

The Craft of Songwriting

by Robbie O'Connell

Definition

A good song is the perfect combination of melody and lyrics. The melody should set a mood that enhances or at least is compatible with the lyrics. For example a funny song should have a bright or up-tempo melody and a sad or serious song should have a slow or deliberate tempo.

Many beginning songwriters think that a song is a poem set to music. Although this can be done, it is rarely, if ever, a success. A poem contains its own music in its language and, apart from meter and rhyme, can use language in unconventional and complex ways. When music is added to the lyric of the poem, it's as if there are two melodies that do not quite fit each other.

A song lyric needs to be very simple and easily understood. The melody carries the mood and the lyric carries the story or the information. You can't take the time to linger over a line like you would with a poem. Song lyrics are verse, not poetry. A bad poem often makes a good song lyric. Many songs use well known phrases or cliches, especially on choruses. Most pop songs rely on a "hook" as the foundation of the song and this is often a well worn phrase.

Features of a Good Song

A successful song relies on a good combination of substance and form. The substance includes the basic idea, the plot or story, what the song is trying to communicate. The form is the way in which this information is communicated. It includes the type of melody and meter and the structure of the verses and chorus.

There are four basic guidelines to bear in mind when "making" a song:

1. Keep the language simple and uncluttered.
2. Make sure the melody and lyrics are well suited.
3. Try to keep your ideas clear and easily understood.
4. Keep the padding to a minimum.

There are hundreds of different techniques in writing songs and the best way to learn them is by analyzing their structures. Make a list of your favorite songs and select a number of different types. Study their structures, the form of the lyrics, the type of verse, the melody, the chord sequence, etc. and try to figure out how you would have done it.

The Creative Process

Psychologists generally agree that there are four stages in the creative process:

1. Preparation

Decide that you are going to write songs. Get a special notebook and pencil (with an eraser) and keep them handy. Always keep them and/or a tape recorder by your bedside.

2. Incubation

The subconscious mind is always working. Feed it ideas and they will come back developed and grown.

3. Illumination

When inspiration strikes and you grab your pencil or guitar, suspend the "Inner Critic". See it through to the end. You can always destroy it later if it's no good but finish it first. Do not get bogged down in details such as rhyme or a few notes that sound suspiciously like some other song. Explore all the angles. Write as much as possible before you run out of steam. If you get an idea for different song, jot it down. Sometimes you can start out writing one song and end up with another.

4. Verification

When the flash of illumination has faded and you have the bones of the song, this is the time to be critical. Inspiration is only the beginning, not the end. Imagine someone else has written the song and you have to improve it. Rewrite again and again. Cut and paste and try as many alternatives as possible. This is where most beginners fall down. There is nothing sacred about your song. Be cruel.¹

Creative Motivation

It has been found that people are most creative when they are motivated by the interest, enjoyment, satisfaction, and challenge of the work itself. It is hard not to

be concerned by criticism of your work but you must try to keep that out of your mind while you are writing. Live with a song for a while before you play it for someone. New songs usually sound great for a few days but you should give yourself time to see it more objectively and improve on it.

Try to find a quiet place to work without interruption. Do not restrict yourself by limiting your choices as this can destroy your motivation. Try to write the best song you can for your own satisfaction. If you decide later on that it's a masterpiece and a sure fire hit, that's fine. But don't write for the approval of others; if you don't get it, your motivation may disappear.

Getting Started

Many songwriters started by writing parodies. It's a great way to develop an awareness of song structures and techniques. Another trick for beginners is to write a children's song or a funny song. It is not nearly as intimidating as trying to write a serious one and it helps to build your confidence. There is great satisfaction to be found in creating something out of thin air, regardless of its simplicity.

Another technique is to work within a given structure. Either create a structure to begin with or use the same structure as a familiar song. If you have an idea and a structure, you are already halfway there.

Unlike the chicken and the egg, it does not matter with a song which comes first, the lyric or the melody. If you are lucky, the two will arrive together or at least you will have one and a vague idea of what the other will be.

Every song has a foundation of one simple phrase either melodic or lyrical. The tin Pan Alley songwriters almost always started with a title and built the song on that. There are phrases all over the place that could become songs. Think of it as a word game. One idea leads to another and you may even end up dumping our original idea for a better one. Sometimes it helps to write your ideas out in prose and forget about versifying and rhyming. This often has a liberating effect on the subconscious and it can have surprising results.

If you begin with a musical phrase try to expand and develop it. If you feel you have a verse, try to get a chorus bearing in mind that the chorus should be melodically stronger and more dynamic. Generally speaking, it should rise above the verse. Remember that "melodies are hiding only waiting to be found." Try variations on what you already have and repeat them several times. The best melodies very often take time to grow on you so repetition is very important.

Don't be afraid to try changing tempo or phrasing. Sometimes what starts out as a verse can end up as a chorus. If you get bogged down, try playing it in a different

key or tuning. Leave it alone for a few days and give your subconscious a chance to work on it. Don't try to hurry it. Most songwriters spend far more time fixing and repairing than they will admit. Some writers change their songs many years after they first wrote them.

The Irish poet, W. B. Yeats maintained that writing poems was easy; the hardest part was the rewriting. The same applies to songs. Sometimes you can be lucky and a song will almost write itself. But the real craft of songwriting is in the improving, polishing and refining.

Things to Keep in Mind

Many great ideas are accidents. Let your subconscious develop your ideas. Think of yourself as a songwriter. Try working on more than one song at a time. Allow yourself time – weeks, months, a year. Keep a notebook handy and jot down every idea. Fool around with different instruments or tunings. Mess around with your guitar while you watch TV. Tape and review. Don't expect immediate perfection. Don't get bogged down on a rhyme or musical phrase. You can work out the problems later.

