

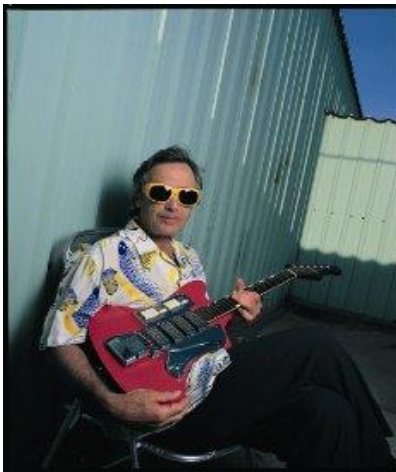
RY COODER AND 'ONE MEAT BALL'



Ry Cooder is not just a superb musician and writer: he is also a superb archivist, and a master at finding and resuscitating old songs. He has done this several times. One of the songs he rediscovered, reinvented and recorded is 'One Meat Ball'.

Carl Tighe

Ry (Ryland) Cooder was born on 15 March 1947 in Los Angeles, California. He lost an eye at the age of four and is said to have taken up guitar as a kind of compensatory activity. He first attracted attention with his guitar playing when he was working with The Seeds. He went on to play with Taj Mahal's band The Rising Sons and later with Captain Beefheart and The Magic Band. He has played with The Rolling Stones, Little Feat, The Chieftains, John Lee Hooker, Ali Farka Touré and he has written several film scores including the music and soundtrack for Wim Wender's film *Paris Texas* (1984). Cooder's recording career began with the album *Ry Cooder* (1970), and now includes dust bowl folk music, Tex-Mex, soul, gospel, rock and roll, blues, rag-time, jazz, cross-over and just about everything in between.



At a time when the US still has a total embargo on contact and trade with revolutionary communist Cuba, Cooder has been a major force behind the rediscovery of Cuban music and Cuban musicians. Cooder risked his citizenship to visit Cuba and to record the Buena Vista Social Club. He later worked on Wim Wender's documentary *The Buena Vista Social Club* (1999), which was nominated for an Academy award. It is partly as a result of Cooder's efforts that very late in their lives, and possibly at their very last chance, we have recordings of Ibrahim Ferrer (1927–2005), Compay Segundo (1907–2003) and Ruben Gonzalez (1919–2003), all of whom died within 6 years of the recording. Cooder's visits to Cuba put him at risk of imprisonment or a huge fine. Since the appearance of the video *The Buena Vista Social Club*, the US Treasury has been involved in a long drawn-out court case against Cooder, trying to impose a fine of \$25,000 for spending US dollars in Cuba without permission.

Ry Cooder is not just a superb musician and writer: he is also a superb archivist, and a master at finding and resuscitating old songs. He has done this several times. One of the songs he rediscovered, reinvented and recorded is 'One Meat Ball'. The history of the song is obscure, but it is clear that what has come down to us is a version of a much older song. One author has it that the song was a *volkslied* – a folk tune with no known

author. But from other sources it appears that there was an original song, probably called 'The Lone Fish Ball', dating from around 1854.

One version of this song's history says it was written by someone calling themselves Maestro Rossibello-Donimozarto and performed to raise money for the Civil War Sanitary Commission – a forerunner of the Red Cross. Another version claims it was written by a Harvard Professor of Latin called Norton.

However, there is evidence to suggest it was written by George Martin Lane (1823–97), Pope Professor of Latin at Harvard University. Apparently it was based on a real experience in a Boston restaurant, where Lane attempted to order half a portion of pasta. His song, 'The Ballad of the Lone Fish Ball' (possibly based on an earlier folk song) was taken up by faculty members and set into a pastiche of grand opera performed in Boston and Cambridge to raise funds for the Union army. Whoever wrote it and whenever it first appeared, by the late 1880s 'One Fish Ball' proved popular and featured (with words in Italian) in a published one act opera called *Il Pescaballo* (published by The Caxton Club of Chicago, 1899).

A song called 'One Fish Ball' appears in a song collection called *Read 'Em and Weep: The Songs You Forgot to Remember* (1926), edited by Sigmund Spaeth. He says this version dates from a collection of college songs published in 1868 and was popular in the Reconstruction Days immediately after the American Civil War. The song has more recently appeared in an anthology called *Joe has a Head like a Ping Pong Ball* (1988) edited by Marcia and Jon Pankake.

Sigmund Spaeth's Version (1926)

There was a man went up and down,
To seek a dinner thro' the town.
What wretch is he who wife forsakes,
Who best of jam and waffles makes!

He feels his cash to know his pence,
And finds he has but just six cents.
He finds at last a right cheap place,
And enters in with modest face.

The bill of fare he searches through,
To see what his six cents will do.
The cheapest viand of them all,
Is 'Twelve and a half cents for two fish-ball'.

The waiter he to him doth call,
And gently whispers – 'One fish-ball'.

