

Crafting A Song- Square One

by Rick Lang

(based on an article written in 1994)

One of the most difficult aspects of songwriting, especially for beginning songwriters, is the awkwardness of trying to get started, not being sure of where or how to begin (especially if you have no one to talk to... or help you). There are really no absolute rights or wrongs in songwriting, or only one correct way to proceed for the most part, but simply a continual process of experimentation and trial and error...finding your own way. There have been many books written on songwriting that advocate various methods of writing " formula " songs, some of which do achieve commercial success. However a large percent of these songs sound contrived, full of gimmicks, clichés, and hooks. This approach is designed to help the song be financially successful, but often times compromises the integrity of the song. The very best songs are usually ones where the writer writes from their feelings. You should always try to write about things you are familiar....from your own experiences...in a conversational manner (write the way you talk).

So with that in mind lets get started with the basic tools of the trade. For the most part just a pad of paper, pen, pencil and a guitar or other musical instrument is all you really need. However, I find that a good hand held cassette recorder can prove very valuable, especially to capture any musical ideas or melodies so you don't forget them. Also I do a fair amount of writing while I drive, so if you travel a lot as I tend to do, a hand held recorder is a very practical and " safe " tool to use.

The start of a song can be a title you have come up with, a general concept or theme, a particular line that sticks in your mind, a melody, chord progression, a feeling etc. It can be any one of these or something else that becomes our starting point that we build from. Once you have something to build on you should start writing down all of your ideas. In the beginning you don't need to worry if the lines rhyme or not, but concentrate more on what you want to say, sticking to the main theme or concept of the song. To me it's critical that it is clear what the song is all about so that the listener can follow the song.

As you develop your ideas you will need to formulate a chorus to the song, however you can make a song occasionally work without a chorus, by using other techniques like a refrain (repeating a particular line for emphasis) or a bridge which we will cover at some future time. Your chorus should be memorable and echo and reinforce the main theme of the song. In an effective song, the listener will go away singing or humming the chorus.

As your song progresses and takes shape, it is good to try and avoid saying the same things in different ways, but let your song flow along in a logical way interjecting different ideas that all tie into the concept of the song. I have a practice that every day when I get up, when I'm

working on a new song, I try to think of different ideas I want to include in the song and write them down. In a period of a week or two I usually can come up with enough material to start to put it all together....sort out and organize what I've written down.

At the same time you need to be incorporating a melody and chord changes to the words to make it all work together. This can be extremely frustrating till you get to the point where it starts to sound good to you. As I said earlier it is all a matter of trial and error and it is important to keep experimenting until you come up with something you really like and are happy with. Don't settle for less! One of the biggest mistakes most all songwriters make (including myself) on occasion is to stop too soon, before our soon is fully developed and has reached it's true potential. Songwriting takes time, and it is important to be patient and keep working on it every day until your song is the best it can be and you cannot improve on it any more. If this sounds like work, it is, and this process can be extremely frustrating for the experienced writer as well as the beginner.

I should mention the importance of titles. Most good songs have a concise but effective memorable title. It is a good idea to try and include your title (or elements of the title)somewhere in the song , especially in the chorus. If you have done this well the listener will hopefully remember your title after hearing the song a couple of times.

Last but certainly not least is that in writing your song you must consider the singer, especially if you your intention is to have a band perform or record your tune. The melody and lyrics have to flow and be easily " singable ". The concept of the song should put the singer in a good light. The singer has to be able to buy into the idea of the song... and feel good about singing it. The best gauge I know of is to listen to the lyrics of several of your favorite songs and learn from them. Try to figure out why the song was effective and then proceed to critique your own song in the same manner. This is a process you can really learn and benefit from.

Well that's all for now, and I hope that a few of the points I've covered here may be of some help to you. For myself, learning & improving are vital to good songwriting, and that is a process that should never stop, no matter how long you have been writing for. With that I will leave you with the lyrics and MP3 version of a song entitled " Maybe This Time " that the Colorado based band Front Range recorded on their " Back To Red River " CD. This is a tune I wrote for my high school daughter....who was struggling with relationship issues at the time. I intended it to be a song of hope!

Until next time, take care and good writing!
Rick Lang

PS

Years ago someone I met came up with a simplified definition of songwriting, that really made sense to me... "figure out what you want to say...then figure out how you want to say it".