



- (c) if any verse is removed from the song, *it is not critical to the sense or success of the song in communicating the message.*
- (d) there is no required relationship in time between events described in one verse and those any other

## What is a Story Song?

A story song is one where:

- (a) The flow of the verses depicts a sequence of events which *in total* make the song's point. A single verse (or verse-chorus) is not enough by itself to stand alone and convey the message.
- (b) if any verse is removed from the song, something critical to the overall logic of the song is lost
- (c) the lyric addresses the six "W's" , **who, what, where, when , why, and how**
- (d) there is an explicit or implicit relationship in time between the events in the verses (i.e., verse #2 occurs 3 hours after verse #1)

It should be easy to tell the difference between lists and stories, and it should be very easy to write a "list" lyric, right? Well, let's take a look. Dan Fogelberg's "Longer" is clearly a list about the magnitude of his love. The only point of the song is "I love you a lot". All the lyrics just re-state that point using different metaphors e.g., *Longer than there are stars up in the heavens/ Higher than any bird ever flew/Deeper than any forest primeval ...* Sounds easy? We have to remember scope and semantic field. The metaphors are consistent with each other in that they are all about natural things like forests, stars, birds, fish, and oceans, and they are all about "big" things. It would not be appropriate to insert an item about the height of a skyscraper in a list of natural wonders, or an item about a grain of sand in a list of big things. Lists must be consistent.

Here is the chorus from "All God's Critters" by Bill Staines (an ABABABABAB folk song)

*All God's critters have a place in the choir  
Some sing low, some sing higher,  
Some sing out loud on a telephone wire  
Some just clap their hands or paws or anything they've got now...*

Now here are the five verses, all of which support the chorus, re-state the same message, have overall consistency, and can stand alone:

*Listen to the bass, it's the one on the bottom  
Where the bullfrogs croak and the hippopotamus  
Moans and groans with a big 'to-do'  
And the old cow just goes 'moo'...*

*Singin' in the nighttime, singin' in the day  
The little duck quacks, then he's on his way,  
And the 'possum, he ain't got much to say,  
And the porcupine talks to himself*

*Now the dogs and the cats, they take up the middle  
While the honeybee hums and the crickets fiddle  
And the donkey brays and the pony neighs  
And the old coyote howls*

*It's a simple song of livin' sung everywhere  
By the ox and the fox and the grizzly bear  
The grumpy alligator and the hawk above,  
The sly racoon and the turtle dove...*

*Listen to the top with the little birds singing  
On the melody with the high notes ringing  
And the hoot owl hollers over everything*

*And the jaybird disagrees*

What about Church Hymns? A quick look through a hymnal will show that most hymns are 3-5 verses all of which re-state the same message. Any single verse can stand alone, thus, hymns are list songs. Well known examples are "America the Beautiful", with verses extolling different virtues of our country, and "All Things Bright and Beautiful", about the natural world.

Another shape that a list song can take is that the first verse or the chorus can state the song's message in a general way and then all the following verses can serve as more specific, supporting examples. In this case, each verse can be internally consistent within itself in scope and semantic field, but not necessarily consistent from verse to verse. This is fine, as long as they state exactly the same message, and each serves as a specific supporting example of a more general case presented in the first verse or chorus.

There are yet other twists on lists... Let's look at the lyrics from Bill Joel's "Movin' Out":

*Anthony works in the grocery store saving his pennies for someday  
Mama Leone left a note on the door, she said "Sonny move out to the country"  
Working too hard can give you a heart attack, you ought to know by now,  
Who needs a house out in Hackensack? Is that all you get for your money?  
It seems such a waste of time, if that's what it's all about,  
If that's movin' up, then I'm movin' out.*

*Sargent O'Leary is walking the beat, at night he becomes a bartender  
He works at Mr. Cacciatore's down on Sullivan Street, across from the Medical Center  
He's trading in his Chevy for a Cadillac, you ought to know by now,  
If he can't drive with a broken back, at least he can polish the fender  
It seems such a waste of time, if that's what it's all about,  
If that's movin' up, then I'm movin' out.*

It's a pop/rock song with an (A-A) format. Is it story or list? Your first impulse might be to say it's a story, but if you look closely, verse one and verse two share no dependence on each other at all. They are both self-contained statements of the song's message. It is true that *within themselves*, they are short stories, but the overall song is a list of short stories.

