

GREAT SONGWRITING TECHNIQUES

JACK PERRICONE



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Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Perricone, Jack, author.

Title: Great songwriting techniques / Jack Perricone.

Description: New York, NY : Oxford University Press, [2018] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017038738 | ISBN 9780199967650 (cloth : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780199967674 (pbk. : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780190874032 (companion website)

Subjects: LCSH: Popular music—Writing and publishing.

Classification: LCC MT67 .P46 2018 | DDC 782.42/13—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017038738>

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Paperback printed by WebCom, Inc., Canada

Hardback printed by Bridgeport National Bindery, Inc., United States of America

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS


Patience is not only a virtue but also a gift, a gift that I have experienced from my wife, Rebecca, during the years it has taken to write this book. Our daughter Sonya Rae Taylor, a talented vocalist, guitarist, and songwriter, contributed astute and helpful comments during the many rewrites this book has undergone. She also contributed the vocals on most of the audio samples in the book. My colleagues at Berklee College of Music, Pat Pattison, Mark Simos, and Ben Camp contributed helpful information and feedback. Ben Camp also co-produced the recording of my song “Goodbye Again” that appears on the companion Oxford website containing audio examples. Tanja Utunen, a Berklee alumna, after reading a couple of chapters early on, helped set me on a path that proved to be better and more direct than the one I had initially begun, and Mike Rexford, an entertainment lawyer, gave me some very helpful tips not only on law but also on formatting the book. My lawyer, Paul Sennott, gave me great legal advice and, since he is also a musician, shared his enthusiasm for the book. I also thank Bill Brinkley and Steve Kirby for helping me with the Finale graphics that are such an important part of this book.

Thanks to the two vocalists, both graduates of Berklee College of Music, Emma White and Frank Maroney, who gave excellent, authentic performances of the two original songs that are used to demonstrate the process of songwriting. My wife, Rebecca, aka Labek, is the evocative vocalist on my song “Love Provides” found on the companion website.

I am forever grateful to Norman Hirschy, editor at Oxford University Press, who believes, as I do, that this is a book that needed to be written.

ABOUT THE COMPANION WEBSITE

<http://www.oup.com/us/greatsongwritingtechniques>

Included on the Oxford website are audio examples to accompany and enhance your songwriting exploration. Passages with correlating audio examples are indicated with .

Great Songwriting Techniques

Introduction

This book is written for those who are serious about songwriting, for those who believe, as I do, that the rational mind has a definite place in the creative process—that once you become familiar with the tools and techniques of songwriting your freedom to create is greatly increased.

Both major disciplines, lyric writing and composing, are included in this text. However, there is a decided emphasis on music and especially on music's relationship to lyrics. Once you've absorbed the information in this book, it will be available whenever needed, so that when you are in that intuitive place—in the zone—you can remain there for longer periods of time. You will be able to finish more of the songs that you've started, and more of your songs will be keepers. It may take time to absorb a lot of the information in this book, but I believe it will be time well spent.

Some knowledge of music notation and basic theory will be very helpful in fully understanding some of the subjects. Even without a fluent knowledge of notation, you should be able to learn a great deal from this book because many of the examples are from songs you will recognize. All the excerpts are short and are solely meant for educational purposes. Oxford University Press has a dedicated site: www.oup.com/us/greatsongwritingtechniques, containing streaming audio that corresponds to the various examples found in this book. If you find that you are attracted to a particular song, there are many sites where you can purchase the song.

Methodology and song selection

The portions of songs that I've used as examples are mainly from well-known and well-written popular songs, not art songs or musical theater songs (although many of the songs from the *Great American Songbook* did have their origins in the Broadway Theatre).

My method is to, as succinctly as possible, teach you a technique and then show you a number of examples of that technique in well-known popular songs. Songwriters range from Irving Berlin to Taylor Swift, and, because I am teaching technique rather than style, examples from these two great writers may appear next to each other. I've also included a few of my songs to illustrate a particular technique and, especially, to demonstrate the process used in composing a song.

A key ingredient to becoming a successful songwriter is your ability to become your own best teacher. This can be done with the guidance I've provided in this book and in *Melody in Songwriting*, published by Berklee Press, distributed by Hal Leonard, and, most of all, through your own commitment to writing songs every day. I also highly recommend collaboration with other songwriters, because it is a great way to learn the craft of songwriting from another person's perspective and because it can produce extraordinary results.

Study, listen, analyze, and write songs regularly and with your newfound knowledge and experience, you won't have to wait for inspiration to begin your next song; your daily attempts will finally allow the muse to enter your creative life on a regular basis.

My personal experience as a songwriter

I began my career as a professional songwriter at about age thirty, a rather late age to begin any career. When I arrived in New York in 1968 I knew that I would be a professional musician. I already had a couple of degrees in music when I was hired to work music at Belwin/Mills Publishing in New York as an office musician. I had not been hired as a songwriter because at that point in time I had not seriously attempted to be one. At Belwin/Mills I wrote lead sheets and put together demo sessions for the staff songwriters, all of whom had little or no formal training in music. Being in the environment of songwriters inspired me to become one. I, however, experienced seemingly endless frustration as I gradually realized that writing commercial songs was not so easy.

