

SONGCRAFTERS COLORING BOOK

by Bill Pere

EXPRESS or COMMUNICATE -- What's the Difference?

Picture yourself in Africa, wandering aimlessly through the jungle with tears streaming down your face and your heart broken because your pet gorilla has forsaken you and run off with a group of other apes.

You stumble into a village of natives, who gather around you and seem curious as to what's going on in your life. Unable to choke back the sobs, you spill your life story, your hopes and dreams, joys and sorrows. The natives just stand and stare at you, as you hear a few snickers and see a few smiles. You grow irritated that they have not responded the way you thought they would, so you jump up and down and yell angrily at them about all the pain and injustice you have endured. They still stand and stare, their snickers growing louder, their smiles wider. You can't understand how it can be that you have expressed such intense feelings and emotions to these people and have gotten no reaction, no sympathy, no connection. Quite simply, you don't speak their language and they don't speak yours, and you were too wrapped up in your own despair to notice. You most certainly have expressed yourself, but there has been no communication.

Expression is the outward display of that which you think or feel inside. It is a process of sending signals or transmitting messages. Expression does not address what happens to those messages after they are sent. Communication deals with both the transmission and reception of a message. If a message is received the way it was intended, then communication has occurred. It doesn't necessarily have to involve words, although this is the most common method. Communication can occur via sign language, images, Morse code, etc, but whatever the method, communication is made possible by the existence of rules which both parties understand. Communication is the glue that connects people with others. When expression is mistaken for communication (i.e., "I expressed myself so you **MUST** have understood me...") we get all the unhappy social situations that result from not being connected.

So what does this have to do with songwriting? Quite a bit when we remember that in general, songwriting is a two-phase process i.e., creating and crafting. The creation phase of a song is universal in the sense that everyone "does" it. Unless creation occurs, there cannot be a crafting phase, since there would be nothing to work with. The creation process is very individual, without rules or restrictions. Everyone finds inspiration in his or her own way, and expresses it with individuality. However, this is where some of the major areas of confusion arise in discussions and critiques of songs and songwriting.

How often is it heard at song critique sessions or among groups of artists that "there are no rules in songwriting" and "how can anyone else critique MY song" and that "I won't compromise my artistic integrity for the sake of commercialism!"

In the world of creative expression, it is true that there are no rules, because everyone is free to think and feel what they want and to share those thoughts and feelings. The creation phase of a song is directly connected to inner feelings, thoughts, and emotions; thus, music and lyrics that come from that process are usually quite personal and genuine. If those lyrics are never intended to go anywhere else beyond the writer, then nothing more needs to happen. The song does not need to be performed for an audience or brought for critique. However, if the writer really wants to share this snapshot of his or her inner self with others, and wants

others to connect with it, then all of a sudden, it has entered the realm of communication, where, like it or not, there are rules that determine whether or not the words will elicit a desired feeling or action.

Thus, the first decisions a writer faces are “what do I want to have happen when someone hears my song?” and “How important is it to me that the listener understands what I am really saying and not just overlaying their own interpretation?” The question of interpretation is a key one for a songwriter. If you want to maintain control of your message, then you don’t want the listeners to impose their own belief about what they think you are saying. If you really want some vanilla ice cream and you say to your significant other “please go to the store and bring back some of that delicious white creamy stuff that I love”, you really can’t blame them if they then present you with a bottle of milk or a jar of mayonnaise. By not being specific in what you said, you left it open to interpretation and didn’t get the result you wanted.

Quite often, a song is music-oriented and is driven by a beat or a groove, with lyrics that remain vague and non-specific. This is fine as long as the intent is only to evoke a mood or feeling or to get people to dance. By definition, music itself, without words, is an abstraction and can only express, not communicate. Great orchestral works like “Peter and the Wolf” (Grieg), “The 1812 Overture” (Tchaikovsky), “Petroushka” (Stravinsky), or “Rodeo” (Copland) are all written around very specific stories or events, but the music, as great as it is, cannot convey any of the specifics, and can only evoke general feelings and images which a listener flavors in his or her own way. Without the verbal explanation of the roles of the instruments in Peter and the Wolf, or the Mardi Gras setting of Petroushka, the chances of anyone actually understanding the story from just hearing the music is nil. In expressive songs or dance tunes, where the music is the driver, the words are not functioning as carriers of meaning. They are really functioning as an additional part of the music, to enhance a mood.

To actually communicate effectively though a song is an amazing challenge when you think of what’s going on. In normal human interaction, there is constant two-way checking to insure that meaning is understood. Phrases like “What did you mean by that?”; “Could you please re-phrase that?”; “Let me see if I got this right”; “Is that what I heard you say?” all serve to get people aligned so that there is one common interpretation. In a song, the communication is not interactive – you have three minutes to speak your piece with no feedback from the person(s) on the receiving end to tell you if they are “getting it” or not. Thus, the rules of communication become extremely important.

The number one rule of course is specificity. Using concrete references (nouns that are accessible by at least one of the five senses) is a must. If all the reference words (nouns) in a song are abstract, you are opening up the message to broad interpretation. Of course most songs are *about* abstract things like love, loneliness, friendship, happiness, peace, etc, but in order to communicate, those abstractions have to be put in concrete terms.

