

Understanding the Basics of “Once More, With Feeling”

Buffy Summers: The Vampire Slayer, chosen (no one exactly knows how), now 20 years old; she died at the end of last season and was brought back to life by Willow at the start of this one.

Willow Rosenberg: One of Buffy’s best friends since high school. She was rather a timid brain, but is now a less timid, powerful witch. She is gay and has been in a relationship with Tara, who is also a witch, for about a year. Tara is concerned about Willow using too much magic and has told her so.

Dawn Summers: Buffy’s younger sister, age 15. She actually used to be a ball of energy—a key—but some monks turned her into a human (Season 5) so Buffy could protect her from being used to open a hell dimension by an evil god. She’s a troubled child, which is understandable considering she found out she was a key; her mother was ill with a brain tumor, had successful surgery, but then died suddenly of an aneurism; she was kidnapped by this evil god and almost ritually sacrificed, but was saved by Buffy (who died to save Dawn’s life). Dawn has been shoplifting from the Magic Box (Giles and Anya’s shop) and other stores around town.

Rupert Giles: Buffy’s “Watcher” (trainer, guide, etc.) who has been with her since she moved to Sunnydale six years before. Commonly called Giles, he worked as the high school librarian. He took over the Magic Box after the previous owner was killed—and Buffy et. al. graduated (and destroyed!) from High School. He’s English (as all the Watchers seem to be, since the Watcher’s Council is located in England), and shortly after this episode he does go back to England.

Xander Harris: Another of Buffy’s best friends from High School. He’s now a construction worker and is engaged to Anya.

Anya: To quote Willow in a later episode, Anya is “a 1000 year old capitalist ex-demon with a rabbit phobia.” She is more like 1200 years old and had been born human but became a Vengeance Demon. She became human again after Giles smashed her amulet to change a wish

she had made (Season 3). She's a touch odd, but mostly because she doesn't know how to act human, despite having very real feelings.

For reasons unknown to me, they call themselves the "Scoobies" and have done so since the first or second season.

Most readers are probably familiar with the plot of the episode, but briefly, it opens with Buffy singing (backed up by a few demons) in the cemetery while slaying. Her song encompasses her depression, her feelings of just "Going Through the Motions." The final line, "I just want to be alive," is picked up later in the Coda when singing with Spike. The next day at The Magic Box, she reluctantly inquires whether anyone else "uh, broke into song last night?" A mishmash of voices ensues as Giles, Tara and Willow, and Anya and Xander share their experiences; we only catch words here and there. They then all share their theories (a dancing demon, evil witches, bunnies) and the feeling that they had better figure it out. A portion that was not aired, at least on the repeats, but is on the album, is Buffy singing that the most important part is that they are together to face whatever is causing the singing.

After determining that the phenomenon is not limited to the Scooby Gang ("They Got the Mustard Out"), the group pulls out the books to do research. Willow and Tara make a pretense of having a related book at the house and leave. Walking in the park, Tara sings a romantic tune to Willow in "I'm Under Your Spell," complete with a couple of back up dancers. The scene shifts to their room in the Summers' house, where Tara is elevated from the bed in a sexy and sexual allusion. After school, an excited Dawn arrives at The Magic Shop eager to share the experiences of her school day, and is a bit disappointed to discover that everyone knows that she and her friends were singing. In keeping with her recent shoplifting, she takes a necklace she finds in the shop.

Cut to a shot of an unknown man dancing so rapidly that he begins to smoke and then bursts into flame. He is watched by a suited demon reminiscent of the devil.

The following morning, Anya and Xander get up, singing “I’ll Never Tell,” in which they express their fears about getting married. They later find Giles, complaining to him (and Anya also complaining about the lack of originality in their song), who informs them about people burning “from the inside.” Xander expresses outrage at this, saying, “Give me an ax and show me where to point it.” In the background, we see people dancing, and, of course, hear most of hysterical “The Parking Ticket” (sung by co-writer Marti Noxon). Evening again, Buffy visits Spike, who denies being affected by the vocal epidemic, but is given away as he sings “Rest in Peace.” After Spike shares his ambivalent feelings about loving Buffy, she runs off.

At the Summers’ house, Dawn tells Tara how relieved she is that Tara and Willow are no longer fighting (referring to their fight over Tara’s perception that Willow overuses magic). Tara has no recollection of this, but becomes suspicious about the dead flower pinned to her sweater. Left alone in the house, Dawn puts on the stolen necklace, and has time to sing only two lines of her “Lament” before she is whisked away by Sweet’s workers. Taken to The Bronze, Dawn dances with Sweet (the three-time Tony award winning Hinton Battle), who then sings “What You Feel,” in which he explains that “I come from the imagination / And I’m here strictly by your invocation.” When Dawn, in desperation not to be made Sweet’s queen, sings that her sister is the Slayer, Sweet’s interest is aroused and he sends his men to get Buffy.

Meanwhile, Giles and Buffy have a brief conversation while training about disciplining Dawn. When Buffy casually says she thought Giles was going to take care of it, he has a realization that he’s “Standing” in the way of her growing both up and independent. Tara has gone to The Magic Box, where she consults a volume and discovers the plant she is wearing causes memory loss. In a tune reminiscent of the one she sung earlier, she sings about having to leave Willow because “I can’t adjust to this disgust / We’re done, but I just with I could stay.”

She is joined by Giles, who reprises “Standing.” They both look from their separate areas at Willow and Buffy, who are talking.

Spike, meanwhile, discovers Sweet’s messenger outside The Magic Box and brings him in. After delivering the message that Sweet has Dawn at the Bronze and that he wants Buffy, he shoves Spike aside and runs off. Discussion about what to do follows, but Giles cuts it off, saying that Buffy must go alone. She leaves, walking slowly, warming her hands by a fire in a barrel, singing “Walk Through the Fire,” which expresses her numbness and wish to feel. Her solo then cuts to Spike singing, the Scoobies confronting Giles, Sweet commenting, and the gang converging on the Bronze. While Buffy is singing “Something to Sing About,” the gang arrives, and, at the end of the song, she reveals that she had been in heaven when she was brought back to life—something she had sworn to herself she would never tell them. She begins to dance wildly and starts to smoke when Spike appears and stops her, singing that she has to go through the pain. Willow, in shock at what she has done by bringing Buffy back to life, is comforted by Tara.

Sweet is still intent on taking Dawn with him to hell, but she denies that she invoked him. Sweet points to her necklace as the source of the invocation, and the group realizes that it has to have been one of them. After a pause, Xander reluctantly raises his hand, explaining he thought it would be good fun. Sweet reprises his song, singing, “All those secrets you’ve been concealing / Say you’re happy now / Once more, with feeling” before disappearing. Together, the group wonders “Where Do We Go From Here.” In the midst of this, Spike seems to realize what he is doing, says “bugger this,” and leaves. Buffy follows him, and they both reprise their songs. Buffy says, “This isn’t real / but I just want to feel,” and they kiss.