THE MUSEUM OF

Time in Song

A Lyrical Journey Across Five Centuries

40 SONGS · 5 CENTURIES · 8 THEMES OF TIME

CREDITS

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From Elizabethan lute songs to modern electronic anthems, songwriters have returned again and again to the great subject of time — its passage, its cruelty, its gifts, and its mysteries. This exhibition traces eight themes of time through the songs that gave them voice.

Each artifact is presented with its theme, era, and a curator's note on how the song treats its temporal subject. No lyrics are reproduced — seek out the originals; they reward every listen.

THEMES: Nostalgia · Mortality · Fleeting Moments · Seasons & Cycles · Waiting & Longing · The Eternal · Youth & Aging · Seize the Day

The Renaissance & Baroque

1590 - 1740

C. 1597

"Come Again, Sweet Love"

John Dowland

● SEIZE THE DAY

Dowland's lute song implores a lover to return before time steals the moment. The Elizabethan obsession with "carpe diem" is woven into every falling melodic phrase — love and urgency made inseparable.

The Renaissance treated time as an hourglass: visible, finite, always running out. Songs begged lovers to act now.

C. 1610

"Flow My Tears"

John Dowland

● MORTALITY

Perhaps the most famous lament of the English Renaissance, this pavane treats time as a descent into darkness. Each verse sinks lower, mirroring the inexorable pull of mortality on a grieving soul.

Dowland's melancholy was so fashionable it became a cultural brand — sadness as sophisticated art.

C. 1725

“Bist du bei mir”

attr. J.S. Bach / Stölzel

● THE ETERNAL

A tender aria about the peace of dying in a beloved’s presence. Time dissolves entirely — what matters is not duration but the eternal quality of a shared moment. Death becomes gentle, almost welcome.

The Baroque era framed eternity through faith and devotion — time was a corridor to something greater.

The Classical & Romantic

1780 - 1900

1823

“Gretchen am Spinnrade”

Franz Schubert

● NOSTALGIA

Gretchen sits at her spinning wheel, trapped in an obsessive memory of Faust’s kiss. The wheel’s circular motion becomes a metaphor for time looping — she cannot escape the gravity of a single past moment.

Romanticism discovered that nostalgia could be a prison as much as a comfort.

1828

“Der Erlkönig”

Franz Schubert

● FLEETING MOMENTS

A father rides through the night with his dying son — time collapses into a frantic gallop. The triplet piano figure never relents. By the final bars, the child is dead. Time ran out before the song could save him.

Schubert made musical time itself a character — the relentless accompaniment is the clock.

1840

“Frühlingstraum (Dream of Spring)”

Franz Schubert (Winterreise)

SEASONS & CYCLES

A wanderer in winter dreams of spring flowers, only to wake to frost on the windowpane. The seasonal cycle becomes a cruel joke — spring exists only in memory, and winter may never end.

The Romantics saw seasons not as comforting cycles but as reminders of what was irretrievably lost.

C. 1865

“Aura Lee”

W.W. Fosdick & George R. Poulton

WAITING & LONGING

A Civil War–era parlor song that aches with longing for an absent beloved. Time is measured not in hours but in the unbearable distance between two people. Later adapted by Elvis Presley as “Love Me Tender.”

The 19th century’s long separations — by war, by emigration — turned waiting into America’s great emotional theme.

Early 20th Century

1900 - 1950

1927

“Ol’ Man River”

Jerome Kern & Oscar Hammerstein II (Show Boat)

FLEETING MOMENTS

The Mississippi rolls on, indifferent to human suffering. Sung by a laborer who is tired of living and scared of dying, the river becomes time’s physical embodiment — it just keeps rolling along while mortal lives are crushed beneath it.

Paul Robeson’s definitive recording turned the song into a civil rights anthem — time’s indifference became an indictment of injustice.

1931

“As Time Goes By”

Herman Hupfeld

NOSTALGIA

Written as a Broadway number but immortalized in Casablanca, the song argues that the fundamental things — love, jealousy, longing — remain unchanged by time’s passage. Nostalgia here is a comfort: the past lives on in the present.

The song became a talisman for a generation facing world war — proof that some things endure.

1935

“September Song”

Kurt Weill & Maxwell Anderson

YOUTH & AGING

An aging man reflects on how the calendar shrinks as you grow old — the long days of May dwindle to precious few in September and November. Time’s subjective acceleration is captured in a single devastating metaphor.

One of the first popular songs to treat aging not sentimentally but with clear-eyed emotional precision.

1939

“Over the Rainbow”

Harold Arlen & E.Y. Harburg

THE ETERNAL

Dorothy dreams of a place beyond time’s reach — a land where troubles melt and days are endlessly bright. The song channels a universal yearning to escape the temporal altogether, to find a place where clocks have no power.