I finally came to the conclusion that I did have the foundation (a bachelor's degree in music theory and a masters degree in composition) to study—really study—popular songs and discover the techniques that were used in making them popular. From that moment on, I began to listen to popular songs in a different way: with more intensity and with more openness. The endless hours of listening, transcribing, asking myself questions, and attempting to write songs on a daily basis, finally produced results. Through the analysis of successful songs, not only did I become more conscious of the vocabulary and techniques that were used, but also I learned a new harmonic and melodic vocabulary that differed from the ones I had been exposed to in the staid halls and classrooms of the music conservatories I had attended.

I discovered that one of the most important missing ingredients in my education was grasping the importance of lyrics in songs. Realizing my shortcomings in that area, I started to collaborate with lyricists. Songs started to emerge, and within five years I had successes as a songwriter: a top 5 pop song that I cowrote and solely arranged, a top 10 R&B song, even a top 20 country song.

In 1986 I became chair of the Songwriting department at the premier contemporary music educational institution, Berklee College of Music, an office I held until I retired in 2013. Early on in my tenure as chair, I wrote *Melody in Songwriting*, a book that exposes some of the songwriting techniques presented in this new book, but unlike this text, contains very few examples from well-known songs. Probably the most innovative thing I've done in my lifetime is to emphasize the importance of melody and create a text that actually teaches melody, a subject that has been ignored by higher education for centuries. Paul Hindemith, the great German composer and theoretician, wrote in his *Craft of Musical Composition* this indictment of music academia: "It is astounding that instruction in composition has never developed a theory of melody." I continue to teach melody and to elaborate on my initial theories with concrete examples from the popular song literature in this book.

The book that you are now reading more closely mirrors the way I taught myself to write songs. That method, to study and analyze hit songs that have something substantial to offer the serious songwriter, is the method I've chosen to use in this book.

My thoughts on professional songwriting

Most of the songs presented in this book are successful not only artistically but also commercially. In my teaching, I've always chosen commercial songs as models for technique because they have proven themselves successful to the masses. The word "commercial" has often been maligned with connotations of "less than" or "selling out." In choosing to use commercially successful songs, I'm not endorsing every commercial song, nor am I stating that every commercially successful song is well written. However, the best commercial songs have an appeal to the masses because they contain an innate truth, a connection that cannot be denied, whether it is a groove that has an immediate physical effect or a lyric so perfectly wedded to music that an emotional reaction invariably occurs. Many of them have great songwriting techniques that I've unearthed for my students and, now, for you.

I've often asked myself: "Why do we continue to write songs and what is the purpose and effect of songwriting on society?" My answer may throw you, but I consider it a great truth: popular songs relieve the pressure of being alive, lighten our load, and help us connect to each other. That is the function of popular songs in our society—and a great function and purpose it serves.

This book will provide you with many techniques that will facilitate your ability to fully express yourself through song. Once you've finished writing a song, ask yourself: *Is the message in my song coming across to the listener so that s/he can feel what I feel?* If your answer to this question is "yes," then you may have helped contribute to our common mental health and to the enjoyment of life.

How to use this book

I've attempted to make this book less academic than my first book, *Melody in Songwriting*, through both its language and its format. Certainly, the many short examples gleaned from well-known songs make this study very real, not simply theoretical. I have included a few exercises or activities at the end of each chapter. For the most part, I rely on you to study the techniques demonstrated and to use the techniques and exercises you feel you need. As you try a particular technique, you may find that it leads you into writing an original song; that would be the very best outcome.

This text has a progression from simple to complex and, as in most disciplines, the foundational elements that appear early on are most important. Without them, much of the subjects that appear later in the text will not be as fully comprehensible.

The first part of the book, "The Basics," chapters 1–6, covers basic concepts and techniques. The second part, "Tonal Environments," chapters 7 and 8, presents fundamental studies of tonality, how tonal materials are organized and function. Since these two chapters also contain fairly detailed information related to music theory, they should be used as reference chapters as questions arise. The third part, "Large Considerations," chapters 9–11 deals with developmental techniques, form, the melodic outline, and the melodic step progression. The fourth part, "Harmonic Considerations," chapters 12–14 covers harmony and the intriguing relationship of melody to harmony, as well as harmony's affect on lyrics. A number of less exposed

but highly important songwriting techniques are taught in the fifth part, “Deeper into Technique” chapters 15–16. These include writing to a riff, the use of counterpoint, and a study of tonal and rhythmic strategizing. In the sixth part, “Final Results,” some gems of exceptional songwriting are revealed and explored and the actual process of writing a song, a subject rarely broached in most texts, is exposed.

PART I

The Basics

Beginning A Song

The act of writing a song is a gift to yourself. The moment you decide to write a song, you are exhibiting the courage to create. I use the term “courage” because songwriting is a challenge to your creativity, to your fortitude and, therefore, can be a little scary. And, like most acts that demand courage, the payoff is usually greater than most other endeavors. Luckily, there are many ways that you can begin a song; if one road leads to a dead end, there are many other roads you may try.

Since writing can be and usually is such an intense personal experience, it is best if you shut out the outside world. Turn off your phone and any other intrusive devices, so that you can enter the interior of your being.

Beginning with a title

One of the most direct ways to begin a song is by starting with a title. A title may simply be an indexing device, i.e., a fast way to recollect a song, but it also can be a powerful catalyst for the idea and treatment of a song. Titles are everywhere, and fortunately titles are not copyrightable, so you needn't concern yourself about using a title that has been used before.

What is important is the way in which you treat the title. For example, the title “You Belong To Me” has meant different things to different generations. In the 1940s, the subject of the hit song “You Belong To Me,” sung by Jo Stafford, was centered on possessiveness, but its possessiveness was couched in ultraromantic language.

