

In January 2017, Ed Sheeran released “Shape of You,” a song he initially credited himself, Steve Mac, and Johnny McDaid with writing. But in March, he updated the ASCAP credits to include Kandi Buruss, Tameka Cottle, and Kevin Briggs – individuals that did not personally contribute to the songwriting process. Instead, they had written “No Scrubs,” a song recorded and popularized by TLC in 1999. When Sheeran released “Shape of You,” the internet immediately noted the similarities between the melody of “Shape of You” and TLC’s famous song, “No Scrubs.” Whether he deliberately lifted material from “No Scrubs” or unconsciously based the melody off a hit-song from his childhood, Sheeran quickly diffused the situation. Video shows Cottle dancing on Instagram after receiving the news about her inclusion in ASCAP. For Sheeran, it was a small price to pay for stealing from the best.

Anybody who disagrees with my claim that “No Scrubs” is “the best” would feel more inclined to agree with another claim of mine: Paul Simon’s 1986 album *Graceland* is also “the best.” It’s a controversial album, realized due to Simon’s defiance of a world wide-imposed cultural boycott of apartheid South Africa. But whether or not you agree with the politics surrounding its recording, it’s culturally, historic, and aesthetically important. At least, that’s what the Library of Congress argued when they included it in the National Recording Registry in 2007.

So when Sheeran’s recent release, “Bibia Be Ye Ye” (2017) bears a striking similarity to one of *Graceland*’s tracks, “Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes,” we could say Sheeran is “stealing from the best” yet again. Simon’s “Diamonds,” contains lyrics in Zulu by Ladysmith Black Mambazo and lovely *mbira* guitar playing by Ray Phiri; Sheeran’s “Bibia” contains lyrics in Ghanaian Twi by the song’s collaborator Fuse ODG and hypnotic West African and Congolese *soukous* guitar background. Not since the success of Vampire Weekend in the mid-2000s has an African-tinged single struck American listeners.

But nevermind abstract comparisons between Simon’s “Africanisms” and Sheeran’s “Africanisms”. Sheeran lifted wholesale melodies and lyrics from “Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes.” In the first verse of “Diamonds,” Simon sings “she said you’ve taken me for granted because I please you” by stepping up and down the first three notes of the G major scale (G–A–B).<sup>1</sup> In the second verse, he makes the same move up and down the first three notes, but slightly changes the rhythm to better accommodate the lyrics “by the bodegas and the lights on Upper Broadway.” The notes Simon sings are not out of the ordinary, but he relies on a particularly syncopated delivery and rhythmic cadence, emphasizing essentially every fourth syllable of the lyrics: “she said you’ve TAKEn me for GRANted because I PLEASE you/by the boDEgas and the LIGHTS on Upper BROADway.” Sheeran emulates Simon’s note choice in the first verse when he sings “I was tired and fell asleep beneath an oak tree” by stepping up and down the first three notes of G major. Additionally, he sings this melody with a rhythmic cadence that also emphasizes and elongates every fourth syllable: “I was TIRED and fell aSLEEP beneath an OAK tree.” The melodic and rhythmic similarities occur in another one of Sheeran’s lines. In the second verse he sings “now things are looking up, I’ll find my shoes right next to the oak tree.” He begins on a high G and descends down to a D before hitting a couple of Es (essentially outlining a G-pentatonic scale) while using an incredibly syncopated rhythm. When he arrives at his last word “tree,” he begins on a B and slides down to a G to end his phrase. This same gesture occurs twice in “Diamonds,” both lyrics immediately preceding the two examples above. Simon begins the lines “she was physically forgotten, then she slipped inside my pocket with my car keys” and “she said honey take me dancing but they ended up out sleeping in a doorway” on a high G. All while using another odd rhythmic cadence, Simon descends to a D and hits an E and then stops on the last syllable (“keys” and “-way”) where he sings a B before descending to a G to end his phrase.

If you can hear these melodic similarities, then the lyrical similarities make themselves comically evident. Sheeran begins his first line to “Bibia” admitting “I lost my shoes last night I don’t know where I put my keys.” He could perhaps find them in Simon’s pocket where a girl with diamonds on the soles of her shoes is looking for Simon’s car keys. Sheeran ends up finding his shoes next to the oak tree, where he fell asleep the night before. But he could have easily found them in a doorway where the girl with the diamonds on the soles of her shoes and a poor boy spend a night asleep after having gone dancing.

If you’ve gotta steal, steal from the best – or from a girl with diamonds in the soles of her shoes.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Simon sings “Diamonds” in the key of F-major and Sheeran sings “Bibia” in G major. To better compare the two, I discuss “Diamonds” in the context of G