The quest for a timeless place is one of humanity’s oldest impulses — Oz is Eden, is Shangri-La, is heaven.

The Rock & Soul Era

1955 - 1985

1965

“Turn! Turn! Turn!”

The Byrds (words from Ecclesiastes)

SEASONS & CYCLES

Adapted from the Book of Ecclesiastes, the song insists that time is cyclical and every experience has its appointed season. War, peace, love, loss — all are phases in an endlessly turning wheel.

Ancient Hebrew wisdom meets 1960s folk-rock — a 2,300-year-old lyric became a #1 hit.

1966

“Time Is on My Side”

The Rolling Stones (orig. Irma Thomas)

FLEETING MOMENTS

A rare song that treats time as an ally rather than an enemy — the singer is confident that a wayward lover will eventually return. It’s youthful swagger personified: when you’re young, time feels infinite and generous.

Rock and roll’s early years were defined by the illusion that time was on everyone’s side.

1966

“A Hazy Shade of Winter”

Simon & Garfunkel

FLEETING MOMENTS

Paul Simon’s lyrics race against the season: the leaves are brown, the sky is hazy, and youth is visibly expiring. The driving tempo creates urgency — this isn’t a gentle autumn meditation but a panicked realization that the seasons of life move faster than you think.

The Bangles’ 1987 cover doubled the tempo and the anxiety, proving the song’s urgency only intensifies with time.

1967

“A Whiter Shade of Pale”

Procol Harum

THE ETERNAL

Built on a Bach-inspired organ figure, the song creates a space where time has no purchase — its cryptic, dreamlike imagery resists linear narrative entirely. The music seems to exist outside of any era, and the effect is one of timelessness achieved through deliberate disorientation.

The organ line borrows from Bach’s “Air on the G String,” linking 1967 psychedelia directly to 1731 — a 236-year bridge across time.

1971

“Time in a Bottle”

Jim Croce

NOSTALGIA

Croce imagines saving time the way you’d save wine — bottling the best moments to uncork later. The fantasy is tender and impossible: if he could stop time, he’d spend every saved second with the person he loves. Released posthumously after Croce’s death in a plane crash at 30, the song became an unbearable prophecy.

The song hit #1 only after Croce’s death — time granted him the fame that life could not.

1972

“Changes”

David Bowie

FLEETING MOMENTS

Bowie turned time into theatre — each era demands a new face, a new persona. The song is a manifesto for reinvention as a survival strategy: time changes everything, so you must change faster than time does. It’s a rejection of permanence as a virtue.

Bowie would spend the next four decades proving the thesis of this song, shedding identities like a snake shedding skin.

1973

“Time”

Pink Floyd — written by Roger Waters (Dark Side of the Moon)

MORTALITY

Written by Roger Waters for The Dark Side of the Moon — one of the greatest vinyl albums ever pressed — this is arguably rock’s definitive meditation on mortality. The song’s devastating thesis: you spend your youth thinking time is infinite, and then one day you realize a decade has vanished. The ticking clocks, the alarm bells, the heartbeat — Waters builds a sonic architecture of temporal dread. After the frantic guitar solo, the song surrenders into the gentle reprieve of “Breathe (Reprise),” as if accepting what cannot be changed.

The famous clock intro was recorded by engineer Alan Parsons at an antique shop in London — each clock individually captured, then layered into a symphony of ticking. The vinyl pressing made those ticks feel physically present in the room.

1975

“Landslide”

Fleetwood Mac (Stevie Nicks)

SEASONS & CYCLES

Written by Stevie Nicks at 27, the song watches the seasons change and wonders if she can change with them. The landslide is time itself — an unstoppable force reshaping the terrain of a life. Children get older, snow covers the hills, and every mirror shows a stranger.

Nicks wrote it while deciding whether to join Fleetwood Mac — the song’s uncertainty about the future became the hinge of her entire career.

1976

“Fly Like an Eagle”

Steve Miller Band

SEIZE THE DAY

Over a hypnotic synthesizer pulse that mimics the relentless tick of a clock, Steve Miller delivers one of the 1970s’ most urgent meditations on time: it keeps on slipping into the future. But the song refuses despair — instead it soars into a vision of liberation, feeding the hungry, housing the poor, transcending the constraints that time imposes on a broken world. Time is the enemy, but the eagle is the escape.

The song’s opening synth drone was revolutionary for mainstream rock in 1976 — a machine heartbeat counting down, daring you to act before the clock runs out.

1977

“Stayin’ Alive”

Bee Gees

SEIZE THE DAY

Beneath the disco groove lies an unexpectedly gritty lyric about survival — staying alive against the pressures of time, poverty, and the city. The insistent pulse is a heartbeat, proof of continued existence.

