

Lyrics: Part One

by Tim Thompson

This article is not intended to be a comprehensive "how to" about songwriting, but more of a jump start approach. There are lots of books out there that devote hundreds of pages to the subject. [A good place to start is with Mel Bay Publications; check out the "[Licktionary](#)" DVD by [Denny Sarokin](#), or [You Can Teach Yourself about Music](#) or [You Can Teach Yourself about Songwriting](#), for example.] My goal is to point out a few important elements that I think are key to good songwriting- some technical and some philosophical. Take it with a grain of salt as you read on.

In my opinion, it takes three things to be a good songwriter: natural talent, developed skills, and tenacity. Natural talent manifests itself in the ability to see the world in a way that allows you to use images that convey a message packed with emotion using only a few conversational words. Some people have natural talent and see the world in a unique way, but they may not have the skills to organize their thoughts and ideas in a cohesive way.

Tenacity really means one thing to me and that is re-write, re-write, re-write until it's right. If you get married to the first words you put down thinking it's the best song ever written, and you're not open to constructive criticism, then it will be harder for you to improve. So far, I've been talking about one aspect of songwriting, and that's lyrics- but there's more.

A song consists of three main elements: lyrics, melody, and chord changes. For copyright purposes it's only the lyrics and melody that count, even though the chord changes can dramatically change the mood of a song. There are a lot of books out there about lyric writing, some that get real technical and others with more of a meat and potatoes approach. Below is my spin on things from a perspective of having lived in Nashville for fourteen years and writing for a publishing company, meeting hundreds, if not thousands of songwriters over the years, and playing on hundreds of songwriter demos. In this article, I'll start at the beginning and discuss lyrics only.

Starting with the Song Title

When I start a song, I usually, but not always, begin with a song title because it ultimately becomes a beacon to keep you headed in the right direction. The title is usually the point of the whole song and is sung somewhere in a key place, like in the first or last line of the chorus, or the last line of the verse, or all three. It's also the most memorable part of the song.

There are exceptions that sometimes can't be helped. I have a song that I perform regularly that contains the words "elephant gun" in the first line of the chorus, but the name of the song is "You Can Stop a Train" and that's the hook that shows up in the last line of the chorus. Whenever someone refers to the song or requests it, however, they always call it "the elephant gun song."

Brainstorming

Once I have a good title and an angle on how I want to treat it and I pretty much know the point I want make in the song, I brainstorm ideas and write down random

thoughts- pages of them. The left side of your brain is the analytical side that helps you edit and put all your thoughts in order. When you're contemplating whether something makes sense or not, you're using your left side. You don't want to ask those kinds of questions too early, which is a mistake many new writers make.

By contrast, the right side of your brain is the creative side that enables you to come up with great imagery. One way that I stimulate the right side of my brain is through physical activity, usually by taking a walk outside, or pacing through my house. I put 50,000 miles a year on my carpet. I don't analyze anything when I'm in this randomization process. Sometimes, when I'm one or two lines away from finishing a song and I'm stuck, those magic lines will show up in the shower. Taking a shower is right-brain activity.

Getting Organized

Once I get tons of thoughts on paper, I start to organize those thoughts into singable lyrics. Here's some food for thought, and I'm pretty black and white on this- *lyrics are not the same as poetry*. Some people make the mistake of writing a poem and then putting music to it. Okay, like anything, there are exceptional instances where this procedure works, but I believe that song lyrics are more related to prose than poetry.

The novel is the longest form of prose writing, often consisting of hundreds of pages; the short story is the next step down, tens of pages; and song lyrics, to me, are the shortest stories- about seventy words or so. Okay, back to organizing our random thoughts. One rule that I follow pretty religiously is, "If I wouldn't say it, I probably wouldn't sing it."

I'm talking about making your lyrics conversational. As you're going through your pages of thoughts and coming up with lines for your song, ask yourself, "Would I say this in a conversation with someone?" Again, there are exceptions to every rule; you might write down a quirky phrase that you really wouldn't say, but in your song you repeat it a couple of times and it becomes a memorable hook. Ask songwriter friends you trust for objective input about how it sounds to their ear.

