

The Annotated



# Scarlet Begonias



An installment in The Annotated Grateful Dead Lyrics

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“Scarlet Begonias” composed and written

by Jerry Garcia and Robert Hunter.

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As I was walkin’  
‘round Grosvenor Square  
Not a chill to the winter  
but a nip to the air  
From the other direction  
she was calling my eye  
It could be an illusion  
but I might as well try  
Might as well try.

She had rings on her fingers and  
bells on her shoes,  
And I knew without askin’ she was  
into the blues  
Scarlet begonias  
tucked into her curls  
I knew right away  
she was not like other girls—  
other girls

In the thick of the evening  
when the dealing got rough  
She was too pat to open and  
too cool to bluff  
As I picked up my matches and  
was closing the door  
I had one of those flashes:  
I’d been there before—  
been there before.

 *Bridge*

I ain’t often right  
but I’ve never been wrong  
It seldom turns out the way  
it does in the song  
Once in a while  
you get shown the light  
in the strangest of places  
if you look at it right

Well there ain’t nothin’ wrong  
with the way she moves  
Or scarlet begonias or a  
touch of the blues  
And there’s nothing wrong with  
the love that’s in her eye  
I had to learn the hard way  
to let her pass by—  
let her pass by

The wind in the willows played Tea for Two  
The sky was yellow and the sun was blue  
Strangers stopped strangers  
just to shake their hand  
Everybody’s playing  
in the Heart of Gold Band  
Heart of Gold Band





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# Scarlet Begonias

debuted on March 23, 1974, at the Cow Palace in Daly City, California. The show also included the first "Cassidy," as well as the sound test for the famous "wall of sound" system. It appeared in the first set, between "Black Throated Wind" and "Beat It On Down the Line."

Two days later, the group began recording [From the Mars Hotel](#), on which the song appears. (DeadBase)

Robert Hunter recorded the song on his [Box of Rain](#) album. (1991)

Keith and Donna Godchaux covered the tune on [The Ghosts Playing in the Heart of Gold Band](#). (1984)

This notification of a cover from a reader:

Date: Fri, 06 Oct 95 15:20:15 -0700

From: Maziar Sadri

If you really like this song (and I'm sure you do) You should listen to the cover of it from a band called Sublime, they do (in my opinion)the greatest version of it. you won't be disappointed. It is on an album called 40 oz to freedom by sublime.

<http://www.semiweb.com/mazi>

\* [Oroboros](#) covers the song in their live performances.

\* [Phish](#) has covered the song live at least twice.

Blair Jackson, in [Grateful Dead: the Music Never Stopped](#), says this about the song: "Scarlet Begonias" remains one of Hunter and Garcia's very best songs, with its intricate percolating rhythm...a bright, tuneful melody, and dreamy lyrics: 'The wind in the willows played "Tea for Two" / 'The sky was yellow and the sun was blue,' the final verse begins, continuing with a wonderfully worded sentiment that describes the bond between Deadheads and the band— 'Strangers stoppin' strangers/just to shake their hand/Everybody's playing in the heart of gold band.' If there is one sentiment that is repeated over and over again by both Deadheads and the band, it is that they feel they are all actually part of the same animal, in the same sense that a Grateful Dead show is a giant gestalt in which the band and the audience support each other. Everyone is in the band in that respect." (p. 155)

[As I was walkin'](#) [BACK TO LYRICS](#)

A standard opening line in the British tradition, used in ballads and nursery rhymes. Along with the reference to Grosvenor Square, this line sets the song squarely in Britain.

One [nursery rhyme](#) which the song clearly echoes is "Pippen Hill":

As I was going up Pippen Hill, Pippen Hill was dirty; There I met a pretty Miss, And she dropped me a curtsy."

Source: The Real Mother Goose, Rand McNally, 1916.

[Grosvenor Square](#) [BACK TO LYRICS](#)

"Grosvenor Square, six acres in extent, takes its name from Sir Richard who died in 1732. It was built between 1720 and 1730, and has retained its popularity as a centre of wealth and fashion ever since that time." (Harold P. Clunn. [The Face of London](#), Spring Books, 1956.)

During WWII, Grosvenor Square was nicknamed "Eisenhower Platz" due to the presence of the American Embassy. Most other buildings on the square during the war housed U.S. military headquarters.

[Rings on her fingers...](#) [BACK TO LYRICS](#)

This line echoes another nursery rhyme, "Banbury Cross":

"Ride a cock-horse to Banbury Cross, To see and old lady upon a white horse. Rings on her fingers, and bells on her toes, She shall have music wherever she goes." [Source:] The Real Mother Goose, Randy McNally, 1916.

[Ain't always right...](#) [BACK TO LYRICS](#)

The folk song "Number Twelve Train" contains the line "I may be wrong, but I'll be right some day" (Source: [Folksinger's Wordbook](#), p. 81.)

love

Garcia sings  
"the look that's in her eye."

## Wind in the Willows [BACK TO LYRICS](#)

There are at least two references here.

1. “Blueberry Hill”, a song by Al Lewis, Larry Stock, and Vincent Rose, first appeared sung by Gene Autry in the 1941 movie, “The Singing Hills.” Glenn Miller made it a hit in the same year. Louis Armstrong recorded it in 1949, and Fats Domino in 1957. The line echoed in Scarlet Begonias is “The wind in the willow played/Love’s sweet melody...”