The song’s BPM (around 104) matches the ideal rate for CPR chest compressions — a coincidence that became medical protocol.

1980

“Redemption Song”

Bob Marley

WAITING & LONGING

Marley, unknowingly near death, sings about emancipation from mental slavery across generations. Time here is both captor and liberator — history’s long arc bends toward freedom, but only if each generation claims it.

Written after Marley’s cancer diagnosis, the song treats time as something to be redeemed, not merely spent.

1984

“Time After Time”

Cyndi Lauper

NOSTALGIA

A promise that transcends chronology: no matter how many times the clock resets, the devotion endures. The song’s genius is in its title — “time after time” is both repetition and infinity, suggesting love is the one thing that time cannot erode because it simply keeps returning.

Miles Davis covered it, stripping the pop arrangement to a bare trumpet and turning it into a meditation on temporal longing.

1984

“Forever Young”

Alphaville

YOUTH & AGING

A synth-pop anthem asking whether it’s better to burn out young or fade away slowly. The song frames youth not as a phase but as a state of grace that time will inevitably revoke.

The Cold War generation’s fear of nuclear annihilation gave “forever young” a double edge — a wish and a warning.

Late 20th Century Renaissance

1988 - 1999

1991

“Tears in Heaven”

Eric Clapton

MORTALITY

Written after the death of Clapton’s four-year-old son, the song asks whether they would still know each other beyond the boundary of death. Time here is the cruelest thing imaginable — a parent outliving a child, a future erased. The question of recognition in heaven is really a question about whether love survives the end of time.

Clapton eventually stopped performing the song live, saying he’d moved past the grief — time, in the end, did what the song doubted it could.

1992

“November Rain”

Guns N’ Roses

WAITING & LONGING

An epic power ballad that stretches to nine minutes — the song’s very duration enacts the slow, painful passage of time in a disintegrating relationship. The rain is time itself: persistent, indifferent, eventually wearing away everything that once seemed permanent.

Axl Rose worked on the song for nearly a decade before recording it — the time it took to finish became part of its meaning.

1995

“Wonderwall”

Oasis

NOSTALGIA

A song already drenched in nostalgia the moment it was written — the backward-looking melody and wistful delivery turn the present into memory even as it unfolds. Time is experienced as something already lost.

Britpop specialized in preemptive nostalgia — mourning the present before it becomes the past.

1997

“Everybody’s Free (To Wear Sunscreen)”

Baz Luhrmann (text by Mary Schmich)

YOUTH & AGING

Not quite a song, not quite a speech — a spoken-word piece over ambient music that distills an entire philosophy of time into six minutes. Its central advice: you will not understand the power of youth until it has faded. The real damage in life comes from the things you didn’t expect, on idle Tuesdays.

Originally a newspaper column, it became the decade’s unlikely graduation anthem — wisdom about time, delivered as pop music.

1999

“1999”

Prince

SEIZE THE DAY

Originally released in 1982 but reborn at the millennium, Prince’s anthem confronts apocalyptic time with ecstatic defiance: if the world ends tonight, the only rational response is to dance. Time’s finality becomes not a threat but an invitation to live with absolute intensity.

The song’s resurgence at the actual Y2K moment proved Prince prophetic — he’d been rehearsing humanity’s farewell party for seventeen years.

Modern & Contemporary

2000 - 2026

2000

“Clocks”

Coldplay

FLEETING MOMENTS

The cascading piano riff mimics the mechanical urgency of clockwork. The lyric wrestles with missed opportunities and the feeling of being swept along by forces beyond control — time as a river you’re caught in.

The piano figure was reportedly improvised and nearly discarded — a fleeting moment that defined a career.

2007

“Skinny Love”

Bon Iver

SEASONS & CYCLES

Recorded in a remote Wisconsin cabin during winter, the song’s raw falsetto captures a love too fragile to survive the season. The cold is both literal and emotional — relationships, like winter, have a natural ending point.

The cabin recordings redefined indie music — isolation and seasonal desolation as creative catalysts.

2011

“Someone Like You”

Adele

WAITING & LONGING

A song about arriving too late — the beloved has moved on, and time has closed the door permanently. The longing isn’t for the person but for the version of time where things turned out differently.

The appoggiatura technique in the melody — notes that lean into tension before resolving — literally mimics the ache of unresolved time.

2013

“Get Lucky”

Daft Punk ft. Pharrell Williams

● THE ETERNAL

A song built on an endlessly looping groove — the repetition creates a sense of suspended time, a perfect night that never has to end. The eternal isn’t spiritual here; it’s physical, present, and felt on the dance floor.

