

**Norwegian Wood: 「ノルウェイの盛り返し」**

**by Bim Yoder**

A few months ago I was talking with a Japanese friend about music. A Beatles fan, he was trying to remember the name of one of his favourite melodies, and hummed it to me. *So-la-so-fa-mi, re-fa-mi-do, te-fa-la-so*. Oh, I said, that's 'Norwegian Wood'. Yes, of course, he said, slapping his head. 「ノルウェイの森」. How could I forget?

「ノルウェイの森」? Norwegian Forest? I must have heard Japanese people say that before, but I can't have taken it in. Perhaps I'd never thought about it, in the way that you sometimes don't with songs you are so familiar with you just take for granted and don't bother to analyse. But it suddenly made me think. What did 'Norwegian Wood' really mean? Was it really about a forest? Somehow that didn't seem right. Through the magic of smart phones, I quickly downloaded the lyrics.

*I once had a girl, or should I say, she once had me...  
She showed me her room, isn't it good, Norwegian wood?*

*She asked me to stay and she told me to sit anywhere,  
So I looked around and I noticed there wasn't a chair.*

*I sat on a rug, biding my time, drinking her wine  
We talked until two and then she said, "It's time for bed"*

*She told me she worked in the morning and started to laugh.  
I told her I didn't and crawled off to sleep in the bath*

*And when I awoke, I was alone, this bird had flown  
So I lit a fire, isn't it good, Norwegian wood.*

Though the melody is so familiar, and one of the most evocative of the Beatles' early songs, I don't think I'd really seen the lyrics written down before. Certainly, if you'd asked me, I wouldn't have been able to tell you anything about them other than it was some kind of love song. It's probably much the same for most people, unless

they are really keen Beatles fans. I knew the opening line: “*I once had a girl, or should I say, she once had me.*” I remember that line because it’s such a striking start, so different from a typical love song, an open confession of failure right from the beginning. He didn’t ‘have’ her; she ‘had’ him – the nuance of the word ‘had’ even suggesting that the girl had actually tricked him. But I’d never really caught the rest of the words. Could they have been in a forest?

From the second verse, the lyrics make it quite clear that the characters in the song are actually in a room. This is a strong clue that the song might not be talking about a forest. Unless that room was in a house in a forest, with large windows giving views onto a wooded scene, why would you mention it? But there’s a grammatical clue too. If the speaker had really been talking about how nice the ノルウェイの森 was, there would need to be a specific marker: Isn’t it good, *this* Norwegian wood, or *a* Norwegian wood. Without it, we’re left with an uncountable noun. And that means only one thing. We’re talking about wood as a material.

Checking on Japanese websites I noticed that there has already been some debate about whether ‘Norwegian Wood’ really means a forest, or whether it might refer to ノルウェイの家具. Haruki Murakami even mentions this theory himself in a short essay on the subject written in 1994. Given the popularity of Scandinavian furniture in Britain at that time, that could in theory be a possibility. But there’s a big problem with that idea. The song specifically mentions there wasn’t anything to sit on in the room – so there can’t have been any furniture at all, let alone Norwegian furniture. Which is why, of course, the disappointed suitor ends up sleeping in the bath.

So that leaves only one other possibility, confirmed by Paul McCartney himself in a more recent interview, that ‘Norwegian Wood’ refers to the pine cladding that was so popular at the time as a way of giving rooms a cheap make-over and lending them an exotic, fashionable look at low cost. You can still find rooms in London that survive from that period, lined in cheap pine to cover up dark and unfashionable wallpaper. “Isn’t it good, Norwegian wood.” It’s a very natural thing to have said as a chat-up line, complimenting the girl on her room.



So the song is about visiting a girl who lived in a trendy (for the time) room lined with Norwegian wood. The singer has hopes of sleeping with her, and 'bides his time' waiting for the right moment. But when it comes to bedtime, she's not interested, and he has to go off to the bath because there's nowhere else to sleep. Frustrated, he wakes up the next day to discover she's gone, and lights a fire.

