

Newsweek

An Old Twist on Valentine's Day

By Katya Cengel / February 13, 2014 3:42 PM EST

When composing a singing telegram, Adhamh Roland likes to start with the recipient's name. From there he likes to take the subject's quirks and characteristics "pretends to like salsa," "has beaten *Grand Theft Auto V*" and work them into five or six rhyming stanzas. Somewhere in there is "the shocker" say, Daniel Badal's sister catching him and his girlfriend, Kara Murray, having sex.

That was the gist of a singing telegram Roland recently delivered to Badal, from Murray, on top of a grassy knoll at Oakland's Grand Lake Farmers Market. A transgender 28-year-old from St. Louis, Roland has a traditional style bellhop outfit and accordion and a modern outlook: He advertises the telegram as, among other things, a way to come out to your parents. Murray hired him because she wanted to send something a little more personal than the usual birthday greeting for Badal's 24th. Something evocative of their relationship, one that their friend Seneca Miller sums up as "the combination of *Grand Theft Auto* and eating vegetarian."

Roland was thinking about a different combination and how the families picnicking nearby might feel about the sex scene set to song. But compared to what will come on Valentine's Day, the biggest single day in the business, the in flagrante delicto *con* sister line was tame.

Western Union began delivering singing telegrams in 1933 as a

sort of gag. Even Warner Bros. cartoons got into the act. The raunchier element can be traced to their revival in the 1980s, a decade when even cartoon rabbits had sex appeal. The Las Vegas-based Eastern Onion played a large part in the singing telegram renewal, with more than 40 franchises in its heyday. Gary Baldowski and his wife, Lynne Colby, opened the Atlanta branch in 1978. In three-plus decades of business their performers have sung more than 120,000 telegrams, everything from birthday wishes to employment terminations. The latter went so well some women being fired ordered a telegram for their bosses: "You can't fire us, we quit!"

"It was all sort of a joke," said Baldowski.

From the stripping gorilla to the 300-pound Elvis Presley impersonator singing "Burning Love," the whole enterprise was built on bawdy humor. On Valentine's Days back in the 1980s the Atlanta branch used to deliver more than 200 messages in 12 hours.

Clarence Thomas and a Coke can put an end to the bawdy humor, he said. The age of sexual harassment lawsuits in the workplace drastically cut back their cubicle clients, which had become close to half of their business. The fat lady, or the fat Elvis, stopped singing and Eastern Onion went from having dozens of branches to about half a dozen. Valentine's Day orders for the Atlanta office slipped to a tenth of previous levels.

But in the past few years singing telegrams have been making a comeback. Western Union briefly revived a digital version as part of a holiday promotion in 2011. It allowed senders to create digital cards featuring themselves singing alongside celebrities like Snoop Dogg and Timbaland. Even Baldowski's less famous characters have been gaining ground. "It's a

pendulum; swings one way, will definitely swing back the other...." he said. "And just like we did back then, someone will take the concept and redo it and have a lot of fun with it."

That person may not be Roland, but he puts on a good show. Roland entered the scene in the San Francisco Bay Area three years ago with his own business, Tin Can Singing Telegram. He composes his ditties on a MacBook but completes them on a typewriter. He makes about 30 percent of his income from the telegrams which run from \$90 to \$225 and the rest working with school children in programs on bullying prevention and diversity.

A wispy redhead, Roland has composed rhymes about make-out scenes on tire swings and doctors who run dialysis centers. There was a baby shower for a woman who worked at Planned Parenthood and a multiple message rhyme for an Irish family on St. Patrick's Day. The latter was delivered at a somber family funeral where everyone was dressed in green and crying over their food. The woman who ordered the telegram wanted Roland to sing about the family milestones she had missed during the past year while caring for her ailing father.

It didn't go over so well at first, said Roland. But when people heard references to themselves and their exploits in the song, it became more of a "Wow!" And because the song mentioned almost everyone in the room, the place got pretty warm and fuzzy.

Then there was the time he was asked to blend in at a Silicon Valley business meeting while outfitted in tux with tails and derby hat. Roland pairs his tux with skinny jeans and can pass for a hipster, but the accordion tends to give him away. Classrooms are more common settings. Serenading teachers in front of their students tends to be "awesome" in elementary

school and "a lot more embarrassing" in middle school.

Fran Silver hired Roland for the "wow factor" for her boss Holly's 60th birthday last year. "He was just a hoot," she said of Roland's rhyme about Holly's Laughing Cow cheese diet. The love lines are even better:

*Conveniently located in the same apartment
And conveniently attracted in the crush department*

Unfortunately, composing a love rhyme for a customer who includes reasons the relationship isn't working is more common than common sense would dictate. While Roland tries to work in all the information he is given, he has been known to leave certain things out. Like the time a man sent descriptions of intense club drug use and Roland decided to forgo much of it because he didn't think it was as important to the woman as the man. The guy tipped him anyway, with marijuana.

Then there are those who don't share *enough*. Roland tries to get the men, because it is usually men who have trouble talking about relationships, to elaborate. Being transgender may help him see both sides, or at least be wordier than the average male when it comes to love. In some cases Roland is hired to help woo a woman back. One man told him that of all the things he had done to attract his ex-girlfriend's attention, including hiring a plane to pull an "I Love You" banner through the sky, she liked the singing telegram best.

He has at least one repeat client this year. Badal could be another. He rated his birthday-gram "brilliant" and a "pretty amazing summation of six years." His girlfriend, who likes to do things big, he said, set the standard high for her own birthday 11 days later, which happened to be the day before Valentine's Day.

"And never combine the two," said Badal, who knows better than to skimp on his girlfriend's celebrations. "No easy path there."