Electronic music’s loops offer a secular eternity — the beat goes on, and as long as it does, time stands still.

2015

“When We Were Young”

Adele

● YOUTH & AGING

Adele encounters an old flame and is overwhelmed by the distance between who they were and who they’ve become. Youth isn’t idealized — it’s simply gone, and the recognition of that absence is both beautiful and annihilating.

Pop music’s youth obsession shifted in the 2010s: instead of celebrating youth, artists began elegizing it in real time.

2016

“Lazarus”

David Bowie

● MORTALITY

Released two days before Bowie’s death, the song is a deliberate farewell from a man who knew his time was ending. It transforms a terminal diagnosis into art — death becomes a final creative act, not a defeat.

Bowie choreographed his own exit from time, making mortality itself a work of art.

2017

“HUMBLE.”

Kendrick Lamar

● SEIZE THE DAY

An explosive demand to be fully present and fully alive right now. Kendrick rejects the past and the future in favor of the immediate — time is only real in the current moment, and that moment demands respect.

Hip-hop’s relationship to time is often about owning the present — staking a claim on now as an act of power.

2019

“Old Town Road”

Lil Nas X ft. Billy Ray Cyrus

● THE ETERNAL

A song that fuses the mythic American past (horses, cowboys) with the digital present, collapsing historical time into a single surreal landscape. The “old town road” is a place where all eras coexist simultaneously — nostalgia and modernity riding the same horse.

By mashing genres that belonged to different centuries, the song proved that in the streaming age, all of musical time is simultaneous.

2020

“Circles”

Post Malone

● SEASONS & CYCLES

A relationship that can’t end and can’t progress — the lovers run in circles, season after season, repeating the same patterns. Time doesn’t move forward here; it spirals. The dreamy production wraps the repetition in something almost beautiful, making the trap feel like home.

The circular structure of the song — verse, chorus, verse, chorus, with no bridge or resolution — enacts the very trap it describes.

2022

“As It Was”

Harry Styles

● FLEETING MOMENTS

Styles captures the vertigo of realizing the world you knew no longer exists — the title itself is an epitaph for the recent past. Written during the pandemic’s isolation, the song treats pre-2020 life as a vanished world. The synth-pop brightness masks deep disorientation.

The song’s opening phone message from a child saying “come on, Harry, we wanna say goodnight to you” grounds cosmic loss in the most intimate possible scale.

2024

“Birds of a Feather”

Billie Eilish

● THE ETERNAL

The most-streamed song of 2024 is, at its core, a love song that uses death to measure devotion. Eilish promises to love someone until she’s in the grave, until light leaves her eyes — mortality becomes the ultimate proof of sincerity. The breezy new-wave production creates a paradox: eternity expressed as a three-minute pop song.

A 22-year-old writing about loving someone until death inverts the tradition: usually it’s the aging who contemplate time’s limits, not the young.

2024

“Alone / Endsong”

The Cure (Songs of a Lost World)

● MORTALITY

After sixteen years of silence, Robert Smith returned with the most unflinching album of his career. “Alone” opens with the declaration that this is the end of every song we sing. “Endsong” closes the record with a ten-minute elegy in which Smith, now 65, stands outside in the dark wondering how he got so old. Time is not abstract here — it is deeply, painfully autobiographical, shaped by the deaths of Smith’s mother, father, and brother.

Smith once wrote about mortality as a 20-year-old romantic pose. In 2024, he wrote about it as a man who has buried his family. The difference is everything.

2024

“Luther”

Kendrick Lamar ft. SZA

● NOSTALGIA

A lush ballad that feels lifted from a time capsule — Lamar and SZA channel the warmth of early-2000s R&B; duets while singing about giving someone the love they deserve before time runs out. The nostalgia is deliberate: the sound itself is a tribute to an era of music that felt more tender.

Named for the soul singer Luther Vandross, the song acknowledges that to love fully in the present, you sometimes need the emotional vocabulary of the past.

2025

“Golden”

Sabrina Carpenter

YOUTH & AGING

The biggest pop song of 2025 captures the iridescent self-awareness of Gen Z youth — knowing you’re living in a golden moment even as you experience it. Unlike earlier generations who only recognized youth’s value in retrospect, this generation photographs, documents, and eulogizes the present in real time.

Pop music has come full circle: where “September Song” mourned youth from old age, “Golden” tries to bottle it while it’s still happening.

“Time is the substance I am made of.
Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river.”

— Jorge Luis Borges

A curated survey of how songwriters across five centuries have grappled with humanity’s oldest obsession — from Dowland’s Elizabethan lute songs to Roger Waters’ vinyl masterwork on *Dark Side of the Moon*, from Steve Miller’s soaring eagle to The Cure’s 2024 reckoning with mortality.

CREDITS

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