Another example of a list of stories is "Garbage", recorded by Rosenshontz. Here, the message of the song, whose chorus consists primarily of the exclamation "Garbage!" is that the trash we generate, both physical and intellectual, is messing up the environment.

*Mr. Thompson calls the waiter, orders steak and baked potater  
Leaves the bone and gristle and he never eats the skin  
Then the bus boy comes and takes it, with a cough contaminates it  
Dumps it in a can with coffee grinds and sardine tins  
Then the truck comes by on Friday to haul it all away  
And a thousand trucks just like it are converging on the bay... (to chorus)*

*Mr. Thompson starts his Cadillac, winds it up the freeway track  
Leaving friends and neighbors in a hydrocarbon haze...  
He's joined by other cars, sending gasses to the stars*

*There to form a seeding cloud that hangs for thirty days  
And the sun looks down upon it with its ultraviolet tongue  
Turns to smog and settles down and ends up in our lungs... (to chorus)*

*Coming home, takes off his shoes, settles down for the evening news  
While the kids do homework with the TV in one ear  
While Superman for the thousandth time sells sexy dolls and conquers crime  
They dutifully learn the date of birth of Paul Revere  
In the paper there's a piece about the mayor's middle name,  
And he gets it read in time to watch the all-star Bingo game... (to chorus)*

Thus, we have three stories, with the same character (Mr. Thompson), yet all self-contained examples of a specific type of pollution, and not interdependent on each other (Mr. Thompson does not have to be in each verse for them to make sense). This is a list of examples in the form of stories.

Above, I stated that one should not mix list format and story format. That is not the same as using a list of stories. The rule is that either all the verses should be interdependent for time and context (a story) or none of the verses should be interdependent for time and context (a list). Problems with weak lyric construction arise when some verses are independent examples of something, and others in the same lyric bear a sequential dependence on one of the other verses. In that case, you are mixing the two formats, and what you really have is a redundant verse (one of the independent ones) or an illogical/inconsistent verse (one of the dependent ones). This is a major cause of confusing and unfocused lyrics but is often hard to bring out at a critique session because it may be difficult to detect and explain.

If we look at actual story-songs which are not lists, we have classic examples like "Coward of the County", "Taxi", "Big John", "Laurie", "Luka", "Leaving on a Jet Plane", "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald", and "Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Show" All are sequences of verses which together, weave a complete tail, and no single part can stand alone. Every verse interrelates to all the others, and no verse can be removed without losing a piece of logic. Good story songs tend to be more difficult to write than lists because of the required connections of time and logic and consistency across all parts of the lyric. For great examples of the story format, listen to the work of Harry Chapin.

Some songs are very subtle about whether they are lists or stories, but if you apply the tests listed above, you'll find that if well written, they are one type or the other. Pay particular attention to the importance or non-importance of time. In songs that try to describe a moment or a feeling, it is easy to do as a list by specifying characteristics of that moment (what do you see, how do you feel, etc.), but it is extremely difficult if not impossible to do as a story, because time isn't flowing.

To help you really think about it, look at your own songs, verse by verse. If they cannot easily be cast as a list or a story, then perhaps some re-writing may be in order.

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*Bill Pere was named one of the "Top 50 Innovators, Groundbreakers and Guiding Lights of the Music Industry" by Music Connection Magazine. With more than 30 years in the music business, as a recording artist, award winning songwriter, performer, and educator Bill is well known for his superbly crafted lyrics, with lasting impact. Bill has released 16 CD's , and is President of 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](http://www.lunchensemble.com)). Twice named Connecticut Songwriter of the Year, Bill is a qualified MBTI practitioner, a member of CMEA and MENC, and as Director of the Connecticut Songwriting Academy he helps develop young talent in songwriting, performing, and learning about the music business. Bill's song analyses and critiques are among the best in the industry.*