A second principle is to address the six W’s: Who, What, When, Where, Why, hoW. Look at these opening lines from three hit songs, and see how much detail and sensory input they provide:

*Bus stop, wet day, she’s there, I say, “Please share my umbrella”
Bus stop, bus go, she stays, love grows, under my umbrella.
All that summer we enjoyed it, wind and rain and shine
That umbrella, we employed it, by August she was mine.*

(Bus Stop, by Graham Gouldman, recorded by the Hollies)

*Riding on the City of New Orleans
Illinois Central Monday morning rail
Sixteen cars, sixteen restless riders,
Two conductors, twenty-five sacks of mail.*

(City of New Orleans, written and recorded by Woody Guthrie)

*Hot August night and the leaves hanging down and the grass on the ground smellin' sweet
Move up the road to the outside of town and the sound of that good gospel beat
Sits a ragged tent where there ain't no trees, and that gospel group telling you and me its'
Brother Love's Traveling' Salvation Show*

(Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Show written and recorded by Neil Diamond)

For other great examples of conveying lots of information in a very compact way, look at TV theme songs like *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Gilligan's Island*, *The Brady Bunch*, etc. The whole story is told in a minute.

Another principle of communication is semantic field, which is closely related to context. Take the simple sentence "That was the finest set I have ever seen". If you think you know what that means without any other information, you're betting against the odds. That line can mean completely different things depending on whether it was said by:

- A maker of chess pieces
- A tennis player
- A volleyball coach
- An antique TV collector
- A leering guy in a bar

All the words in a lyric have to work to provide clear context, which is accomplished by keeping all the words in the same semantic field (if you're writing about apples, don't talk about oranges, if you're writing about fruit, then apples and oranges are okay, but don't talk about celery, etc). This is called tone constancy. The semantic field is determined by the overarching metaphor that governs the song – and there can be only one in a song – remember, it's hard enough to communicate clearly about one idea in three minutes, let alone more than one idea. It is important to set your overarching metaphor to match the audience you're trying to reach. Consider these lyric references from the hit "Backfield In Motion".

*Backfield in motion, I'm gonna have to penalize you,
Offside and holding, you know that's against the rules*

These references are completely tone constant against an overarching metaphor of love=football. This of course only makes sense to people who know the details of football, but since that number is millions of people, it provides a large audience who will "get it". Perhaps one of the best examples of this aspect of communication was depicted in an episode of *Star Trek Next Generation*, called "The Children of Darmok". This race of people spoke in English words but no one had a clue what they were talking about because everything they said only made sense if you knew the characters and events of a particular story from their culture. Similarly, if you're writing a song and use images and references known only to you, or a select few, you seriously compromise the chances of being understood. You're expressing yourself, but not communicating.

Another element of verbal communication that we often take for granted is the effect of dynamics (loud/soft) and cadence (pattern of accents). In typical communication, a word in a sentence which is stressed (louder than the others) automatically conveys “as opposed to”. This is called the principle of contrastive stress. For example:

- He didn’t drink his beer TODAY. (as opposed to having drunk it some other day)
- He DIDN’T drink his beer today. (as opposed to the fact that he usually does)
- He didn’t DRINK his beer today. (as opposed to having eaten it or snorted it)
- He didn’t drink HIS beer today. (as opposed to having drunk some else’s beer)

Thus, the exact same sentences have totally different meanings, depending on where the accent falls. And when you’re putting words over music, the music forces accents to go in certain places. Thus, to communicate effectively, the natural verbal accents (both words and syllables) have to align with the natural musical accent, or else you change the meaning of what you’re trying to say.

Whether or not a song needs to communicate is completely a matter of what the writer wants to accomplish. If the only desire is to have people dance to the music, then the words really don’t matter much and they can just be expressive to convey a mood, or they could just be nonsense. If the purpose of a song is to make a connection between writer and listener, and create a specific response, then the lyric needs to communicate clearly.

There are no rights or wrongs about what a writer wants to accomplish with his or her song. It is completely up to the writer. Problems arise when there is a mismatch of the desired outcome and the means of trying to achieve it. One of the best things that a songwriter or songwriter’s association can do when critiquing a wide variety of song types in a single session, is to clarify up front whether the writer really cares if the audience understands what he or she is trying to say. If it doesn’t matter to the writer, then the listeners can focus on different things like a general mood or the musical groove. If the writer does want the audience to “get it” then the song needs to be listened to and responded to in a different way.

From a commercial perspective, songs are successful because of either their mood/groove, or for the impact of their story or message. Either element alone can make a hit. Songs that sit in between which have no distinct musical or emotive identity and which do not have a clear and cinematic lyric, are the ones that are going to need significant re-working.

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Bill Pere is a recording artist, award winning songwriter, performer, and educator well known for his superbly crafted lyrics, with lasting impact. Bill has released 12 CD's , teaches private songwriting workshops and serves as the Director of Special Projects for the Connecticut Songwriters Association. Bill is an Official Connecticut State Troubadour, and is the Founder and Executive Director of the LUNCH Ensemble (www.lunchensemble.com). Twice named Connecticut Songwriter of the Year, Bill is MBTI certified, a member of CMEA and MENC, and helps develop young talent in songwriting, performing, and learning about the music business.

For workshops, consultation, performances, or other songwriter services, contact Bill via his web sites, at www.billpere.com and www.lunchensemble.com