“You Belong To Me” lyrics by Chilton Price, Pee Wee King, Redd Stewart

Fly the ocean in a silver plane
See the jungle when it's wet with rain
But remember, darling, till you're home again
That you belong to me

In the seventies, at that time of personal confessionals, Carly Simon wrote and sang the same title in much more direct language and with more than a tinge of jealousy.

“You Belong To Me” by Carly Simon, Michael McDonald

You belong to me;
Tell her you were fooling.
You don't even know her,
Tell her that I love you.

What if you wanted to write a song that uses that same title, but one that doesn't perpetuate the theme of possessiveness—a theme that seems to be built into it? The following is my attempt to do just that, and I hope that in sharing this process it will help guide you in how to conceptualize a lyric. To begin, I simply jot down the main idea without concerning myself about whether the rhythms work in the context of a song.

I don't want to possess you
but I can't seem to live without you.
You belong to me in the same way
that the air I breathe and the water I drink belong to me.

Now that I can see and hear these thoughts, my task is to make them work as a lyric. I need to find substitute phrases and words that have rhythm and rhyme and can function with music within a song form. To do that, I need to establish a steady beat as a basic guide—to find a *groove*: a rhythmic underpinning that establishes the meter and allows the rhythms of the melody to move and flow naturally.

The first two lines, “I don't want to possess you / but I can't seem to live without you,” might work as a beginning verse, but since I realize that those two lines are part of a declaration or conclusion, they are best kept for material that will appear just before the title and the chorus. I need to create a section to set up that declaration. With that thought in mind, I write:

When I say that, “you're mine”
I know those words
make you wonder.
And when I say, “you're a part of me,”
I don't mean
you're under my control.
You're my life, my heart, my soul,

Now I feel that I can make a declaration and I write:

And **you belong to me**
Like the river belongs to the sea
Like the ocean belongs to the shore
Like the air that we breathe
You're my deepest need
You belong to me
Like I belong to you.

In a sense, I've explained myself to my lover and in doing so I've come up with a way to make the phrase “You belong to me” not as possessive as it initially sounds but, instead, as an outcome of nature and love. I've also found rhythms and rhymes that work within a musical setting and a song form (verse/chorus) in which to express the concept of the song.

The process that I've just taken you through: first coming up with a title that leads to an idea/feeling and concept that you want to express, and then quickly writing in prose some of what you want the lyric to encapsulate, is an empowering approach to lyric writing. It will furnish you with ideas and some usable phrases but, more than anything, it will help keep your lyric on track.

Interestingly enough, the title “You Belong To Me”—with one word change—was a big hit in 2010 by Taylor Swift. She changed “to” to “with” and with that, “You Belong **To** Me” became “You Belong **With** Me,” and the former title lost its negatively possessive connotation. Proof, once again, that one word, even a preposition, can make a huge difference.

Beginning with a lyric concept

Many professional songwriters begin the songwriting process with a title but, in addition, do not proceed until they have a clear idea of how they treat that title; they only proceed when they have a lyric concept. My concept in writing to the title “You Belong To Me” was to make the song as loving and nonpossessive as possible. Concepts are potent sources for inspiration because they often come with an assortment of images and feelings that help flesh out a song.

It doesn’t matter if an idea, i.e., an intellectual, objective construct, or a feeling comes first in the writing process, because ultimately these two (idea/feeling; feeling/idea) must meld together into a song concept. Often these two entities must be further tied to an important phrase, usually the title of the song.

For example, a writer might have a desire to write a song about making the world a better place. This lofty goal may, after a short time, bring up feelings of inadequacy on the writer’s part. The writer may conclude that the best he can do to change the world is to change his own behavior. This thought might lead to thoughts of closely examining himself—which might lead to a title, e.g., “Man In the Mirror.” This might have been part of the psychological process that took place for the writers of “Man In the Mirror,” the gigantic Michael Jackson hit written by Siedah Garrett and Glen Ballard.

This lyric is written from the point of view (POV) of an internal monologue, but one meant to be shared with everyone. The formal name of this POV is *first person narrative*.

“Man In The Mirror”

Siedah Garrett, Glen Ballard

I’m starting with the man in the mirror
I’m asking him to change his ways

The notion of making the world a better place has occurred to many writers, but few have succeeded as well as John Lennon in his song, “Imagine.”

“Imagine”

by John Lennon

You may say that I’m a dreamer
But I’m not the only one

John Lennon expressed his belief that the world’s ills are often caused by nationalism and religion. His concept was to share these thoughts with his listeners. Because he did not preach to us, but instead, invited us to share with him—to imagine a world without boundaries—the song was embraced by all.

One of the first decisions that you must make when you begin a lyric is choosing its perspective, its POV: Who is the singer addressing? “Imagine” is sung in the first person to all of humanity. When the singer addresses the audience directly, as he does here, it is called *direct address*. This is the most immediate and intimate point of view. Since POV

is a subject demanding more attention and, therefore, more space than this book allows, I highly recommend you study Pat Pattison's excellent book *Writing Better Lyrics*, which covers this important subject in detail.

A title or general theme for a song is not the same as a song concept. A concept is narrower in focus and more powerful because of it. Once you have a concept for your song, your songwriting process will assume more clarity and directness.

The importance of having a central idea

Everything in your song revolves around and assumes direction from the main idea of the song, what I am calling the *central idea*, which is often encapsulated in the title. The central idea of a song can be presented its first couple of phrases.

