

A Companion Text to "The Essential Secrets of Songwriting"

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*Use
Your*
WORDS!

Developing a Lyrics-
First Songwriting
Process

Pantomime
Music
Publications

Written by Gary Ewer

USE YOUR WORDS!
Developing A Lyrics-First Songwriting Process

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Introduction

This is not specifically an eBook about how to write good lyrics, *per se*. Its main purpose is to give you ideas for creating songwriting processes that place lyrics front and centre in importance. If you've ever felt that your lyrics sound disorganized, unfocused or otherwise neglected, I hope you find the ideas presented here to be just what you've been looking for.

But though the purpose here is not to get too deeply into what makes a good lyric (that's something I deal with in "The Essential Secrets of Songwriting" eBook, Chapter 5), it's going to be important for me to at least partly address that issue in the first section of this eBook; there's not much sense in helping you develop a lyrics-first process if those lyrics don't really do the job they're supposed to do.

So to be sure that you aren't going to be handcuffed by some of the more typical errors or oversights with regard to why good lyrics sound good in the first place, the Preface below addresses some of the more important issues pertaining to creating song lyrics.

Preface: How We Say Things

Whoever said “It’s not *what* you say, it’s *how* you say it” sure said a mouthful. I don’t know who originally said it (and no doubt the internet will eventually attribute it to Einstein), but it conveys a sentiment that is applicable to song lyrics – both how we write them and how we sing them.

It’s important to note that vocal style can have a lot to do with how we craft melodies, and therefore will have an indirect impact on how we write the lyrics that go with those melodies. That’s a longwinded way of saying that melodies and lyrics are inextricably linked. And the more you study song lyrics, the more you’ll see its important connection with instrumentation, rhythm, and practically every other element. I go over this in greater detail in my eBook “The Essential Secrets of Songwriting”, Chapter 5.

With regard to lyrics, how we say something has a lot to do with our choice of words. It’s hard for me to tell you what words to use in any specific sort of way, because it depends on many things: genre, for example:

Genre: Garage Rock

I'm a street walking cheetah

With a heart full of napalm

I'm a runaway son of the nuclear A-bomb

(“Search and Destroy” (1973) – Iggy Pop, James Williamson)

Genre: Country-Pop

Girl you're gettin' that look in your eyes

And it's startin' to worry me

I ain't ready for no family ties

Nobody's gonna hurry me

("Baby, Don't Get Hooked On Me" (1972) – Mac Davis)

How we say things also depends on topic, tempo, and performance style in general. In songwriting, nothing operates on its own. Everything is linked, and one element will affect another.

We know that someone who makes their living as a public speaker (motivational speakers, politicians, and good teachers) is usually careful about choice of words. But hand-in-hand with word choice is *execution*: It's not what you say, it's how you say it. The hypothetical example of a political rally serves as a suitable analogy in this case:

If a politician wants to convey the fact that their party plans to lower taxes for middle-income workers by 15 percent, they can either simply say that ("I will lower taxes by 15 percent for middle income workers, primarily by reducing costs in non-renewable fuel sources and other programs..."), or they can appeal to emotion and think about *how* to say it: ("Look at all you wonderful, wonderful people... Do you not work hard for your money? Do you really want government grabbing it before you even get a chance to see it? Of course not! So I'm lowering your taxes by 15%!") The person that actually gets the chance to lower the taxes will be the one who has appealed most effectively to the audience's *emotional centre*.

In songwriting, the job of a lyricist is not much different. You need to appeal to the audience's emotional centre. You need to make people care – make people *feel* something. In my example above, experience tells us that the politician who actually says *how* they plan to lower taxes is likely the one who'll lose the election, because the choice of words (not to mention the delivery), at least in the example, seems devoid of emotion. The person

who gives no substance but simply appeals to emotion will usually win the election. Again, in songwriting, it's not much different: there is the issue of *what* you say (i.e., choosing your words), but probably even more important is *how you say it* (i.e., pairing the words to a melody.)

When I use the word *emotion* in this context, I'm not saying that all songs need to be emotional in the sense that they're tear-jerkers. I simply mean *writing words that people care about*. Take this verse and chorus combination, for example, from "Castle On the Hill" (Ed Sheeran, Benjamin Levin):

Verse:

*When I was six years old I broke my leg
I was running from my brother and his friends
And tasted the sweet perfume of the mountain grass I
rolled down...*

Chorus:

*I'm on my way
Driving at 90 down those country lanes
Singing to "Tiny Dancer"
And I miss the way
You make me feel
And it's real
When we watched the sunset over the castle on the hill*

Though the difference is subtle, you can see that there is a distinction between the kinds of lyrics you might use in a verse, and the kind you'd use in a chorus. I deal a lot with this in my blog, "The Essential Secrets of Songwriting" (<http://www.secretsofsongwriting.com>), and also in my eBook manuals. So I'm not going to go over it all again here, except to say that verses generally make us care by setting a scene, describing people and situations, and generally letting us know what's going on

("I was six years I broke my leg..."). Choruses help listeners feel the appropriate emotions ("I'm on my way... I miss the way/ You make me feel...").

Getting that balance right between the descriptive, scene-setting words of a verse, and the more emotional words of a chorus, is the hallmark of lyric-writing success. In most cases, *subtlety is a virtue*.

The Emotional Ups and Downs

In a 2001 interview for Mexican television, singer-songwriter Barry Gibb of the Bee Gees said, "Songs don't come from stories; songs come from feelings." In most good songs, emotion is a roller coaster that moves up and down with a certain measure of predictability. Well, roller coaster might be the wrong analogy, because with lyrics the ups and downs are typically subtler than that. But certainly fluctuating emotions are a vital part of song success. Why? Because all-emotion-all-the-time has a way of stunting our ability to process the essential ingredients of a storyline. Think of it: a song where the verse, pre-chorus, chorus and bridge are all telling us how heartbroken the singer is over their latest breakup. Usually, it's just too much.

The way to go is to create a lyric that spends the first part of its time (the verse) giving a background to a story or situation while minimizing the emotional outlay. What that does is it *legitimizes* the turn toward a much more emotional response in the chorus.

As you look through most song lyrics, you will notice this up and down emotional ride. Even verse-only songs will