

What Makes a Good Song?

Some Thoughts for Our Audience

Most of the time, the songwriters you hear at the showcases here belong to a songwriting workshop that meets twice monthly at Southbrook Christian Church in Centerville and one other time monthly at the Clermont Inn in Batavia. There, courtesy of both Southbrook and the Nashville Songwriters Association International, songwriters learn about the craft and business of songwriting, and they have their songs critiqued by their colleagues.

But most of you reading this newsletter are not songwriters. Nevertheless, you enjoy our showcases and you keep coming back for more.

So if you're not a songwriter, why would you want to read about what makes a good song? Well, even though you may love hearing a good song now, your appreciation and enjoyment of that song can grow exponentially once you understand a little more about the craft.

Why Is Songwriting a Craft?

First of all, why do I keep calling songwriting a craft? It's a talent, right? You're either born with it or you're not.

Well, actually that is true in only one respect: we songwriters are apparently born, not grown. There is something different about us in that the vast majority of people cannot even take the first step toward writing a song. In the songwriter's genetic makeup, that difference, once unleashed, becomes a fundamental part of his or her personality.

But beyond that basic inherited trait, there is the need to develop the gift. And there is a craft to be learned.

The Basics: Music

So let's start with the basics: what does a good song consist of?

Most people would say "words and music". By "music" they usually mean "melody". But in fact, the music has three important parts: the melody, the harmonics, and the rhythm.

Harmonics are simply the chords, and while you may not know anything about chords, you are definitely affected by them. An often-used example is "Somewhere Over the Rainbow". In the first line of that song, even when we're replaying it only in our minds, the first three syllables all have distinctive chords behind them. When we hear each melody note, we also - either con-sciously or uncon-sciously - hear the chord, the harmonic, behind it.

Rhythm - well, you know what that is. Does it have a good beat, right?

But in fact, a better word for "rhythm" is probably "groove". It's not just what the drums are playing, but how the other instruments and how the singers are playing off each other's rhythmic patterns. In fact, if you listen to Glenn Miller's "In the Mood" in your own head, it's possible that you don't even recall what the drums were doing in that recording. But you remember the groove, don't you?

Songwriters in fact use two languages to communicate with their audiences: words and music. The degree to which the two languages succeed in saying the same thing or in complementing each other is what we refer to as "prosody" ("praw-suh-dee").

Both languages are dependent upon tone and connotation to convey meaning. In fact, harmonics and groove are to melody what tone and inflection are to words. As a worded message can seem loving or biting depending upon the way it's delivered, so too can a melody seem bleak when sung against darker minor chords and a slower rhythm, or positive when it's sung against brighter chords and a more uptempo groove.

The Basics: Perspective

The craftsmanship involved in writing the lyrics is usually one of the biggest challenges a songwriter faces in working toward commercial success. First is the perspective: through whose eyes did the writer choose to tell the story or describe the situation? Using the first person – “I”, “we” – is usually the most powerful, so when a songwriter chooses to use another perspective – “he” or “she” or “you” – there are usually interesting reasons for doing so.

Likewise, the character of the narrator is important. Just because the songwriter uses the first person doesn't mean that he or she is describing personal experience. In fact, even if the songwriter *is* describing personal experience, the character of the narrator must be conveyed through the song itself, since the song could ultimately go on to be recorded by another person. Perspective, therefore, can make all the difference between a hit and a dud.

The Basics: Structure

Then there is the song structure itself. The basic components of a song - again, both lyrically and musically - are the verse and the chorus (and sometimes the bridge, which can function as a lyrical and musical twist on either the verse or the chorus).

As a storyteller - and nearly every song involves a story that, even if it isn't directly told in the song, is at least part of the context in which things are being described - as a storyteller, the songwriter has the most daunting format. The story usually must be told in, on an average, 16 lines or less, and must include a distinctive beginning, middle, and end.