2. The famous children’s book by Kenneth Grahame (1859-1932), published in 1908, featuring a cast of animal characters. Frances Clarke Sayers, in a 1959 preface to the book, says ““On the surface, it is an animal story concerned with the small creatures of field and wood and river bank. Aside from their ability to talk, and a brief interlude of mysticism in which the great god of nature makes his presence known, it is a world of reality like that of the fable. ... It is a prose poem spoken in praise of the commonplace; a pastoral set in an English landscape which sings the grace of English life and custom. But it is something more. The tragedy inherent in all life is here, the threat of evil’ and the great mysteries are touched upon.”

The title of the book comes from the beautiful chapter, dead in the book’s center, entitled “The Piper at the Gates of Dawn” (also the alternate title for Pink Floyd’s first album), in which Rat and Mole listen as

the wind in the reeds and trees by the river bank slowly transforms into pipe music: “Breathless and transfixed the Mole stopped rowing as the liquid run of that glad piping broke on him like a wave, caught him up, and possessed him utterly. He saw the tears on his comrade’s cheeks, and bowed his head and understood. ... And the light grew steadily stronger, but no birds sang as they were wont to do at the approach of dawn; and but for the heavenly music all was marvellously still. ... In midst of the stream, embraced in the weir’s [!] shimmering armspread, a small island lay anchored, fringed close with willow and silver birch and alder.” (pp. 124-125) A yellow sky and a blue sun would not be out of place in Grahame’s evocative writing.



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melody; But all of those vows we made Were never to be. Tho’ we’re apart You’re part of me still For you were my thrill On Blueberry Hill.

## Tea for Two

A song published in 1924, music by Vincent Youmans (b. NYC 1898, d. Colorado, 1946), words by Irving Caesar (b. NYC 1895). From the musical comedy No No Nanette, which opened in Detroit in April,

## “Blueberry Hill”

Words and music by Al Lewis, Larry Stock and Vincent Rose.

Do you recall a year ago tonight? We stood and watched the golden sun descending When love had just begun, Why did there have to be an ending? Do you recall a year ago tonight?

(Refrain) I found my thrill On Blueberry Hill, On Blueberry Hill When I found you. The moon stood still On Blueberry Hill, And lingered until My dreams came true. The wind in the willow played Love’s sweet

## [BACK TO LYRICS](#)

1924. This is one of the most familiar and catchy melodies in the world, and has been extensively covered, especially by jazz performers.

Alec Wilder, in his [American Popular Song: the Great Innovators, 1900-1950](#), says that “The phenomenal hit of “No, No, Nanette” was, of course, Tea for Two. Because of the abrupt key shift in the second section from A-flat major to C major, it is very surprising to me that the song became such a success. And not only that, but after the key change and at the end of the C-major section, the song is virtually wrenched back into A flat by means of a whole note, e flat, and its supporting chord, E-flat-dominant seventh. Irving Caesar has said that the opening section of the lyric was never intended to be more than a “dummy”, one by means of which the lyricist is able to recall later on, while writing the true lyric, how the notes and accents fall. He also says that, in order to use the words he wanted in the second section, the C-major section, he persuaded Youmans to add notes which resulted in its being similar to, but not an exact imitation of, the first section. ... But for the rhythmic variance in the second section, the entire song is made of dotted quarter and eighth notes. This certainly ran the risk of monotony, yet the record stands: it was one of Youmans’ biggest songs and it remains a standard forty-odd years later.” (pp. 295-296)

## “Tea For Two”

Words by Irving Caesar;

Music by Vincent Youmans

I’m discontented with homes that are rented

so I have invented my own;

Darling this place is a lover’s oasis,  
where life’s weary chase is unknown.

Far from the cry of the city

Where flowers pretty caress the streams,

Cosy to hide in, to live side by side in,

don’t let it abide in my dreams.

*(Refrain)*

Picture you upon my knee

Just tea for two and two for tea,

Just me for you and you for me alone.

Nobody near us to see us or hear us,

No friends or relations on week end vacations,

We won’t have it know, dear,

That we own a telephone, dear,

Day will break and you’ll awake

and start to bake a sugar cake

For me to take for all the boys to see.

We will raise a family,

A boy for you, A girl for me,

Oh can’t you see how happy we would be?

You are revealing a plan so appealing

I can’t help but feeling for you,

Darling I planned it

can’t you understand it

is yours to command it, so do.

All of your schemes I’m admiring,

they’re worth desiring, but can’t you see,

I’d like to wait dear for some future date dear,

it won’t be too late dear, for me.

*(Refrain)*

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## Sky was yellow..

[BACK TO LYRICS](#)

This comment from a reader:

Date: Thu, 20 Jul 95 20:30:46 -2400

From: Timm Rebitzki Subject: scarlet begonias

Hi Dave,

you have some fun stuff out here! The first song I looked at, scarlet begonias, caught my attention. There is a line in there that’s always intrigued me: ‘the sky was yellow and the sun was blue’.

Now this just seems to most people a goofy inversion of the well-known fact that the sky is obviously blue and the sun is yellow. BUT, have you ever actually LOOKED?

Well, on any sunshiny day, if you let your eyes flash by the sun (without actually staring at it, ahem), you can really see that the disk of the sun is light blue and the patch of sky surrounding it is yellow. No doubt it is an optical illusion, caused by the eye replacing the unbearably pure white disk of the sun with the color it had received previously, namely the blue of the sky. Still, illusion or whatever, this is what you SEE! Hey, these guys are just telling it the way it is!!

Keep it up Dave, so long,

Timm