

## ON THE NET

### Finding Song Lyrics Online

**Jean W. LeLoup**  
SUNY Cortland  
**Robert Ponterio**  
SUNY Cortland

Most foreign language teachers enjoy studying song lyrics as authentic text in their classes. Songs can be used at all levels and for a wide variety of activities and purposes such as comprehension, vocabulary introduction, illustration or recognition of grammar structures, and reinforcement of topics. Traditional or new children's songs, musical classics, or the latest pop hits are all fair game. The rhythm and melody of songs can make the words and expressions easier to remember and more enjoyable for students than other sorts of texts. But providing written support for the lyrics can sometimes be a problem. Photocopying the lyrics from the album cover might not meet the needs of a specific activity if some modification, such as blanking out some words or adding definitions, is required. Retyping or transcribing the lyrics takes time that the teacher might not be able to spare, though, of course, transcribing lyrics is a good listening activity for us teachers as well as for our students. The Internet has become a useful source of song lyrics that can be copied into a word processor and transformed into an activity for class use.

Sometimes these lyrics can be easy to find, but teachers often ask us for help locating songs that they have searched for in vain. We will explore some of the kinds of sites where song lyrics may be found and describe some techniques that can help teachers use WWW search engines to locate the lyrics to a particular song more quickly.

When searching for song lyrics, one needs to think a bit differently from the way one might approach searching for other kinds of information online. Many teachers begin by looking for a good Web site for song lyrics. Although there are some sites that do present a selection of lyrics as a corpus, in most cases this is not a productive search strategy because the songs are generally not collected in one place but rather distributed around the Internet in millions of different sites.

Where can one find these songs? Record labels often have official Web sites for their artists that provide a variety of information about their activities and usually add a "discography" and/or "lyrics" section that might include song lyrics. This site for Patricia Kaas is managed by Sony Music:

<http://www.sonymusic.fr/kaas/>

Some companies seem to be very protective of their control of the lyrics and have even closed down private sites that put lyrics online. Official and unofficial fan club sites sometimes duplicate or replace the function of record label in promoting the artist. For example, discography and lyrics pages for Mecano can be found at the MecanoWeb site:

<http://www.geocities.com/~mecanoweb/LETRAS.html>  
<http://www.geocities.com/mecanoweb/DISCOGRAFIAMECANO.html>

Other private sites by individual music fans are another option, and these might be located anywhere in the world.

<http://members.es.tripod.de/Ananta/letras/mecano.htm>

Many individuals might have a reason to include the text of a particular song on a Web page. If you need the lyrics for all of the songs on an album, the most efficient search strategy will likely be different than if you simply need to find a particular song.

There are many search engines for the Web whose results will be similar, so it is not necessary to use any particular site. Some people have a preference for a certain search engine, and this is fine. A few favorites are [Altavista.com](http://Altavista.com), [Google.com](http://Google.com), [Snap.com](http://Snap.com), [Yahoo.com](http://Yahoo.com), [Lycos.com](http://Lycos.com). Many search engines allow the user to specify sites in a particular language, but this is generally not useful as few Web sites bother to label their language. So including a language in the search might even prevent finding the pages you need.

The most important feature to use when searching for songs is using quotation marks to identify a string of words that go together. "Twinkle, twinkle little star" should locate the title that we intend to find, but without the quotation marks we might also find "The little star will twinkle brightly." Careful use of quotation marks will eliminate false hits -- pages that match the search criteria even though they are not what we want. The more false hits we get, the harder it is and the longer it takes to track down what we really need. But quoting strings that are too long can have the opposite result if some small difference in the text makes the string in the Web page slightly different from the search string. For example, if the title in the Web page appears on two separate lines:

Twinkle, Twinkle  
Little Star

Our search might miss the very page we are looking for.

Every search is a matter of narrowing or widening the search parameters depending on whether we are getting too many false hits or not enough good hits. Quoting strings tends to narrow the search, so use fewer quotes if the search results seem too narrow, more quotes if the results seem too wide.