Pitfalls

The common features of a poorly written song are:

- Predictability – A good song achieves a balance between predictability and surprise. Too much of one or the other can be detrimental.
- Preaching – A message subtly imparted can be far more effective than one that bashes you over the head. Listeners are usually turned off by preaching.
- Self-pity – Unless you are writing a blues song, self-pity should be avoided. It may be therapeutic for you but it can be very off-putting for an audience.
- Personal symbolism – Personal symbolism seems to work for writers such as Leonard Cohen or Suzanne Vega, but they are the exception rather than the rule.
- Ornate language – In a funny song, ornate language can be used for comic effect, but the message of a song will not carry if the listener's attention is absorbed in untangling a jumbling of flowery language.
- Generalization – A general point can be made very effectively by a specific image. People respond better to solid images than to generalizations.

Approaches

It's important to remember that a song is different than a recording. A poor song can make a good recording because of the arrangement, the singer or studio wizardry. Many hit songs turn out to be nothing but musical fluff when they are stripped of their studio arrangements.

A good song stands on its own. It has a life of its own. Very often it deals with universal themes which are hidden in the specific. It can survive being put through many radically different arrangements. It usually focuses on just one feeling or point of view. It tells you who, what, where and when. The information is related in specific images, plot, movement. It is visual. The listener's imagination is engaged and stimulated and feeling in the song gets across.

Try to focus on one idea or feeling at a time. Remember that you are writing to communicate and don't write just for yourself. Say what you mean as clearly as possible and don't say more than is needed. You want someone to feel what you feel.

Technical Problems

The first problem you will probably encounter is rhyme. Many a great line has had to be discarded because of the lack of a rhyme. But strangely, this is often for the best, although it may take time to get accustomed to it.

There are two types of rhyme:

- Perfect Rhyme – e.g. cat-bat, down-town; It's nice to have perfect rhymes but it can be detrimental if it seems too contrived. It's more important to be natural and to maintain the mood and the clarity of the verse. Retain the flow of natural speech as much as possible and don't be content with an easy rhyme if it changes the meaning of what you are saying.
- Imperfect Rhyme – e.g. games-chains, song-on. Imperfect rhymes give you much more scope for expression. In a serious song especially, do not be afraid to use them.

Perfect rhymes can sometimes appear trite, so it is sometimes better to avoid the obvious rhyme. Clever rhymes can greatly enhance a humorous song but also dilute the effect of a serious one. A rhyme should try not to be obvious unless it is for comic effect.

Rhyming dictionaries can be very helpful; not so much for giving you rhymes as eliminating the options. If you find that there is no good rhyme for a particular word, you may just have to change the original. But don't give up too easily.

A thesaurus and a dictionary can also be helpful, especially in clarifying your ideas. Sometimes the lack of a good rhyme drives you to the thesaurus for help and you end up with a much clearer couplet.

Poetic Devices

Meter:

It is not necessary to know the names of all the different metric patterns but a basic knowledge of the kinds of meter can be helpful. Most people have a natural sense of meter but it can be handy to know all the options. Changes of meter can be used for variety or for emotional effect. Most rhyming dictionaries have a section on versification which includes meter.²

Other poetic devices such as alliteration, assonance, simile, metaphor, allegory, personification, hyperbole, irony, antithesis, and characterization all come into play and a knowledge of these may help you to express your ideas with more clarity.³

Construction:

The usual forms of a song are:

- VERSE and CHORUS
- VERSE and REFRAIN
- VERSE with a BRIDGE

And there can be different combinations of these. The bridge is generally used only in pop songs.

The function of the verse is to impart the information or story. It concentrates on detail and moves the plot forward. Remember to use concrete imagery and try to be as visual as possible. The melody may have small variations but it stays essentially the same each time.

The CHORUS crystallizes, focuses and distills the intent, emotion, meaning and essence of the song into a succinct, simple and easily remembered statement. It makes a broad statement that bears repetition.

The melody is the same each time but different from the verse. It should rise up above the verse and be melodically more appealing. It usually contains the song title, often in the first or last line.

Occasionally, a chorus may change after each verse, especially in a story song, but generally it is not a good idea.⁴

Repetition:

Most singers are accustomed to hearing people ask, "Can you sing something we know?" In this age of processed images, people resent the unfamiliar. The best way to make them comfortable with a song is to build in a lot of repetition. The danger is that too much repetition is boring, so you have to find the balance between predictability and surprise.⁵

Rewriting

The main difference between the successful and unsuccessful songwriter is in rewriting. The former knows that revision and refining are often ninety percent of the effort; whereas the latter tends to think the song a gift from the Muse which is somehow sacred and should be left alone. Many poor songs could have been excellent if the writer had been willing to rework them more.

The most common techniques used in rewriting are Reduction and Inversion. Eliminate as much padding as possible. See if you can get your point across in a clearer simplest way. Try different ways of saying the same thing. Cut and paste. Switch rhymes or change the syntax. You'll be surprised at the improvements you'll find. Walk away from the song for a while if you feel that you have reached an impasse. Give your subconscious time to do some work and then come back to it again. Deal with the problems first thing in the morning when your mind is clear.⁶

Remember perseverance pays off.

¹ John Braheny, The Craft and Business of Song Writing (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books). 1988, p.4.

² Ibid., P. 62.

³ Ibid., p. 58.

⁴ Ibid., p. 67.

⁵ Ibid., p. 82.

⁶ Ibid., p. 87.

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