Think of Stevie Wonder's "You Are the Sunshine Of My Life":

You are the sunshine of my life
That's why I'll always be around.

or Joni Mitchell's "Help Me":

Help me
I think I'm falling
in love again.

The title and central idea for both songs appear in the first two or three lines.

If the central idea appears at the beginning of your song, both the music and the lyrics must be substantial enough to generate the rest of the song.

There are other songs that have their central idea at the end or final cadence of the first verse or the second verse or at the end of the A section of an AABA song. If your song does not begin with the central idea, but instead begins with a verse that ends with the title, the verse material must continually supply information that leads logically to that culminating line called a *refrain*. Examples abound, e.g., Billy Joel's "Just The Way You Are" ("I love you just the way you are"), and "Movin' Out," Paul Simon's "Still Crazy After All These Years" and "I Do It For Your Love," Bob Dylan's "Blowin' In The Wind" and "Tangled Up In Blue."

If your verse does not contain the central idea, either at its beginning or ending, the central idea will most likely show up in the next section, the chorus. If your narrative requires it, two verses may be necessary before reaching your central idea in the chorus. Many songs contain a verse and an added shorter section called a prechorus. Its function is to create a need in the listener to hear the central idea by building tension and increasing the forward motion to the chorus.

The most popular placement of the title in a verse/chorus song is either in the first line or within the first couple of lines of the chorus. Some choruses contain the title at the beginning of the chorus and at its ending as well. Here are some opening lines of hit choruses:

"Un-break My Heart"

by Diane Warren

Un-break my heart;
Say you'll love me again.

“I Run To You” by Hillary Scott, Charles Kelly, Dave Haywood, Tom Douglas

This world keeps spinning faster
Into a new disaster,
so I run to you.

“I Can’t Make You Love Me” by Mike Reid and Alan Shamblin

’Cause I can’t make you love me if you don’t
You can’t make your heart feel something it won’t.

There are also some verse/chorus songs, much fewer in number, that hold off the statement of the title/central idea until the very end of the chorus.

No matter where it appears, having a central idea in your song is an essential element to your potential success as a songwriter. If you are not able to say what your song is about in one or, at most, two sentences, you probably don’t have a central idea.

In the writing process, it helps if your central idea is encapsulated in a title, but if you don’t have a title yet, try to formulate a thought that you can hang on to that keeps your lyric on track. I’ve seen too many student lyrics wander into areas that are totally incomprehensible because they either didn’t have a central idea or they got sidetracked along the way.

If you are writing a verse/refrain or a verse/chorus song, the momentum of your verse should progress as directly as possible toward your central idea. Think of yourself as an archer and the verse of your song as an arrow aimed straight at your central idea. When your arrow arrives at the target, your central idea should explode with the main feeling of the song.

Does this mean that you should write lyrics that are always linear, that only give information and contain no metaphors or colorful language? No, of course not. In fact, just the opposite of that occurs when your writing has taken on its own flow. You should know what your song is about and choose to write it in an original way with language that is evocative, that makes your listener feel what you are feeling. The materials of your song, as they emerge, often lead the song in interesting and sometimes surprising directions, just as a character in a novel can lead the author to interesting dialogue or plot development. If this begins to occur, let it happen, but do remind yourself of the central idea of your song and ask yourself if you are veering too far from it. Allowing your song to sometimes lead you is not contradictory to the recommendation that you never lose track of the central idea of the song; you simply must be able to do both.

Beginning with a musical idea

Many songwriters like to begin with a musical idea and to develop that idea into an entire section before thinking too much about what the lyric may be. It is one of my favorite ways of beginning a song. Music gives form, rhythm, and gesture to a song, and if it feels and sounds good, and is composed for the voice, it aches to have the right words set to it. To realize that your music is giving you hints at the lyrical meaning of the song is a part of the process of songwriting that invites an intriguing and exciting journey of exploration. Since music is abstract, knowing music theory can help you find some of the answers to the question “What is the music saying?” But if you listen closely and are sensitive to each musical gesture,

to the kinesthetic qualities of tone, rhythm, and phrase — the rhetorical gestures found in your music that tie it to verbalization—you will find what the music is saying to you.

After composing a section of music, listen to it in various ways with sensitivity to tempo, groove, tone, and melodic rhythm. How does the music make you feel?

- Does the music sound *stable*: calm, contemplative, etc., or *unstable*: agitated, questioning, etc.?
- Are the melodic rhythms conversational, or are they declarative?
- How does the music feel to your body? Does it have a groove? Is it balanced or unbalanced? (Where is it balanced or unbalanced?)
- Does it leave you feeling fulfilled or wanting more? (If the latter is true, it may indicate to you that the music you've created is not substantial enough to contain the central idea).
- Is it atmospheric, capable of capturing a state of mind, or is it more suited to a narrative that leads to a goal area? If so, where are the melodic/harmonic goals located in the music you've composed?

Since words not only have meaning, but are also made up of sounds, your job is to listen for sounds that work with your music. As you listen to your music, try singing words that may be the actual words that you will use in the song, or they may be simply words that sound right but may have no meaning attached. This latter result is called a “dummy lyric,” one that uses sounds, nonsense syllables, words you assume will not be the final ones, but that sonically resonate with your music. Listen to the sound of the words in each phrase, especially on important notes such as long notes or arrival points. Listen for places where rhyme is necessary or desired. Ask yourself if an “oo” would sound better than an “ah,” or if the pinched sound of an “ee” would sound better than an “i.” Sing entire phrases, even though some of the words may seem nonsensical. In doing so, you will probably find a line or two that you will keep in the final lyric.

