Barney the purple torturer?

The arranger of 'I Love You' is skeptical of the song's interrogation value.

By Bob Singleton
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Some months ago, Mother Jones magazine put together what it called a "torture playlist" of songs that American interrogators have used in their sessions with detainees during the last few years. "Torture's Top 10" was what one newspaper called it.

I have no idea whether the list is accurate. It includes mostly the kinds of songs you might expect -- by Metallica, Drowning Pool, Deicide, Eminem. The top song on the list included an extremely obscene reference to the religion of others.

But I must admit I was surprised to see that one of the songs supposedly used to break the will of terrorist suspects and cause them to confess to crimes against humanity was the well-known "I Love You" from the "Barney" TV series. That's a song that I produced and arranged in the 1990s (to the tune of "This Old Man"). And I certainly was not a user of the song's original intent of the work. For example, I'd be unhappy if I found out that my music for children was being used as the underscore for a stripper's nightclub act. Naturally, I want that music put to its best use -- entertaining and encouraging children. But in the end, it is the users and listeners who ultimately determine the merit of my work, and like it or not, it is they who also determine the best and worst use of it.

Well, I'm sorry, but I'm not terribly upset about the use of "I Love You." I'm amused and slightly perplexed, but I frankly don't believe that any artist or composer can really have much of a say about what happens to his songs after they leave his hands. Songs take on a life of their own once they hit the public consciousness, and we composers and songwriters just get to go along for the ride.

When I heard that "I Love You" had been used at Abu Ghraib to break the will of terror suspects, I just laughed. It's absolutely ludicrous. A song that was designed to make little children feel safe and loved was somehow going to threaten the mental state of adults and drive them to the emotional breaking point?

Would it annoy them? Perhaps. (There was one comment from a reader on the Mother Jones website that said: "I would tell them where Jimmy Hoffa is buried if they played the Barney song more than once.") I'm sure the song could have the same effect on some people as my neighbor's leaf blower has on me. After all, it was produced for the pleasure of toddlers, and adults would no more want that as a steady musical diet than they would want strained peas for food.

But could it "break" the mental state of an adult? If so, that would say more about their mental state than about the music.

I do find it unfortunate when my music is used for something counter to the original intent of the work. For example, I'd be unhappy if I found out that my music for children was being used as the underscore for a stripper's nightclub act. Naturally, I want that music put to its best use -- entertaining and encouraging children. But in the end, it is the users and listeners who ultimately determine the merit of my work, and, like it or not, it is they who also determine the best and worst use of it.

Music is just music. It's not something magical; it's just supposed to make us think, touch our emotions, make us dance. It can't change anybody's mind against their will. You can play rants against religion or force people to listen to songs for toddlers, but I don't think those messages are going to do psychological damage.
The idea that repeating a song will drive someone over the brink of emotional stability, or cause them to act counter to their own nature, makes music into something like voodoo, which it is not. That's the same argument that says that listening to a rock beat makes you want to take drugs, which is also obviously false. If that were true, the moral opposite would be true: Playing hymns to a prisoner strapped in a chair would make him a Christian. It just doesn't work that way.

Of course, if you blare the music loud enough for long enough, I guess it can become unbearable. But any loud sound can be made into a torturous experience. Why not play the recorded sound of a jackhammer? Some people have told me they would go stark raving mad if they had to hear Celine Dion or "Freebird" one more time. For some, it's just a few minutes of Philip Glass. I've heard that "I Love You" can do that to people too, but I happen to like the song, as do millions of preschoolers all around the world. No apologies from me about that.

Ultimately, the real issue here does not have to do with the morality of the music being played but with the morality of the people who are playing it. And there's not a thing that I or any other composer or songwriter can do about that.

Bob Singleton was music director for the TV show "Barney and Friends" from 1990 to 2000. He lives in Texas.