

TUNE INTO ENGLISH

R.E.M.'s

Man on the Moon



Il testo di questa canzone del gruppo musicale della Georgia è una minieniclopedia della cultura popolare americana della seconda metà del ventesimo secolo, e una delle migliori dimostrazioni del suo talento nel creare gioielli pop con una grande varietà di riferimenti.

Released¹ in October 1992, R.E.M.'s eighth album 'Automatic for the People' is regarded² as the alternative rock band's finest³. It included the single *Man on the Moon*, a track full of references to pop culture and various conspiracy theories. The music was written by drummer Bill Berry and guitarist Peter Dinklage. With the deadline for the album approaching, they asked vocalist Michael Stipe to write the lyrics for the song, but he struggled⁴ to come up with⁵ ideas. Finally, he was inspired by one of his childhood heroes, eccentric entertainer and performance artist Andy Kaufman.

Kaufman became renowned⁶ in the 1970s for his provocative hoaxes⁷ as well as for his impressions⁸ of famous people. Elvis Presley (who was among them) cited Kaufman as the best impressionist he had seen. Stipe's song reflects upon a prominent rumour that began circulating in the 1980s; that Kaufman had faked⁹ his own death in 1984, at the age of thirty-five. Kaufman's wrestling antics¹⁰ were an integral part of his act. The lyric "Are you locked¹¹ in the punch¹²?" is a play on words¹³, referring to both a fight and the punchline¹⁴ of a joke.

The chorus¹⁵ refers to the 1969 Moon landing¹⁶, which many believe never actually happened. The song suggests that the government may be hiding¹⁷ something, and that we should not believe everything we are told. Stipe said his repeated use of the word 'yeah' was an attempt to use the word more often than his friend Kurt Cobain, who used it forty-two times in the Nirvana track *Lithium*. It appears fifty-six times in *Man on the Moon*! One of R.E.M.'s defining songs, *Man on the Moon* was used as the title and the titular track of a 1999 biopic of Kaufman, starring Jim Carrey. ☺



SCAN, READ & LISTEN
07

LOWER INTERMEDIATE B1

GLOSSARY

- 1 to release: pubblicare
- 2 to regard: considerare
- 3 finest: migliore
- 4 to struggle: avere difficoltà
- 5 to come up with: inventarsi
- 6 renowned: famoso
- 7 hoaxes: scherzi
- 8 impressions: imitazioni
- 9 to fake: fingere
- 10 antics: pagliacciate
- 11 to lock: intrappolare
- 12 punch: pugno
- 13 play on words: gioco di parole
- 14 punchline: battuta (in uno scherzo)
- 15 chorus: ritornello
- 16 Moon landing: arrivo sulla Luna
- 17 to hide: nascondere
- 18 checkers: dame
- 19 mess: caos
- 20 up one's sleeve: nella manica
- 21 staff: bastone
- 22 asp: aspide
- 23 to have the gall: avere la sfacciataggine
- 24 offering: offerta

Mott the Hoople: a 70s rock band

Mister Fred Blassie in a breakfast mess: Blassie was a professional wrestler and appeared in the 1983 Andy Kaufman film *My Breakfast with Blassie*.

locked in the punch: unable to move on.

goofing on Elvis: 'goofing on someone' is an idiom meaning to make fun of them.

are we losing touch?: meaning 'are we unable to think rationally?'

Moses went walking with the staff of wood: the prophet Moses was said to perform miracles with his staff, or rod.

Newton got beaned by the apple good: the story goes that Isaac Newton discovered the law of gravity when an apple fell on his head. 'Bean' is slang for head, and 'good' is used here as an adverb to mean 'hard'.

Egypt was troubled by the horrible asp: Cleopatra supposedly killed herself with the bite of an asp or Egyptian cobra.

Here's a little agit for the never-believer: the verb 'agit' means 'to shak'e or 'to stir'. The song is meant to make people think.

Here's a truck stop instead of Saint Peter's: this suggests Kaufman is not dead, but disappeared at a service station, instead of going to Heaven.

Mott the Hoople and the Game of Life

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah
Andy Kaufman in the wrestling match
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah
Monopoly, 21, checkers¹⁸, and chess
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

Mister Fred Blassie in a breakfast mess¹⁹

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah
Let's play Twister, let's play Risk
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah
I'll see you in Heaven if you make the list
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

[chorus]

Now Andy, did you hear about this one?

Tell me, are you locked in the punch?

Andy, are you goofing on Elvis? "Hey, baby"

Are we losing touch?

If you believed they put a man on the Moon (Man on the Moon)

If you believed there's nothing up their sleeve²⁰

Then nothing is cool

Moses went walking with the staff²¹ of wood

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

Newton got beaned by the apple good

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

Egypt was troubled by the horrible asp²²

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

Mister Charles Darwin had the gall to ask²³

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

[chorus]

Here's a little agit for the never-believer

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

Here's a little ghost for the offering²⁴

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

Here's a truck stop instead of Saint Peter's

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

Mister Andy Kaufman's gone wrestling

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

[chorus]

Game of Life: a simulation game created by British mathematician John Horton Conway in 1970.

to make the list: an idiom meaning to succeed in achieving something.

did you hear about this one?: jokes often begin with this line.

"Hey, baby": this is Michael Stipe doing an impression of Andy Kaufman doing an impression of Elvis.

Scan this QR code with your smartphone or tablet and listen to the official song on YouTube while reading the lyrics.

SCAN & WATCH



Fergal Kavanagh runs the website www.tuneintoenglish.com, the web's largest free resource for learning English through pop music.