I consciously look for areas in the song where a title might appear. Often, I find a title or important phrase in my song at cadences and at beginnings of sections because these are areas that attract attention. Once I have a title, I start thinking of ways to treat that title, to have a concept, and gradually my lyrics emerge. A lyric might appear almost immediately, but sometimes it may take much longer and will have to undergo numerous rewrites. Patience and the need to tell the truth in the song should guide you.

Beginning with a melodic idea

Usually a musical idea is a melody not heard in its entirety but heard as a phrase or even part of a phrase or as a rhythm that somehow has enough originality and potential to interest or excite you. Sometimes it may appear with a harmony and groove, or only as a naked melody needing to find a harmony or groove before it comes fully to life.

Here is a melody that appeared without harmony in my aural imagination (Ex. 1.01). The most interesting component of this idea is its rhythm; it seems to have urgency, a need to speak. The pitches are simply the back and forth movement of a minor third, either in the key of D minor or F major. Even that information is suspect, because these notes are available in a few different keys, so it may be too soon to determine the key. The rhythm is full of energy caused by a number of factors: it starts

on the second beat and contains anticipations of the first beats of measures 2 and 3 (AUDIO 1.01).

Ex. 1.01

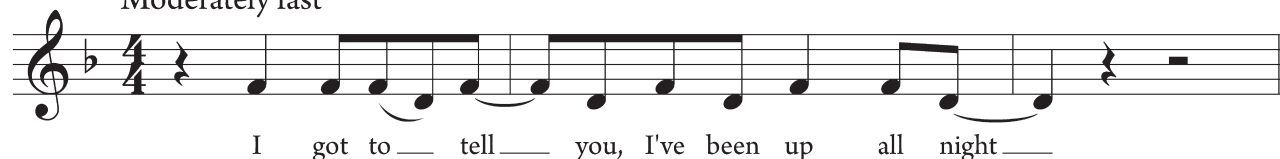
Moderately fast



Here's a lyric that occurred to me as I listened to the music I had just created (Ex. 1.02) (AUDIO 1.02).

Ex. 1.02

Moderately fast



I didn't have to think about what the song was going to be about because the music's character (it felt a little nervous) dictated the lyric idea to me. From this incomplete idea, I might ruminate on what had possibly transpired between the singer, (the person singing) and the *singee*, (the person being sung to). I might use this musical and lyric idea to continue the music, leaving the lyric writing process alone for a while, but using the urgency of the music to develop the music more completely. I would then spend some time trying to develop a more complete scenario for the lyric: a possible crisis caused by an argument, a confession, or first date jitters, or the end of an affair, etc. I would try to see the singer and the singee in a particular setting and try to see some visual images of the scenario, so that I could make them available in my lyrics. I would then try to tie the lyric ideas to the melodic rhythms and accents in music I composed. But whatever next step is decided on, a song has begun—and that is what is important.

Sometimes a melody comes with a harmony. That is how the following melody came to me, presenting itself as a more lyrical and complete musical idea (Ex. 1.03). Its main strengths and interest are its shape or contour and the intervals within it. It is more contemplative, less urgent, due to both the slower tempo and less rhythmic activity than in the previous example (AUDIO 1.03).

Ex. 1.03

Moderately



This idea produced my song called "Out Of My Dream," one into which I delve deeply in chapter 18, "Process." The lyric emerged naturally from the music, without a great deal

of effort. Coinciding with the nature of the music, the lyric is contemplative (Ex. 1.04) (AUDIO 1.04).

Ex. 1.04 "Out Of My Dream" with lyric, Jack Perricone

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Moderately

I've been called a dream-er. I can't say that I'm not.

These two examples indicate a process that I recommend you try. You may not even need an instrument; you simply need your aural imagination and your voice. Imagine a melody—a phrase, short or long. Sing it again and again; now try to find some words to match it . . . and you've begun.

Beginning with a chord progression

Musical ideas can stem from a chord progression. Chord progressions can be evocative and provide a tonal environment in which other more vital elements of the songwriting process—melody and lyrics—can thrive. Combined with a rhythmic groove, chords can generate melodic ideas that would not otherwise occur to a writer.

If a chord progression is played without a rhythmic groove, it may not inspire much (Ex. 1.05) (AUDIO 1.05).

Ex. 1.05

A m G/B C A m G/B C

However, once a rhythmic groove is created, it may be the genesis of a song (Ex. 1.06) (AUDIO 1.06).

Ex. 1.06

A m G/B C A m G/B C

Emeli Sandé was probably inspired by both the sound of this progression and the rhythmic groove she created at the keyboard. It permeates her gigantic hit “Next To Me” (Ex. 1.07)

Ex. 1.07 “Next To Me” Emeli Sandé

The musical score is for the song "Next To Me" by Emeli Sandé. It is written in 4/4 time. The piano accompaniment features a repeating eighth-note riff in the right hand and a simple bass line in the left hand. The chord progression is A m, G/B, C, A m, G/B, C. The vocal melody is written in the treble clef and follows the same rhythmic pattern as the piano riff. The lyrics are: "You won't find him sit-ting at the ta - bles, — Rol-ling dice and stay-ing out 'til three."

