although the lyrics have a different meaning. I read somewhere that it is played at some of the Japanese train stations whenever the train arrives, something I didn’t know before investigating this song. The second part of the song is also very famous, so I’m going to sing it for you very quickly. It’s, again, not difficult to understand.

Dinah, won’t you blow,
Dinah, won’t you blow,
Dinah, won’t you blow your horn?
Dinah, won’t you blow,
Dinah, won’t you blow,
Dinah, won’t you blow your horn?

The second part is really just that one line: “Dinah, won’t you blow your horn,” which is a way of asking Dinah to blow his or her horn.

The next verse – and notice that each part has a different melody, a different musical background:

Someone’s in the kitchen with Dinah,



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Someone's in the kitchen I know.
Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah,
Strummin' on the old banjo!

So, someone is in the kitchen – what kitchen, I don't know, maybe the kitchen on the train – with Dinah. Again, not sure if Dinah is a man or a woman. "Someone's in the kitchen I know." I know that that person is there – I think. "Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah, strummin' on the old banjo!" A "banjo" is a musical instrument; it's a little bit like a guitar but it has a round base to it. It is very popular in American folk music. "Strummin'" just means playing, so someone is playing the banjo in the kitchen with Dinah, who's supposed to be blowing his or her horn. All very strange!

The next part of the song really doesn't make any sense at all; they're just some interesting sounds.

Singin' fi, fie, fiddly-i-o,
Fi, fie, fiddly-i-o-o-o-o.
Fi, fie, fiddly-i-o,
Strummin' on the old banjo.

Now, I must say that I've always associated Dinah with a woman, and there are other parts of the song that would also suggest that. In fact, in one place it said that Dinah was a generic term – a general term for an African American slave woman, or an African woman who was a slave back in the 19th century.

So, that's I've Been Working on the Railroad.

Now we'll turn to our next topic, which is Burning Man festival. Some people call it the Burning Man festival; some people just call it Burning Man. But this is not like other festivals – other celebrations. The Burning Man website – of course, they have a website – says that you can't truly understand what Burning Man is unless you experience it yourself. So I should begin by saying that I personally have never experienced Burning Man – I've never gone to one of these events, but I'll do my best to explain it to you anyway, or at least what I understand of it.

Burning Man is a one-week event that happens every year in late August and early September in a desert, an area that's very hot and dry, without a lot of vegetation – without a lot of trees. This desert is called the Black Rock Desert, and it is in the north part of the State of Nevada. Nevada is right next to



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California; Nevada is where the City of Las Vegas is. But this is in the northern part of the state; Las Vegas is in the southern part of the state.

So, it's a one-week event in this desert. It's described as, on the website, "an experiment in temporary community dedicated to radical self-expression and radical self-reliance." Wow! Okay, so "community" has to do with being social, living with other people. This is a temporary community that is "dedicated to," meaning it has as its purpose, radical self-expression. The word "radical" usually refers to something that is extreme, something that is not usual, not ordinary. "Self-expression" refers to how people express themselves, either through their actions or their words, how they communicate their ideas, what they think is important, how they show other people what they believe. People who go to Burning Man express themselves in many different ways: it might be art, it might be music. Some people express themselves by not wearing any clothing. I'm not sure what they're expressing there!

The description also talks about "radical self-reliance." "To rely on (someone)" is to depend on someone, to need someone else to help you. "Self-reliance" would be doing things yourself, not having anyone help you. The desert where Burning Man is held or takes place is a very "harsh" or difficult environment. It's very hot, it's very dry; it's a desert. You have to bring everything you need to survive. You need to bring food; you need to bring water; you need to bring something where you can sleep, something to protect you from the weather. Sounds like a lot of fun! You're not supposed to buy anything with money during the event, you see; you have to bring everything with you.

During the event, the participants build a kind of temporary city, and there are different areas of this little city that have different themes that are based on different ideas. The participants are trying to create an experimental community, so the relationships that they create are considered very important. Although participants are trying to prove that they can be "self-reliant," meaning not needing anyone else's help, if they do need something they are encouraged to talk to the other people there. So, I'm a little confused already about the "self-reliance" part!

Cars and trucks are not allowed. Of course, you have to get there somehow. I don't think they walk from town – maybe they do! Some approved participants can bring special vehicles which they have changed in some ways, to make them very creative. Sometimes they change the cars and trucks to look like food, or animals, or dinosaurs, or electronics. I'd like to see an iPod car or an iPhone car;



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that would be interesting! So, you can, I guess, bring cars and trucks, but they have to be changed in some way.

Finally, this event, Burning Man, emphasizes leave no trace. This is an expression that is used: “leave no trace.” A “trace” (trace) would be something that shows that you were somewhere; it’s usually a very small thing. “Trace” can also mean a very small amount of something. So if you pick up a glass and you grab it with your hand, you will probably leave a trace that you were there by your fingerprints; the fingerprints are the trace, the piece of evidence. Well, Burning Man tries to leave no trace, meaning when they leave they want to leave the desert area the same way it was before: no garbage, no beer cans, and so forth. I’m not sure how successful they are; it has become very difficult to leave no trace.

