April 2 of last year was a dark day for The Star-Spangled Banner. That week the internet buzzed with so many outraged voices that you’d almost think the flag was burned. But the only thing that was burned was The Fray’s sloppy rendition of the American national anthem into the ears of thousands of listeners in New Orleans’ Mercedes-Benz Superdome just before last year’s NCAA National Championship.

Aside from what seemed like a breakdown of communication between the two guitar players involving the (unconventional and extremely dissonant) voicing of a IV chord, The Fray’s take on the anthem is actually not too bad as far as being musically interesting goes. But it brought out the ugly in the clamor of voices online. Several reporters included this version in the ranks of the worst renditions of the national anthem ever. One colorfully described it as “a version that made you want to curl up in the corner and drunk text an ex.” In the words of another reporter, “The Denver rock band tried to rework the 198-year-old song into a modern hipster version and failed in every respect.”

Ouch. The next day, the embarrassed guitarist Joe King tweeted an apology to fans of The Fray: “My fingers froze last night. If anyone wants to join me I’ll be at the loser bar tonight.” So why is everyone so up in arms about one strangely placed accidental? It seems that somehow The Fray hit a nerve and messed with something that was off-limits. What’s the big deal? It’s just a song... right?

Maybe it’s just that their performance followed the reverent and proud presentation of the flag by the US Marine Corps, and the tone was all wrong. I guess the anthem is supposed to be about national pride, not about cool music. But it’s more than that too. It just didn’t sound like the national anthem: “If you weren’t listening to the lyrics,” one reporter complains, “you’d have never known the band was singing our national anthem." I find this criticism is surprisingly insightful. It seems to me that The Fray’s failure was not musical as much as it was a more fundamental failure to recognize what “The Star-Spangled Banner” is. To try to push the envelope musically and try new things on a song with so much symbolic significance might spring from fuzziness about what roles music plays in public generally.

If all musical performance is performed for its artistic value, then maybe The Fray got it right (though I’m not sure I can get over the ugliness of that strange accidental Joe King added every time the IV chord came around). Try new and interesting things, even if they’re dissonant and strange. Break conventions (even if it’s not on purpose)! Unexpected chords are okay; it’s just part of the creative process. Musical performance is about the artistic expression of the performer or the value of the music itself as an art “object.”

But clearly, art is not what people think music is really for all the time.

A national anthem isn’t just a song; it’s the sound and a story of identity. When you play with
that, you mess with something about who and what people think they are, not just with a song they like. It seems to me that this kind of “low art” (and I want to use this term carefully) music is one of the access points that helps us understand how communities work in our culture. Not all music is meant to be a groundbreaking artistic innovation. “Low art” music can tap into something deep about the way we think about ourselves and about the communities we participate in. Both the music itself and the lyrics contribute to our personal sense of identity and a shared identity of our community (or communities). Somehow singing the national anthem or a hymn or a choral piece together with others uniquely allows us to enter a world where people can share in a sense of identity by coming into contact with what you might call a mythology that defines something about that community.

The father of sociology Émile Durkheim, describes mythologies as deeply connected to the life of a community, a series of stories that reflect its sense of identity (Pragmatism and Sociology, 87). These stories might be either historical or fictional, but the important thing is that they express what it means to be a part of the community. So the term mythology is relevant to our communities (and not just religious ones) today; communities of all kinds have origin stories of how they came to be and why they continue to exist. And sometimes communities are formed through individuals finding others with similar kinds of life stories and struggles, preferences and tastes, crystallizing into a coherent mythological identity.

So maybe The Fray stumbled over something mythological, a song central to American national identity, and mistook it for an opportunity for musical creativity.

After the April 2 performance, the Fray’s other guitarist Dave Welsh, reflecting on the NCAA National Championship’s musical mishap, tweeted, “Upon thinking about it, doing the National Anthem is a bit like choosing between Jif and Skippy. You just can't please everyone. -dw.” Speaking practically, he’s right. But in this case, maybe it’s not a matter of appeasing aesthetic expectations; maybe it’s a matter of acknowledging the solidarity in song between people who share a common identity.