

Saying it with words - and they were often confusing

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People who, like me, were teenagers around 1960 will remember Elvis Presley's hit single *Return to Sender*. As often happened in those days, we ended up discussing the words of the song - or lyrics, as we had learned to say. The problem with American songs was that it was often difficult to make out what the words actually were.

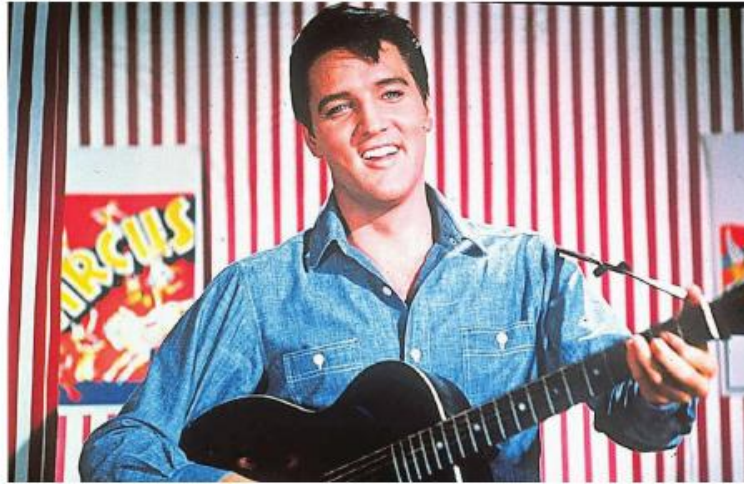
Sometimes this was a matter of coping with the American accent. It was years before I realised that Johnny Tillotson's *Poetry in Motion*, from 1961, contained the line "See her gentle sway" - his pronunciation of gentle had it rhyming with kennel, which was too hard for my teenage brain to process.

Sometimes the problem was more with combinations of words. How could you possibly put on "red blue jeans"?

Other things were cultural. What exactly was an "A-student", we wondered.

And sometimes we simply didn't know what a word meant. What were sneakers? High-heeled sneakers were presumably shoes - but what sort?

When Elvis's *Return to Sender* was played on the radio - as we had only just started calling it rather than wireless - we encountered all of these problems at once.



■ The lyrics of Elvis Presley songs left many people confused years ago because they contained words not known to the British.

Picture: AP

It was easy to understand that the postman had a sack instead of a bag, as we would have said. But we weren't very sure about zone - if that was the word he was actually using - in "No such number, no such zone", though we sort of worked it out. "I sent it special D" required a bit of guesswork.

But the real problem was the sentence "We had a quarrel, a lover's spat". Was he singing "a lover's pat"? Could "pat" really refer to some kind of problem? If it was "a lover's spat", what on earth did that mean? Some kind of disagreement, presumably.

But we had no idea. If there was such a word as spat, we had never heard it. Some of us looked it up in the dictionary - it wasn't there. There weren't any Americans around to ask, except for some not particularly sober USAF airmen on the streets of Norwich on a Saturday night who might have talked to our girlfriends but certainly not to us. We never really found out.

Now, 50 years on, the word spat is probably known, if not necessarily used, by most British people. And you can even find it in the pages of the *Eastern Daily Press*.