The Burning Man event started⁷ back in 1986, with just a small group of people. Now there are, I guess, tens of thousands of people who go. Each person has to buy a ticket. For the 2011 event, the tickets were 360 dollars per person. This is 360 dollars to go out into the middle of the desert and survive by yourself for one week. It’s a pretty good deal; I mean that’s not a lot of money to pay for that kind of suffering! Well I’m, of course, being sarcastic; I’m trying to be funny.

I should say that they don’t actually burn anyone at Burning Man. “To burn (something)” means to light it on fire so that the fire destroys it – consumes it. They do, however, burn a wooden “effigy,” a large statue that has or that is in the shape of a man. Why? I have no idea. It’s kind of like the song that we talked about, I’ve Been Working on the Railroad; it’s very weird, very strange.

Now we’ll answer what I hope are not strange questions that you have sent us.

Our first question comes from Kosuke (Kosuke) in Japan. The question has to do with the meaning of the words “irony,” “sarcasm,” and “satire.”

“Irony” (irony) is usually when you use words to mean something different than what they literally mean or usually mean. For example, you may bake or make a large cake, and your friend comes into the room and says, “Oh, who made the little cake?” Well, “little” is opposite of what she meant to say; but it’s a way of, in a way, making a joke or making an observation about something. That’s what we might call a kind of verbal irony, when you are using it in a conversation you say something that is usually or often opposite of the real meaning of the word because you’re trying to perhaps be funny or comment on the characteristic or quality of a certain thing.



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“Sarcasm” (sarcasm) is using irony, but as a way of criticizing or hurting someone else. It’s a kind of irony, but it’s an irony that is specifically meant to make fun of someone, often to criticize someone. Let’s say somebody comes and they just had their hair cut and it looks terrible, it looks ugly. You might say, “Oh, nice haircut!” but you say it in a way that they know you are joking; they know that you really mean the opposite, that it’s an ugly haircut in this case.

So that’s irony and sarcasm used in conversation. You can also have irony and sarcasm in writing. Authors – writers will often use irony in order to show a certain point or to bring out a certain theme in their book or in a movie or a television drama.

“Satire” (satire) is also a way of using irony in writing; usually it is meant to point out or to indicate some sort of problem or flaw in a culture or a society. Satire is a written kind of irony, sometimes even a kind of sarcasm, where you are trying to criticize the other person by making fun of them. For example, one of the most famous satires is by Jonathan Swift, called A Modest Proposal. This was written at the time that there was a lot of famine, a lot of people dying because they did not have enough food in Ireland, and he thought that people weren’t paying attention to this problem so he wrote a satire. In this satire, written in the 18th century – the 1700s, he proposed that parents in Ireland can make money to buy food by selling their children to rich Englishmen. The Englishmen could then use the children as food. Now, that’s a horrible idea of course, but that is exactly what Swift was trying to do. He was trying to use this sort of bitter irony or sarcasm to show that the British were not doing enough to help the Irish at that time.

Muhammad (Muhammad) in Egypt wants to know the difference between a contract and an agreement. Well, both the words “contract” and “agreement” can mean the same thing; they can mean an understanding between two people or two organizations that is written down. Contracts are almost always written down; they’re an agreement, they’re a mutual understanding between two parties or two people that is about typically some legal or financial matter. A contract – at least a commercial contract is always about what’s called “consideration,” that is, it has to be about something of monetary – of financial value, something worth money. Contracts are written agreements. An agreement, however, could just be verbal, although sometimes you will hear the term a “verbal contract.” An “agreement” is a more general word. It could be about anything, not necessarily something written down, not necessarily something about finance. You could have an agreement between a husband and a wife about who will take their son



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to the doctor next week. That's an agreement. A contract is more formal; it's a legal document typically, and as I said, it is usually written down on a piece of paper. Contracts are legal documents; you can force someone to do something if they do not do what they promised to do in a contract. Contracts are something that only adults can enter into; you can't be a child and sign a contract. In the United States, that means less than 18 years old. Your parents can sign a contract, but you, as a child, cannot.

So, contracts are very specific, legal requirements. Agreements, both verbal and in writing, are more informal, a term we use to describe any sort of understanding between two people or two groups.

Finally, Leung (Leung) from Hong Kong wants to know the difference between "falling for (someone)" and "falling for (something)."

"To fall for (someone)" is an idiomatic way of saying to begin to fall in love, to become romantically interested in, to start liking someone in a romantic way. When you're just beginning to do that, which of course, as many of us know is always the most exciting part of the relationship, the beginning – the falling for someone.

"To fall for (something)" is very different; it means to believe someone who is not telling you the truth, to believe a lie, or to be tricked into something. "I told my teacher that my dog had eaten my homework." That, in American schools, is the traditional excuse; if you don't do your homework, you say the dog ate it! Well, "I told my teacher the dog ate my homework, and she fell for it!" She believed the lie that I told her.

So, "falling for (someone)" is to fall in love; "falling for (something)," like "he fell for what I told him," or "he fell for that lie" is to believe something that isn't true. We hope that falling for someone does not mean that you are falling for something – a lie, that is. Remember ladies, just because he doesn't wear his wedding ring doesn't mean he's not married!

If you have a question about something, you can email us. Our email address is eslpod@eslpod.com.

From Los Angeles, California, I'm Jeff McQuillan. Thank you for listening. Come back and listen to us again here on the English Café.



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