

SONGCRAFTERS COLORING BOOK

What Do I Say and How Do I Say It?

by Bill Pere

Very high on the 'top forty' list of flaws that affect the quality of songs from new and even experienced writers, is the lack of focus in the lyric. Quite often, a writer, having stumbled upon a good musical progression or catchy lyrical phrase, will scramble to assemble a song around it, without first giving careful thought to the matter of what the song is actually about, and how the intended message is going to be conveyed to listeners. The resulting effect on listeners at critique sessions is usually one of vagueness; a mood or atmosphere lacking in the specifics necessary to really pack an emotional punch.

The questions "What do I want to say?" and "How do I want to say it?" are the two most important questions in the realm of songwriting. Without a clearly defined intended message and a well thought out method of presenting it, a song cannot be a successful song, because it will not communicate. Many writers who seem to be able to write a good song quickly have indicated that a great deal of prior thought occurs before the song actually hatches out. It is a type of crafting which occurs even before the creative process...an analytical thought process which serves to focus the energy of the creativity which may follow. In the absence of this, the result of the creative process may be very diffuse and require more revising and fine tuning afterward, to make it shine. Either way, before a song can be considered a finished and finely crafted product, it must have addressed those two key questions.

Hocus Focus, Show and Tell

The answer to the first question, "What do I want to say?", is called the focus. It is the main point of the song, usually a message, concept, idea or emotion that the writer wants to express. There can only be a single idea addressed in a song. With just three minutes to develop an idea, to try to mix two or more messages would dilute the impact of each one. The same is true of the scope of the idea. A 'cosmic' concept like "What is the meaning of life?" can barely be answered in a philosophy book of several hundred pages, let alone a three minute song. The focus should be narrow and specific. A song which attempts to show that "An important thing in life is _____ (fill in the blank with "love", "friends", "family", "money"), at least has a chance of succeeding in a three minute format. Note that I said "attempts to SHOW", not TELL. Don't just TELL the listener something about an abstract idea like love, joy, sorrow, or loneliness. It must be SHOWN by the actions and descriptions of people, deeds, or concrete things. The use of CONCRETE IMAGES is critical for establishing successful communication with your listeners and helps you to SHOW rather than TELL. To say "My soul is empty when you're gone" is a cosmic, rather than concrete image, because a

hundred different people have a hundred different perceptions of ideas like "soul" and "empty", when used like this. Also, it's been said this way many times before, because it's easier to be vague than to be specific. To say "the bed's a little bigger when you're gone" shows, reveals, and evokes the feeling, by referring to a specific, common object, a bed. Most importantly, it conveys a great deal of information about the relationship between the singer and singee, revealing that they have shared many tender, intimate moments together. Economy of words is a prime part of song crafting. The ability to convey a lot of information by showing actions and describing objects is what enables a complex idea to be clearly conveyed in a three minute song.

What makes a good focus for a song? The more universal it is, the better. Ideas like "What goes around comes around", "Look before you leap", "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush", "The rich get richer and the poor get poorer", "Love conquers all", etc. are all understood and accepted as general truths. However, you need to find an original way to present them. This brings us to the second question, "How do I say it?". Once you know the point you want to make, you need to find a way of presenting it which is original and clear. The biggest trap here that tangles up many writers is that they are too personal or introspective and it requires a degree of mind-reading on the part of a listener to understand what is being said. Alternatively, a writer may be too direct e.g.,: "When I'm sad I start to fall, You pick me up, Love conquers all". This is clear, but drab and trite. It's been said that way too many times. To find new ways to convey old ideas, we need to explore the realm of cinema...

Welcome to the Movies

Think of a song as a three minute movie. There are pictures to be displayed, which in turn show us the who, where, what, when and why of the story. Several movies all about the same idea (e.g., "Love conquers all") will all turn out very different if one changes the setting, the time frame, the character types, etc. For example, the story told in "Coward of the County" takes place in the present in a typical country or western setting. Suppose it was put to new music and set in outer space a hundred years from now. Same message, but fresh perspective, because the where and when have changed. The lyric imagery would have to change to suit the new setting. Also important in cinema is the camera angle. One set of events can appear in many different ways, depending on how it is being viewed. Are the events being observed by a male or female or adult or child, and are they being seen firsthand, or being viewed on TV, read in the newspaper, or being overheard in conversation? One idea or one set of events can become many different songs, just by changing the things listed above, and each of those songs can say the same thing in distinctly different ways.

Here is a complete example of this technique. Presented here are two lyrics, each about the exact same events and feelings and the same two characters. The only difference is that the roles of singer and singee are reversed between the two characters. The setting remains constant, i.e., a 19th century maritime town, and they are both simply ways of stating "love conquers all".