Writing to riffs and tracks

An accompaniment figure provided by a guitar, a piano, or a synthesizer, often produces interesting music that can generate melodic or lyric ideas. You may choose to create an entire song around a repeating rhythmic figure called a *riff* or an *ostinato* (a riff-like figure that appears at various pitch levels) that you’ve discovered while jamming or experimenting on your instrument. Riff-based musical ideas rely on counterpoint, i.e., the movement of one melody (the riff) interacting with another melody (the vocal melody) to create interest. A riff can be repeated verbatim throughout a section or it can be transposed as the harmonies change.

Two or more people are often involved in the writing of riff-based songs. It is the guitarist or bassist in a group who usually creates a riff and the lead vocalist, using the riff as a fulcrum, who then creates the vocal melody. Many of rock’s greatest hits were created from guitar riffs, songs such as The Rolling Stone’s “Satisfaction” and “Brown Sugar” or Aerosmith’s “Walk This Way.” The necessity of two or more people to create a riff-based song has been eliminated with technology. Computers, MIDI, and DAWs have allowed anyone who has basic keyboard knowledge and technology skills to write a riff-based song by simply recording the riff and writing or singing to it. I devote chapter 15, “Riff-Based Songwriting,” to this study.

Collaboration

Collaboration is another way to begin writing a song. Play to your strengths. If you know that your strong suit is music and you can use some help with lyrics, do your best to find a good lyricist. Or vice versa, if you are a good lyricist but not much of a

musician, do your best to find a good composer. The act of collaboration is challenging but can also be empowering and lead to great success. The most common pairing in traditional songwriting has been that of composer and lyricist: Rodgers and Hart, Dietz and Schwartz, Arlen and Mercer, Goffin and King, Lennon and McCartney, Taupin and John, etc.

Many of today's hits are written by groups of people, four or five writers per song, each an expert in one part of the whole mix of elements and skills involved in making a hit. The track producer concentrates on what audiences like to move to, creating the groove and the basic harmonic movement; another tech type, a sound designer, concentrates on electronic sounds meant to entice the public with novel sounds; the top line writer (formerly known as the songwriter), writes or cowrites the lyric and melody, crafting the type of language and lyric phrases that the artist's audience expects to hear. In this age of specialization, it is no wonder that in commercial songwriting there are so many specialists involved in making the product.

Summary

There are many ways to begin a song: with a title, a lyrical concept, a melodic idea, a chord progression, a groove, or a riff. Beginning a song often occurs in a rush of inspiration. If inspiration dwindles or if it's not fueled by real knowledge, then the song often goes unfinished. My hope is that the rest of this book helps to supply you with the tools, techniques, and the knowledge it takes to for you to finish the song.

Activities

- Seek titles. Find three titles per day for a week. Look to newspapers, magazines, books, movies, and Broadway shows and titles from songs of the last century. At the end of a week, choose four titles out of the group that you have collected and write fresh concepts for each of them. Always have your antennae out seeking song ideas, catchy phrases, etc. Listen for common phrases that can be made to be unique by a change of a word ("I Second That Emotion") or by a change in its usual context ("Poker Face"). Many outstanding titles have already been used but, luckily, titles cannot be copyrighted so they are available to you (e.g., John Legend had a huge hit in 2014 with "All Of Me," a title usually associated with the jazz standard written in 1931).
- Actively seek out ideas/concepts. Practice thinking conceptually; a title alone will not be enough to get your creative juices flowing or captivate an audience; you'll need to find a unique way of treating that title.
- Develop a strong aural imagination. How often do you think music (not think about music, but actually hear it in your aural imagination)? Get away from an instrument and try to hear a musical phrase that could be used in a song. Once you find one you like, try coming up with a lyrical phrase that matches it—and you'll be on your way to writing a song.
- Compose a melodic idea; record and notate it. Write two different, yet viable lyrics that work with it.

- Find a chord pattern with a groove that appeals to you. Repeat it, record it, or loop it using a sequencer. Write a melody and lyric to it.
- Use music technology to get started. Naturally, if you can play an instrument well and if you have a good voice, you may not need to use a sequencer or DAW. Technology, however, does furnish you with a great way to spark a musical idea by providing novel sounds and textures and, most importantly, rhythmic grooves that can act as the underpinning for your song.
- Read as much as possible; take note of colorful language, interesting figures of speech, details that help you to perceive a picture of the events. Be cognizant of the clarity or lack of clarity in the writing, whether it's within a newspaper article, a magazine article, a short story, or a novel.
- Write every day. Whether you attempt to write an entire song, music without words, or words without music, do write something every day. Write, write, write, and actively listen to what is current; in this way, you will begin to grasp both the musical gestures, grooves, and forms that are being used. Remember that John Lennon and Paul McCartney had written over 100 songs before they met George Martin, and yet that great producer was not happy with what they initially showed him and the Beatles were forced to sing someone else's song for their first recording.
- Try different approaches to beginning a song: start with a title, a lyric idea, a concept; start with a groove, a chord pattern, or a melodic idea. Do not get stuck by always beginning a song the same way; have courage and free your imagination.
- Examine your strengths as a songwriter and your weaknesses. If you feel the need, begin a search for a collaborator who has strengths where you have weaknesses. No matter where you live, you are bound to find a local songwriter's club or workshop, but if you can't find one locally, try the Internet.