But just what should we be searching for? A problem for many novice Web searchers is that they begin by searching for words that identify the topic rather than words that will appear on the pages they hope to find. For example, very few pages of song lyrics include the word "lyrics," so do not use the word "lyrics" in the search for the words of a particular song. However, the word "lyrics" might be effective in looking for a collection of lyrics of many songs. Of course, a page in Spanish will probably use the word "letras" rather than "lyrics," so don't forget to consider the various possibilities in the languages that you use. Most song lyrics pages include the name of the artist and the song title, but not all of them do. In addition, the artist name and song title are the elements most likely to be present in some fancy format that might prevent the search engine from seeing them correctly.

Clearly, the words that will always be on any page containing the lyrics of a song are the words of the song itself, and these are invariably the most effective search parameters. The words "Twinkle, twinkle little star" are in the song but are also the title, so that search will bring up many pages that include only the titles of songs and not the lyrics. The search string "how I wonder what you are" will be more likely to find only pages with the lyrics of the song. Be sure to consider how common an expression is when selecting search criteria. For instance, "what you are" is a string that we can expect to find in many contexts other than this song. Less common expressions from the song will be more effective: "above the world," "diamond in the sky." Some songs also have different versions whose lyrics may vary. This is something to consider depending on whether one is looking for a particular version or all versions of a song.

A search for

Twinkle "how I wonder" "above the world" diamond

is likely to locate the pages we want very effectively. The addition of words from other stanzas might help us eliminate pages that only include the first stanza. In short, the best search strategy is to include only words and short phrases that must appear in the pages we hope to find.

To locate sites that provide the lyrics of many songs -- for example, all the songs on a particular album -- a different approach is required. In this case one might find either a page with a list of song titles and links

to the words of each song, or a long page with the lyrics of many songs. In the first case a search for a couple of titles might work; in the second case, expressions from the lyrics of several songs will be more effective. The problem with searching for titles is that far too many pages will be found that list titles without providing the lyrics. In this case, adding the search term "lyrics" or an appropriate substitute in the targeted language might help.

One example of a useful collection of lyrics is the "comptines" page of the "Premiers pas sur Internet" site for French children: <http://www.momes.net/comptines/index.html>, including the words and often the music for hundreds of children's songs.

There are times, though, when the list of titles can be of use. Some sites that sell CDs online also provide audio excerpts of individual songs. This can be a useful tool for the language teacher in search of new music in the target language, especially for teachers who do not often get to travel to countries where the language is spoken.

A caveat: once you find the lyrics, check them out carefully before using them. Many Web pages contain errors and misspellings. The lyrics on many pages will require corrections before they are shared with students. Copy and paste them into your favorite word processor; read them carefully while listening to the song, and use the spell check.

Now that we've discovered how to find these lyrics, what can we do with them in the FL classroom? As was previously noted, many FL teachers like to use songs as authentic materials in their curriculum. Songs can be used in a variety of ways for FL instruction. A search of the [FLTEACH](#) archives from January 1, 1999 to the present using the keywords "song lyrics" yields at least 146 hits, ranging from postings that are requesting aid in finding lyrics and using them to detailed messages describing grammar and other language lessons that are enhanced by the use of songs and their lyrics. One example of a lesson that uses lyrics for literacy in the L2 was profiled in a previous column: [Literacy: Reading on the Net](#). A sample [message](#) by Kathy White from the [FLTEACH archives](#) offers nearly 40 suggestions for activities using music and songs in the FL classroom.

Another [FLTEACH post](#) by Claudia Irigoin offers song activities from a workshop presentation given in Argentina. The purpose of the workshop was to help teachers motivate students in writing in English (an L2 there). You might also wish to expand repeated portions of songs to make it easier for students to follow along. For listening comprehension, some words or phrases may be replaced by underlining to allow students to fill in the blanks: a cloze task. Definitions or translations of phrases may be added in the margins or footers. Grammatical elements may be highlighted. The text, thus modified, can become a useful tool for language study.

Using songs is a wonderful way to make the target language accessible to language learners. It is a universal medium, and speaks volumes about cultural origin, language patterns, and usage. The power that songs contain is underscored by George Jellinek (WQXR-FM): "The history of a people is found in its songs." On a more basic level, music and songs are simply the stuff that life is made of: "Give me a laundry list and I'll set it to music" (Gioacchino Antonio Rossini).