Crest of a Wave (female sings to male)

You had salt water in your blood, you longed to be
Another Billy Budd, a sultan of the sea
I longed to be the one to break your fever,
But I couldn't have begun to make you leave her;
She had more allure than I, so when they signed up a crew
You were first in line, there was nothing I could do;
You had to tame the tide, so you signed on
The sails billowed with your pride, and you were gone

You said you'd send me your love on the crest of a wave,
And the water wouldn't keep us apart
I was blue sky, you were ocean, the horizon was our heart.
You said you'd send me your love on the crest of a wave,
But I wonder, "Do you think anymore
Of the lovestruck lonely lady you left standing on the shore?"

It's been almost a year, and I've not heard
In all the thunder of the sea, a single word,
I guess you took the sea by storm, and you don't need
Someone like me to keep you warm, so I won't plead
But if your harem is the waves, then what's the good
If they behave as fickle women would
One day they'll be kind, but the next day they will kill
Though you've cast me from your mind, I love you still...

You said you'd send me your love on the crest of a wave,
And the water wouldn't keep us apart
I was blue sky, you were ocean, the horizon was our heart.
You said you'd send me your love on the crest of a wave,
But I don't think you think anymore
Of the lovestruck lonely lady you left standing on the shore?"

Winter finds the ship's yet not returned
Some fear it was wrecked
When the water churned like a mistress spurned,
But it was me who drowned, in your neglect...

You're six months overdue, there's no doubt anymore
I say goodbye to you as I walk along the shore
But then I see there in the sand, surrounded by debris
A scrimshaw by your hand, and the image there is me...

You said you'd send me your love on the crest of a wave,
And the water wouldn't keep us apart
I was blue sky, you were ocean, the horizon was our heart.
You said you'd send me your love on the crest of a wave,

Now I know you thought evermore
Of the lovestruck lonely lady you left standing on the shore...

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The Other Side of the Wave (male sings to female)

I remember the night I first met you
You reminded me I had a heart.
It's kind of hard for me to be gentle
Maybe it's too late to start
I never had much practice with loving,
I mean the kind where you don't have to pay...
This big tough old salt was just a scared little kid
When he found himself feeling that way...

People say I've got a mean tempered mouth
I even swear in my sleep
But a couple of cuss words are easier to spit out
Than talkin' 'bout feelings down deep...
Somehow, you just saw right through it
And I needed I safe place to hide
So I signed up on a ship but before I sailed off
I told you what I felt inside...

I said I'd send you my love with day dawning
That's the promise I gave,
If you could see through the mist of the morning
To the other side of the wave
You'd see this sailor out standing and looking
At the ocean meeting blue sky
Two worlds far apart that make beauty together,
Not unlike you and I

I said I'd send you my love with day dawning
That's the promise I gave
If you could see through the mist of the morning
To the other side of the wave
You'd see this sailor out standing and wishing
For each wave that this bow's cuttin' through
To send you a sign, spill my love at your feet,
So you know that I'm thinking of you...

We caught us a big whale this morning
Now I'm scratching some lines in a tooth
I hoped it would help me forget things
But this picture is telling the truth
I know I'm no kind of artist

But the lines are all finding their place
No matter what I want this picture to be,
It will end up being your face...

I said I'd send you my love with day dawning
That's the promise I gave,
If you could see through the mist of the morning
To the other side of the wave
You'd see this sailor out standing and looking
At the ocean meeting blue sky
Two worlds far apart that make beauty together,
Not unlike you and I

The weather has been turning angry
There's a dark, jealous sky up above
It's funny what a man can learn about himself,
Cause I'm less scared of that than of love...
and I hear this old ship's planks complaining
So if I don't get to see you once more...
I hope that some day, some way, someone will know I love
That lady I left on the shore...

I said I'd send you my love with day dawning
That's the promise I gave
If you could see through the mist of the morning
To the other side of the wave
You'd see this sailor out standing and wishing
For each wave that this bow's cuttin' through
To send you a sign, spill my love at your feet,
So you know that I'm thinking of ...
That lovestruck lonely lady I left standing on the shore...

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Here are two lyrics which tell the exact same story from two perspectives,
thus they are two independent songs. There are even specific images which
use the same metaphor, but say it in two different ways:

I was blue sky, you were ocean
The horizon was our heart

This is the exact same statement as:

You'd see this sailor out standing a looking
At the ocean meeting blue sky
Two worlds far apart that make beauty together
Not unlike you and I.

Thus the secret to a successful lyric is to take a very common idea and say it in an uncommon way. Because so many songs have been written and are still being written about the same topics, it is almost impossible to write a fresh presentation without a cinematic approach. There are many different ways to SHOW something, but very few ways to directly TELL it. Here's another example of two songs, written independently by two different writers, which both have exactly the same focus. Both songs are about values, and state precisely the same message, i.e., material wealth cannot substitute for the happiness provided by love. Yet the two lyrics have completely different cinema. One is set in the present and one is set in the 19th century. Each song features a male and female character, but their relationships and backgrounds quite different. The images and concrete references are appropriate to the respective settings

Down on Easy Street

by Les Julian

Down on Easy Street, we drink fine champagne wine
Honey, you bathe in milk and wear your silk and jewels that shine
Down on Easy Street we drive those fancy cars
I get business hunches over liquid lunches in classy bars
Down on Easy Street, there's nothing we can't buy or sell
But it's feeling like our little bit of Heaven's turned into
A little bit of Hell

Down on Easy Street, our hearts are running dry
Loving only things money can buy
Down on Easy Street we thought living was easy as pie
But it's so hard to hear a heart beat down on Easy Street...

