

July 2, 2006

ON LANGUAGE

## Alright

By AARON BRITT

Just so-so or top of the charts?

Rock 'n' roll has told us lots of things over the years. It has told us that "all we are is dust in the wind" or "bricks in the wall" and that it wants "to hold your hand" and then "spend the night together." Aside from its many cooing, snarling and pleading invitations to the boudoir, pop music has promised nothing more often than the optimistically vague: "Everything's gonna be alright." Alright, that state of grace offered far more frequently than the elevating pledge to take us higher, the base desire to get lower or the blithe promise to ferry us away to paradise, is a strange one. Why does alright sound just, well, all right?

When seeking clarity in the language game, a good bet is to consult [Shakespeare](#). Here we turn to the Shakespeares of rock: John, Paul, George and Ringo. In the song "A Hard Day's Night," John Lennon sings, "But when I get home to you/I find the things that you do/Will make me feel alright." Just alright? Here's [U2](#) with a poetic explication of the same sentiment from 1991's "Mysterious Ways": "It's alright. . .it's alright. . .it's alright/She moves in mysterious ways/It's alright. . .it's alright. . .it's alright/Lift my days. . .light up my nights."

The two groups mean something different from the "satisfactory, average or mediocre" that all right conveys. What they and countless other pop musicians mean is "sublime, fantastic, second to none." alright is better than just all right; it's the best, the greatest, the tops. A single spin will assure the listener that the singers here do not mean "decent" or "acceptable." As Sasha Frere-Jones, the pop music critic at The New Yorker, told me, "When alright comes up in rock 'n' roll, it's often in a poetic sense, where it means that something is really good, much better than the vernacular all right."

More on this later, but first let's clear up what has grandfatherly grammarians griping and English teachers clawing the chalkboards. The prominence of alright in pop music is clear, but some usagists insist that alright is all wrong, proscribing the curt conflation in favor of the standard all right. Rockers themselves are split: some stick to the standards, and others stick it to the Man. The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage and The Associated Press Stylebook are in complete agreement on this issue: never alright. (Neither, however, takes a stand on which Talking Heads album is best.)

According to Wendalyn Nichols, editor of Copy Editor newsletter: "all right is still a two-word locution. We do have a higher tolerance for creative spellings in creative spheres, although "The Kids Are alright" — a 1965 hit for the Who — "gave everyone permission to spell it wrong. One hundred years from now I'll bet they'll be two separate words."

alright has all the same meanings in pop music that it does outside: as an intensifier of a statement, as in [Bruce Springsteen's](#) "Dancing in the Dark" ("Stay on the streets of this town and they'll be carving you up

alright") or as an attention grabber or exhortation, as in Eazy-E's "Nobody Move" ("Alright/Empty your pockets, but do it slow").

But rock 'n' roll has added another meaning to the word, suggesting that all is, indeed, right. In his 1972 glam anthem "Lady Stardust," David Bowie offers a useful rock definition for alright: "He was alright the band was altogether/Yes he was alright the song went on forever:/And he was awful nice/Really quite paradise."

How do we know that the tepid term doesn't actually mean the mild approval it suggests? Over to the [Beatles](#) again. When John Lennon needed the term to mean "just O.K.," he had to supply the definition himself. In "Strawberry Fields Forever" he sings, "But it's all right, that is I think it's not too bad." The superlative sense of all right was so entrenched that rockers were forced to redefine it to sound anything less than ecstatic.

Whence the superlative sense of all right?

As Erin McKean, editor of *The New Oxford American Dictionary*, suggests: "In rock 'n' roll the affect is to be cool. To play it cool you say that something is 'alright' instead of 'wonderful' or 'amazing.'" She calls the superlative sense of alright "a contextually derived meaning where all right is imbued with the best possible meaning."

To see how the rock 'n' roll sense of all right has spilled over into everyday speech, just tell your husband you scored two Clapton tix — another rock clip currently frustrating copy editors the world over — and his reply of "all right!" will leave little doubt. Score him some merch, and he'll really flip.

As well as causing a continual crisis with the red-pencil set, alright has also made it into the most hallowed spots in the rock lexicon: a word you can repeat endlessly regardless of context. all right has joined such stalwarts as "baby" and "yeah" in the halls of song-ending melodramatic melisma. Melisma — no relation to Mariah, Ciara or Aaliyah — is the practice of singing multiple scale-scaling notes on one syllable.

Jump to 2003 for the incandescent and inescapable single "Hey Ya!" from the rappers OutKast. Here is perhaps the most emphatic and focused use of the term in all of pop music. Andre 3000 demands his audience's attention by repeating the word 14 times in the song's breakdown. His rapid-fire staccato is a far cry from John Lennon's plangent repetition that closes the Beatles' "Revolution" (the B side of "Hey Jude"), but 35 years on and in a different genre altogether, alright is all right.

Henceforth, when asked how you're doing, don't say All right. Try singing it. You may feel a whole lot better.

*Aaron Britt is the researcher for the On Language column. William Safire is on vacation. Send comments and suggestions to: [safireonlanguage@nytimes.com](mailto:safireonlanguage@nytimes.com).*