2

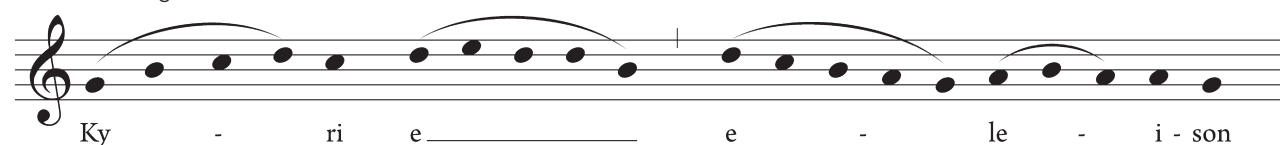
Introduction to Melody

In this chapter, you will be provided with an overview of melody that will help guide you in the more detailed study that occurs in the following chapters.

Melody: pitch and rhythm

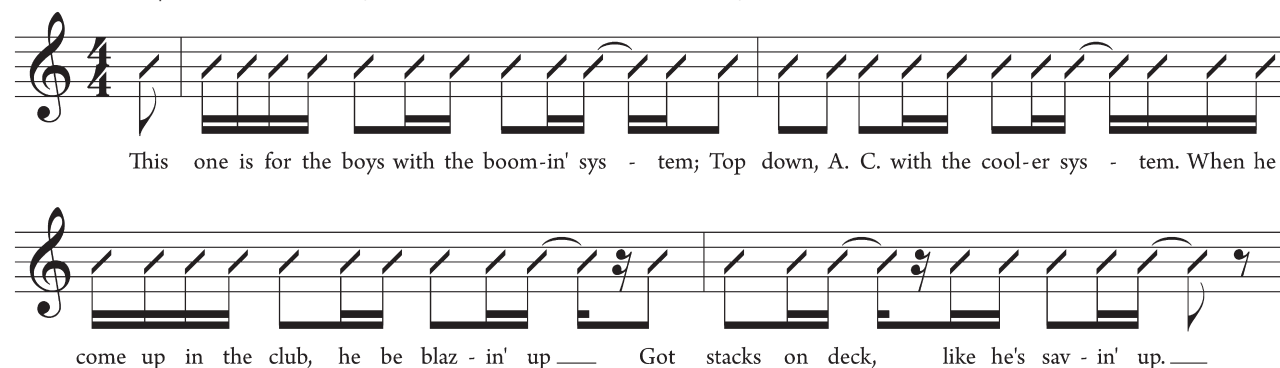
The study of melody writing is wide ranging, involving not only an examination of the individual components of melody such as pitch, rhythm, phrase length, contour, etc., but also melody's relationship to lyric, to the tonal center, to harmony, and to song form. Melody is made up of both pitch and rhythm; therefore, a thorough study of melody must include both of these elements. When one of these two elements is missing or is minimally used, the demeanor of the music is radically affected. For example, Gregorian chant contains a rhythmic component that is minimal in order to transport us away from bodily pleasures and allow us to enter into the realm of the spiritual (Ex. 2.01).

Ex. 2.01 Gregorian chant



At the other end of the spectrum, rap eschews pitch for the most part, and its rhythms tie us to bodily movement (Ex. 2.02).

Ex. 2.02 "Super Bass" Onika Minaj, Daniel Johnson, Ester Dean, Roahn Hylt



Songwriting demands that you consider the attributes and the limitations of the human voice. No matter how interesting a melody may sound when played on an instrument, it may not work when sung. You must consider the range of the voice within the context of

the type of voices that sing popular songs. Vocal ranges vary with each individual artist, but if you are writing without a specific artist in mind, it is best to be fairly conservative and keep the song within a range of an octave and a fifth. Female vocals are written where they sound, and male vocals are notated in the treble clef one octave above where they sound.

No matter how poor you may think your voice is, it is vital to the creation of a song for you, the songwriter, to feel and hear the sounds that emanate from the human instrument. Sing your song as you write it, and it will inform you and most likely, inspire you.

Conceiving a melody: melody's connection to lyrics

Melody, including most instrumental melody, is derived from vocal gestures: conversational speech, exclamations, guttural utterances, and verbal gestures—the entire panoply of how we orally communicate with each other. A verbal gesture includes, e.g., a question, an exhortation, an exclamation, a whisper, and many more subtle gestures that occur naturally, depending on our state of mind or the state of mind we are trying to project. Verbal gestures involve both rhythm and pitch. (Although pitch is most often associated with exact musical pitch, here I am referring to a heightening of the frequency range when, e.g., we ask a question.) Certainly, you would intone the words “I love you” to your beloved in a completely different way than you would say, “I’m going to the store to buy a quart of milk.”

Melody, when used in song, is an extension of speech that not only encapsulates the literal meaning of the words and gestures but also enhances their meaning. If, as a songwriter, you accept this definition of how melody should function, you have a way to judge whether your melody succeeds or fails.

Study the following four very different melodies; sing them and notice how each of them successfully captures a state of mind and a genuine expression of feeling.

Ex. 2.03 “You’ve Got A Friend” Carole King

When you're down — and trou - bled, and you need — some love and care, —

Whether you use a major scale, a minor pentatonic scale, a modal scale, or any number of other scales available to you as the basis for your melody, the choice you make will greatly influence the effect it will have. The melody in the verse of “You’ve Got A Friend” (Ex. 2.03) begins in minor, and by doing so, reinforces the perception of the needs of the person addressed, while the chorus of this song, in A \flat major, the relative major key to the key of F minor, positively reinforces the availability of a friend.