Soliciting an Honest Critique

Speaking of friends, when I was writing lyrics every day, several fellow songwriter pals and I would get together with to critique each others' songs. These are people I know and trust to give me objective input. In my book, there are two kinds of critiques:

1.) Objective criticism goes something like this - "I read your lyric and this is what I think you're trying to say. How close was I? This line made me feel this way. That line doesn't seem to roll off the tongue very smooth." Objective input can be helpful. If your listeners or readers feed back to you what you were trying to say, then you did your job. If not, then you didn't make yourself clear and it's time to rewrite.

2) Subjective criticism says "I would have written it differently." Everyone sees the world a little differently and not everyone accepts someone else's interpretation of the world around them. Sometimes a moral bias or a previous bad experience prevents someone from appreciating truly skillful writing. Just because you don't agree with the underlying message doesn't mean it wasn't written well. So it's important to realize which kind of criticism you're receiving. You may have written something great but after a critique from the wrong person, you might walk away

thinking you are lacking as a writer. I've read lyrics where I didn't necessarily agree with the message, but acknowledged that they were certainly well written.

Storytelling

Another thing to consider is the fact that a song is the shortest form of storytelling. If you only have about seventy words, every word and its placement in the song becomes that much more important. To keep the listener's attention you need to take them by the hand and walk them through the song one word at a time. The first line of the song should be so interesting that the listener thinks, "Huh, what's this about?" As you go through all the random ideas you've written down, it's a good idea to pick out strong lines that you can insert at key places.

For example, you could pick out a line to start the song with, a line to end the first verse with that leads into the chorus, the first line of the chorus, the last line of the chorus, and the last line of the song. In other words, you *outline* the song so it makes sense. Remember, you've already used the creative right side of your brain to get some interesting ideas, now you're trying to put the pieces together using the left side.

After you've gone through one organized version of the song, that is- you're not yet finished with it but you have a good start- go back and brainstorm by writing more ideas down and organize those. It's like breaking a horse; you stay on it until it complies with your wishes.

Song Form

Song form is important too. If you're trying to be a hit songwriter then you probably want to listen to the radio and figure out what forms are the most popular.

Verse - Chorus - Verse - Chorus - Bridge - Chorus - Tag

is probably the most popular form used these days. Other forms include the same as above, only without the bridge:

Verse - Chorus - Verse - Chorus -- Tag (optional)

A bridge should be used when you want to say something that you haven't already said. AABA or Verse-Verse-Bridge-Verse is another popular form. This one works great for story songs where you sing the hook or song title at the end of each verse and sometimes at the end of the bridge. One more element to the first form I mentioned [Verse - Chorus - Verse - Chorus - Bridge - Chorus - Tag] is a "channel" or "pre-chorus." It comes after the verse and is usually a line or two that builds in intensity into the chorus (more about that later in another article about melodies and chord changes).

The 3-Minute Rule Vs. Story Songs

Song length is a big thing too. I used to do a lot of "writers' nights" where three or four songwriters get on stage and perform one song at a time in a round until each one has played three or four songs. You could always tell the new songwriters in town because their songs were five or six minutes long. The attention span of the average human being is a little less than that of a gnat- about three minutes. Keep that in mind and time your songs to make sure you're not going on too long. Story

songs can be the exception because, if you're telling an interesting story, length isn't a problem.

I hope I've given you some helpful ideas regarding song lyrics. In the next article, I'll be talking about writing melodies and how that relates to the information I mentioned in this first installment.

Until next time- rock on!
Tim Thompson

About the Author

As a professional musician working in a competitive industry, **Tim Thompson** has learned to play his strengths in more than one area of the business. Not only is he considered a guitar virtuoso and talented singer/songwriter, he's also a much sought after independent producer and session player.

Thompson grew up in a musical family in Minnesota and began playing piano at age nine, then trombone, and eventually picked up the guitar. Ambitious and focused, he practiced and challenged himself and by age fourteen was playing guitar professionally.

Since moving to Nashville in 1993 Tim has released six albums and produced records for artists such as Kerrville Folk Festival winner Mike Brandon, and finalist Nelda Sisk. Tim's newest release, *Revved Up* contains five new original compositions plus complex arrangements of "Josie", "Eleanor Rigby" and an entertaining version of "The Flintstones".

Learn more about Tim Thompson and his music on the web at:
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