

SONGS ABOUT TIME

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Representation of *Hickory-Dickory-Dock*
@Studycat 2025

While there are very few good jokes about Great Time, there are songs a-plenty.¹ Songs unfold in Time. They mark Time. They muse over its characteristics. My favourite is '*Time, Time, Time is on my side/ Yes it is!*' as sung by Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones. It's very cheering and reassuring, especially when the hours and minutes seem to be rushing by with headlong speed. Where has my life gone? But I shouldn't worry. After all, Time is on my side ... and I'm trying to enjoy every moment.

But, just as a reminder that songs may have multiple messages, there are always pessimistic versions. A twentieth-century song explains that *Time is against Me*. And in the seventeenth-century, Andrew Marvell expressed the same point rather more majestically: '*And at my back, I always hear,/ Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near ...*' Those words come from his poem *To his Coy Mistress*,² urging her not to waste her time - or his - but to yield to his amorous advances. Who would not succumb, when so eloquently wooed?

Temporal themes in songs range across the entire gamut of human emotions. There is affectionate nostalgia. So Jim Croce's *Time in a Bottle* (1972) mused: '*If I could save time in a bottle/ The first thing that I'd like to do/ Is to save every day/ Til eternity passes away/ Just to spend them with you*'. There's also jolly celebration, as in Bill Medley and Jennifer Warnes' *I've had the Time of My Life* (1987): '*Now I've had the time of my life/ No, I never felt like this before/ Yes, I swear it's the truth/ And I owe it all to you*'.

And then there's happy anticipation, as fervently caught in the pulsing rhythms of Buddy Holly's *Everyday* (1957):

*Every day, it's a-gettin' closer
Goin' faster than a roller coaster
Love like yours
Will surely come my way.*

Time and love - or lack of the same - are absolutely standard themes. Yet, at the same time, there's also impersonal temporality, that marches on, regardless of human wishes or desires. So *The Times They Are A-changin'*, warns a classic by Bob Dylan (1964). Humans all become in time nothing but *Dust in the Wind*, agrees Kansas (1977), evoking the sonorous words from Ecclesiastes, 3:20 in *The Bible*: '*All are from the dust; and to dust all return*'.

Furthermore, numerous songs incorporate the relentlessness of time, with the key words: '*The clock keeps ticking*'. So Dale Marsh (2005) reflects that: '*This old Earth keeps spinnin';/ Another day has begun;/ The seasons keep on changin';/ One more circle round the sun;/ And life goes on'/ And the clock keeps tickin*'.

All of which cornucopia of music is underpinned by songs learned in childhood, which are devised to help youngsters learn to 'tell' the time. '*Tick, tock, tick, tock, merrily sings the clock*', runs one, soothingly. Another called *The Clock* explains helpfully that '*There's a neat little clock/ In the schoolroom its stands/ And it points to the time,/ With its two little hands*'. .

Above all, too, there's the much-loved classic *Hickory-Dickory-Dock* (first recorded in print, 1744). It reports solemnly that: '*The mouse ran up the clock;/ The clock struck one;/ The mouse ran down*'. And then it proceeds, verse by verse, with many variant wordings, through all the remaining hours on the dial, from two to twelve. It provides a very cheery way for kids to learn not just to count consecutively but also to appreciate that the clock operates with a twelve-hour sequence, as humans measure out time in hours and minutes, counted rhythmically: Tick, tock!

By the way, how children today will learn to tell the time from looking at digital timepieces is a new challenge. But it's highly likely that traditionally entertaining and instructive songs like '*Hickory-Dickory-Dock*' will survive in the repertoire.

One last thought: very few of these songs, whether aimed at adults or at kids, venture into the philosophy of time. The group Chicago in 1969 once sang to pose the question (written for them by Robert Lamm): *Does Anyone Really Know What Time It Is?* The song then enquired: '*Does anyone really care?*' before adding, accurately enough: '*We've all got time enough to die.*' It therefore concluded, with some bravado: '*I don't care (about time), Oh no, no*'. But that response evaded the big question - actually: 'What is Time?'

Well, not many philosophers or scientists can answer that succinctly,³ let alone song-lyricists. But the versatile entertainer Billy Porter does offer one haunting song under that title (1997). And it ends with a positive appeal for us all to share joy and love: '*For all we know/ All we have/ Is time*'. Tick tock! Where's that mouse?

ENDNOTES:

¹ For further song references, see P.J. Corfield, *Time-Space: We Are All in it Together* (London, 2025), p. 245 - Index 'Songs about Time'.

² See A. Marvell (1621-78), *The Complete Poems*, ed. E.S. Donno (1972).

³ For introductions to a complex theme, see G.J. Whitrow, *What is Time?* (1972); and T. Wyller, *What is Time? An Enquiry* (2020).