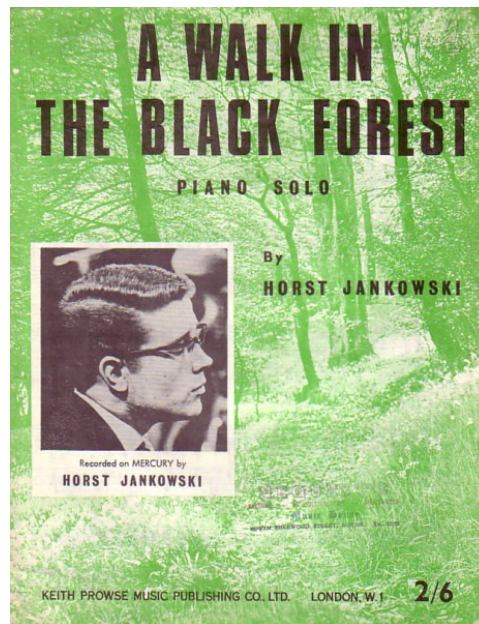
Here again, the Japanese translation is misleading. It suggests that he lit a fire in the grate. 「僕は暖炉に火を入れた」. But even so, the wood would have to have been the panelling of the room, which was easy to remove and would have burnt easily. "Isn't it good, Norwegian wood." And the fire may not have been in the grate. There is clearly a suggestion that he set fire to the room to take revenge on the girl for not sleeping with him, confirmed again by McCartney in the same interview.

The source of this frustration is also reflected in the rumoured original title for the song, 'Knowing She Would' – again mentioned by Murakami-san – meaning that he had only gone to the girl's room in the first place in the clear expectation that she 'would' sleep with him, except that it turned out that she wouldn't. According to this theory, 'Norwegian Wood' is a play on words that sounds like the original intended meaning but hides it. There's also a theory among some fans that 'Norwegian Wood' refers to marijuana, and that lighting the fire refers to lighting a joint, but there really isn't any evidence for that, textual or otherwise.

Either way, the Japanese translation of the title would seem to be highly misleading, not to say plain wrong. You can see why it happened: with no knowledge of the cultural background, it must have been puzzling to a translator probably working to a tight deadline, on a low budget, and desperate to come up with something. There's no other reference to 'Norway' or 'wood' in the song, and if the first suggestion for 'wood' in the dictionary is 'forest', and that sounds good, then why not?

So the question is becomes, what should the translation be? After I explained the whole meaning to him, my Japanese friend jokingly suggested 「ノルウェイのまき」, but that's not very romantic – as Paul McCartney pointed out in explaining why the title wasn't 'Norwegian Pine'. 「ノルウェイの用材」 isn't exactly catchy, either. Another problem is that even if 'Norwegian Wood' refers specifically to the pine panelling in the girl's room, the image that the title creates in English is one of sophisticated trendiness, a cultural reference which a literal translation into Japanese cannot possibly catch. So, as Murakami-san himself suggests, the best solution is probably to leave it as 「ノーウェジアン・ウッド」 as he says Toshiba had always insisted. Either that, or create a play on words in Japanese that suggests some of other nuances that are at work in the song – disappointed expectations and the desire for revenge. But that's not easy, either.

In the end, even if ノルウェイの森 is a complete mistranslation, it has a certain ring to it, and everyone in Japan is familiar with it. It's probably long past the time to make a change. In 1965, the same year that Norwegian Wood was released, a tune called Walk In The Black Forest (「森を歩こ」 in Japanese) was a big hit in the UK. As a young boy, I loved this piece of music, and even learnt to play it on the piano. The published music featured the composer, Horst Jankowski, against the backdrop of a forest, and I used to imagine myself wandering there amongst the woods with the birds singing as I played it.



But a German friend recently told me that the original German title of this instrumental piece is actually '*Eine Schwarzwaldenfahrt*', meaning 'A Drive In The Black Forest'. I was horrified. I couldn't believe it. It completely changed my image of the song. No longer was the song about communing with nature, it was about polluting the air as you drive through the forest, scaring all the birds away. Oh no!

So I understand that people who know and love the song as 「ノルウェイの森」 will resist having it translated another way, or changing the personal significance they attach to the song. Even though I didn't originally think of Norwegian Wood as being about a forest, reading the lyrics for the first time changed my own impression of the song from a soulful, romantic atmosphere (enhanced by George's sitar) to a rather dark and bitter tale. But though the song may lose something of its purity, it gains a depth. There's a twist in the tale, and that makes it more interesting. It's not just a sappy sentimental song, it's a very human story. And all the more surprising that it seems to have been Paul McCartney who suggested the line about arson.

In any case, it could have been worse. At least the translator actually saw the words written down, and didn't just hear it – or we might have ended up with 'Norwegian would...' (ノルウェイ人なら・・・) – a tale about the loose morals of Scandinavian women. And would Haruki Murakami ever have written his book with a title like that?