Down on Easy Street I wear a three piece heart
I can mix and match if I have to act a part
Down on Easy Street you wear that fine mink stole
It keeps your shoulders warm but there's a storm down in your soul
Down on Easy Street there's nothing we can't have
But it's feeling like our little bit of Heaven's turned into
A little bit of Hell

Down on Easy Street, our hearts are running dry
Loving only things money can buy
Down on Easy Street we thought living was easy as pie
But it's so hard to hear a heart beat down on Easy Street...

Honey, lovin you is really all I need
Won't you come with me and see where love will lead...

Wrought Iron Ring

by Bill Pere

The hammer stopped at the top of the stroke
as the blacksmith looked up from the doorway
Where the young woman waited and watched and he started to say
"I'm glad you weren't hurt when your carriage wheel broke.
It won't take too long to repair..."
But like the jewels that she wore, her eyes were just fixed in a stare

The afternoon sun shone off the silk in her dress
and the silver she wore on her ears
He wondered if it might be the soot that was causing her tears
He followed her gaze through the swirls of the smoke
to the photograph up on the shelf
Her eyes asked the question her voice wouldn't ask by itself...

Who is that woman in the old photograph?
Though it's faded and cracked, you can still hear the laugh
In that face out of focus, a poor artist's potrait
An unsteady hand's rendering
But captured with clarity there on her finger, a wrought iron ring...

He said "I've forged all the links of a hundred strong chains,
My father thought me to make things that last,
But I've never been able to find this one link to my past...
That's a picture of the only woman my father loved,
He still would if he were living today,
But he was poor, she was rich, so her parents sent her away..."

He loved that woman and he made her that ring,
All he could offer was a poor blacksmith's life
Though he made her my mother, he never made her his wife...
She was made to marry a rich man that she didn't love
She was told 'Give it a chance fo awhile'
I know she found neither money nor time could buy her a smile"

Who is that woman in the old photograph?
Though it's faded and cracked, you can still hear the laugh
In that face out of focus, a poor artist's potrait
An unsteady hand's rendering
But captured with clarity there on her finger, a wrought iron ring...

"Your carriage is fixed, it works good as new"
Then he told her how much it would be
She said "That's quite fine, money doesn't matter to me..."
It's just something I have that doesn't mean much,
I can spend it just once, and it's gone..."

It's the dreams in your head and the love in your heart that live on..."

"That's the one thing in life that my mother taught me,
and I'm reminded of that every day
By the one special thing that she gave me before she passed away"
As she went through her purse, he tended the forge
It grew hot as the fire was fanned
Then he felt his blood running cold as she held out her hand...

Who is this woman that he'd never met
Who shimmered in shadow as his eyes became wet?
She was a face out of focus, a poor artist's potrait
An unsteady hand's rendering
But captured with clarity there on her finger, a wrought iron ring...

Thus, two different writers convey exactly the same message, in totally different ways, by using different elements of cinema. The images and objects mentioned are adjusted to fit the time and place depicted.

A final point for consideration is the topic of balancing universality and specifics. This sometimes confuses writers who are told to be specific and to also be universal. The key is to remember that universality applies to the focus, the main message of the song, while specificity applies to the vehicle, or method of conveying the message. Specificity means referring to specific object, people or places. It means providing clear answers to who, what, where, when, why and how. The opening lines of virtually any classic hit song directly address at least one of these things. "It's five o'clock on a Saturday" (Piano Man, by Billy Joel) sets time and place; "I am a lineman for the county (Witchita Lineman, by Jim Webb) tells us "who". This is what is meant by being specific in a lyric.

Being specific should not be confused with being too personal. To say "My girl from Tennessee walked out on me" is fine, because it sets up a situation, and "Tennessee" is a name familiar to almost everyone. Another way to say this exact same thing would be "She treated me rotten in Groton", however, this will not be a successful lyric (except if humorous) because it uses a reference that is too personal; Many Connecticut residents may be able to relate to "Groton", but most people in the country have never heard of it. If you use a non-universal reference, then you will have to use valuable additional lines to explain it, and those lines cannot then be used to move your story along.

In summary, the key to a successful lyric is to clearly define what you want to say (the focus) and how you want to say it (vehicle). The focus should be a specific, universal truth. The vehicle should employ a combination of setting, time frame, characters, and situation (all called "cinema") to allow a fresh presentation of the focus. Avoid "cosmic", philosophical ideas and vague references. Refer to concrete objects and places that people know and don't be

too personal and introspective. These few points will put you well on your way to effective lyric writing.

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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.

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