While the verses usually tell the actual story, the chorus typically is not directly part of the story. Instead, the chorus is where the writer sits back and tells you what the story means or makes an overriding comment about it. In Greek drama, the chorus was actually a group of actors standing to the side of the stage making comments about the action that the audience is seeing: “Oh, poor Agamemnon! That Clytemnestra is so mean to him!” (Well, that's not really a quotation from Greek drama, but you get the idea.)

I believe the song is the only modern storytelling medium that still regularly uses the chorus. However, not every song has one.

To appreciate how well some songwriters succeed in this storytelling medium, consider this assignment: try to write a song that...

- (1) establishes that the main character has a glaringly obvious physical birth defect,
- (2) suffers excruciating rejection and humiliation from other children,
- (3) encounters a disaster in the making with the potential of worldwide catastrophe,
- (4) uses his defect to save the day,
- (5) is then loved by everyone who earlier rejected him, and
- (6) ends up going down in history as a great hero.

Now before you think that's easy, here's the final requirement: it can have no more than 16 lines and no chorus.

It has been done, and for sheer brevity it is probably one of the most overlooked popular songs of our time: “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.” Forget about the “You know Dancer...” introduction, because it's not part of the central story and not critical to it. In fact, artists who have recorded the song have usually been forced to sing it several times in one recording because it's so short.

The Basics: Rhyme

Then there is rhyme. Although many printed lyrics on CD covers include punctuation marks, the person listening to the car radio cannot in fact hear or see the punctuation.

Rhyme acts as aural punctuation, using the rhyme pattern to group ideas together, show relationships between different parts of the song, and even speed up or slow down the perceived speed of the lyric.

Songwriters themselves are often surprised when they look at lyric sheets to see how wordy some popular songs can be. But when the lyric is analyzed, we usually find that the rhymes are plentiful and close to each other. Someone once said that rhymes in song are like the accelerator on the floor of a car: the closer they are to each other, the faster the lyric moves. While most of us know that the ends of the important lines in a song are supposed to rhyme, it is especially interesting to listen for the “internal rhymes” - the two or more quick rhymes in the middle of a longer rhyming line. Listen to the incredibly tight rhyme scheme of “Any Man of Mine” by Shania Twain (yes, she writes her own songs) and Mutt Lange and you will never hear that song the same way again; yet the lyric is “conversational”, containing nothing but lines one might say in everyday life.

The Basics: The Hook

What makes a song different from, say, a newspaper report? One of the major differences is that a reporter *tells* you what happened whereas a songwriter *shows* it to you so that you can vicariously experience it yourself. Even then, however, the songwriter must usually choose the descriptive language according to a theme established by a “hook” - usually the title of the song.

I co-wrote a song called “Every Shade of Blue” which I’ve played at the showcases. What my cowriter and I faced with that one was the necessity of “proving the hook”: what would be the circumstances that, in each verse, lead the narrator to start singing the words, “Every shade of blue”? In that song, the first verse describes an artist in the park making a charcoal sketch of the narrator, who then notes, “I knew she’d never capture me in charcoal shades of gray” and goes on to say that only “every shade of blue” would do the job. The second verse describes the narrator’s pain at losing the one he loves, and finishes with “Where there once were rainbows, now there’s only clouds.”

The Basics: Irony

Finally, overriding everything in the well-written song is the delicious sense of irony. Recall the loneliness, for example, of “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” (Kim Gannon, Walter Kent, and Buck Ram) - a song written and first recorded in 1943 during World War II. The promise being made by the narrator in the hook will obviously be unfulfilled; the narrator will be home for Christmas “if only in my dreams.” Given that ironic overtone, the images of home and love that are described throughout the lyric have an almost overpowering poignancy - exaggerated at the time of its release by the prospect that many of its audience’s loved ones would never be coming home from the war.

Adding It All Up

Nearly every song you hear on country radio - the genre that most often uses the work of the greatest song craftsmen - features the elements I’ve described to some degree. That is why most of us who perform in the showcase are attracted to country music, no matter what kind of music we grew up with.

Appreciating the craft of lyric writing can make even songs you previously never noticed suddenly seem like classics. So the next time you hear a song on the radio, perhaps you will listen to it differently - and hear a richness that you never fully heard before.

- Jim Melko