The waiter roars it though the hall,
The guests they start at 'One fish-ball'.

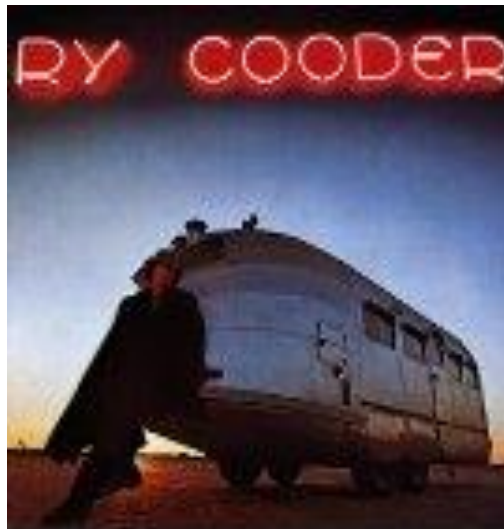
The guest than says, quite ill at ease,
'A piece of bread, sir, if you please'.
The waiter roars it through the hall,
'We don't give bread with one fish-ball'.

Who would have bread with his fish-ball,
Must get it first or not at all.
Who would fish ball with fixin's eat,
Must get some friend to stand a treat.

- There is a great deal of padding here: for example, we don't need to know that he enters with a modest face or that he felt ill at ease.
- The second line is totally redundant and the last two lines add a kind of Christmas cracker morality to the piece.
- The grammar is more complex than it need be, simply because of the demands of the rhyme and the rhythm – possibly the author really was a Professor of Latin.

Ry Cooder's Version

In 1944 two Tin Pan Alley song-writers, Louis (Lou) Singer & Hy Zaret, reworked the song 'Il Pescaballo' as 'One Meat Ball'. Hy Zaret went on to write (with Alex North) 'Unchained Melody, one of the most frequently recorded songs of the 20th century.



Their version of the song was recorded by Josh White to become a very popular hit song – it was also recorded by the Andrews Sisters and even by Bing Crosby. However, in the 1950s, Josh White was driven out of the USA to take up residence in Europe as

Senator McCarthy and the Committee on Un-American Activities (founded 1938 abolished 1975) began to hound him over his political opinions and suggest that he was a communist. The House Committee blacklisted about 300 writers and artists, many of whom were forced to move to Europe or worked under assumed names. Around this time the song disappeared from the US scene and for a period of about 20 years it became rather dangerous to play or perform it.

Ry Cooder included the song on his first album *Ry Cooder* (1970) and that album not only nailed Ry Cooder's political flag to the mast, but clearly put the song back in the public domain. Since then the song has been recorded by several other performers, among others, Baby Jane Dexter, Roy Bookbinder, Ela Jenkins, Mustard's Retreat, Dave van Ronk, Lightening Hopkins, Red Clay Ramblers, Annie Ross and Bjorn Berge. Here is the Louis Singer & Hy Zaret version Ry Cooder recorded in 1970.

The little man walked up and down
To find an eating place in town.
He read the menu through and through
To see what fifteen cents could do.

One meat ball, one meat ball
Well, he could afford but one meat ball.

He told the waiter near at hand
The simple dinner he had planned.
The guests were startled one and all
To hear that waiter loudly call:

One meat ball, one meat ball
Well, this here gent wants one meat ball.

The little man felt very bad
One meat ball was all he had.
And in his dream he hears that call:
'Ya gets no bread with one meat ball.'

One meat ball, one meat ball
Well, you get no bread with one meat ball....

One meat ball, one meat ball
Well, you get no bread with one meat ball.... (repeat and fade)

Consider the (re)writing process involved in this version:

- This is much shorter than the original and the detail works better towards an overall effect
- Simple grammar and sentence construction - short clear sentences - economical language
- Words mainly of one syllable reinforce the rhythm and the movement of the verse and the clarity of the sentences
- Stark song structure of four line verses with a simple two line refrain
- Words mainly of Anglo Saxon origin, rather than French or Latin, as in the original
- There is a clear narrative progression within the song
- At first sight this looks like a song about poverty
- It might even be a song about embarrassing circumstances – as in the original
- However, the construction of this version is more subtle: the real point it is not poverty or even the embarrassing circumstances of the poor man - he handles his poverty with dignity
- The real point of the encounter is held back, preserved in the little man's dreams as a kind of dramatic punch-line
- This version of the song is about the shameful humiliation visited upon a poor man by a waiter and the use to which the waiter puts his power.

Follow-up work

How does this discussion relate to your ideas on what it means to be a professional writer?

In what sense do you think we might characterise the original song 'One Fish Ball' as amateur and Ry Cooder's reworked 'One Meat Ball' as professional?

In which of these do you think the author's 'voice' is apparent? Why?

In what ways does this discussion extend, develop or challenge your ideas on professional writing?