The tempo you choose for your song is also a major factor in its effect. The melody of “You’ve Got A Friend” is in a medium ballad tempo. The melody presents itself in broken rhythms—the pauses after the words “down” and “troubled” are an indication of the thoughtfulness and care that the singer is extending to the singee. The melody slowly rises to the word “need,” the most important word and the climax of the phrase. “Need”

occurs on the longest held note of the phrase and connects to “some love and care,” completely capturing the gesture of reaching out to express sympathy for someone.

“War” is an exhortation, a cry for sanity in an insane world (Ex. 2.04).

Ex. 2.04 “War” Norman Whitfield, Barrett Strong

War! (Hoo!) Yeah! (What is it good for?) Abso-lute-ly (noth-in'!) Ah-ha, Ah-ha. —

The musical notation for Ex. 2.04 is in 4/4 time, key of B-flat major. It features a series of rhythmic patterns and rests that correspond to the lyrics. The melody is characterized by its simplicity and the use of rests to create a call-and-response effect.

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This song is a protest against man’s inhumanity to man, sung by both the lead singer and by a backup group in the African tradition of call and response, a perfect way to present a subject that involves all of us. Exclamations, guttural reactions, the bare-bones sound of the minor pentatonic scale, and strong rhythms followed by rests force us to the truth of this extraordinary musical and lyrical statement.

The romantic purity and ardent romanticism of Oscar Hammerstein’s lyric has a counterpart in Kern’s lyrical melody that is based around a major scale that slowly descends, with occasional leaps of perfect fourths or diminished fifths up and down that add intensity and shape to it (Ex. 2.05). The melody includes chromaticism, the language of romantic composers such as Schumann and Tchaikovsky. It is full of lovingly held notes, and is sung in long legato phrases. This melody, written in 1939, like all melodies and all music, is an indication of its time, the state of mind not only of individuals but also of an entire society.

Ex. 2.05 “All The Things You Are” Oscar Hammerstein, Jerome Kern

You are the prom-mised kiss of spring-time that
makes the lone-ly win-ter seem long. —

The musical notation for Ex. 2.05 is in 4/4 time, key of B-flat major. It features a series of notes that descend from a high note to a low note, with occasional leaps of perfect fourths or diminished fifths. The melody is characterized by its simplicity and the use of long, held notes.

An antipode to the Kern/Hammerstein paean to love and romance, Taylor Swift’s “Bad Blood” is a lover’s commentary on a failed relationship (Ex. 2.06).

Ex. 2.06 “Bad Blood” Taylor Swift, Max Martin, Shellback

So take a look what you’ve done, — ‘cause ba-by, now we got bad — blood. Hey!

The musical notation for Ex. 2.06 is in 4/4 time, key of D major. It features a series of notes that descend from a high note to a low note, with occasional leaps of perfect fourths or diminished fifths. The melody is characterized by its simplicity and the use of long, held notes.

Since the singer wants the singee to feel the pain he has inflicted on her, she attacks him with machine-gun-like rhythms. In contrast to “All The Things You Are,” this melody

has shorter phrases with many repeated notes and repeated melodic phrases that underline the complaint and expression of hurt.

Through this look at melodies of four diverse songs from different styles and eras of songwriting, we are able to realize that melodies must be judged in their proper context, a context that is tempered by style, and the era in which the song was written, but most of all by the relationship of words to music in the service of feeling. This understanding is necessary before we delve deeper into the techniques that evolve from this relationship. There are excellent songwriting techniques, valid in all styles, in each of these examples—and those techniques will be explored in detail in the ensuing chapters.

Melodic rhythm

Melodic rhythm is one of the most important elements used in constructing a song—and one of the most overlooked by songwriting novices. It has an intimate connection to words, especially to rhyme. Once words are attached to the notes of a melody, the importance of rhythmic placement becomes apparent. When you hold out a note, you emphasize the importance of the word that is being sung; when you use slow-moving notes or fast-moving notes in telling your story or in projecting thoughts, you are communicating not only the words but also the feeling behind the words.

Consider how you might speak the following lyric:

Take my hand
Let's run away
To a sun-drenched wonderland.

Try speaking it in time with an underlying steady beat. Infuse the lyric with personal involvement. Speak it in a steady tempo, and then try speeding up or slowing down the tempo until you've achieved the right tempo for the lyric. Choose rhythms that best communicate the meaning of the lyric. Have you highlighted the important words in the lyric?

Here are four different rhythmic settings (Exs. 2.07–2.10) using the same pitches at the same tempo that demonstrate how a rhythmic setting can affect the listener's reaction to it.

The first setting is simply not credible. The words are sung practically at a somnambulant rhythmic pace (► AUDIO 2.07).

Ex. 2.07

Moderate (♩ = c. 108)

The musical notation for Ex. 2.07 is written on two staves in 4/4 time. The tempo is marked 'Moderate' with a quarter note equal to approximately 108 beats per minute. The melody consists of quarter and half notes. The lyrics are: 'Take my hand, let's run a - way to a sun - drenched won - der - land.' The first staff contains the first line of the melody and the second staff contains the second line. The lyrics are aligned with the notes: 'Take' under the first note, 'my' under the second, 'hand,' under the third, 'let's' under the fourth, 'run' under the fifth, 'a - way' under the sixth, 'to a' under the seventh, 'sun -' under the eighth, 'drenched' under the ninth, 'won -' under the tenth, 'der -' under the eleventh, and 'land.' under the twelfth.