

SONGCRAFTERS COLORING BOOK

by *Bill Pere*

Twists On Lists

Critique sessions are very popular these days, and at any given session, we speak a great deal about song form. Songs have parts called verses, choruses, bridges, tags, climbs and we can represent the order of these in a song by using letters to represent the different parts. Thus a song might be of the form A-B-A-B (verse-chorus-verse-chorus), A-B-A-B-C-B, (verse-chorus,verse-chorus-bridge-chorus), A-A-A (verse-verse-verse), or many other variations. We also speak a great deal about song genre or type. We refer to a song as a country tune, ballad, pop, folk, rock, protest song, church hymn, rap, blues, torch song, show tune, etc. What we do not speak about often enough is song format. There are two primary song formats: lists and stories. A song of any form (ABAB) or of any genre (country, rock) can be either a list or a story. Writers often run into trouble when operating in the border land between the two, because they should not mix. There are clear guidelines for successful lists and story formats, and we will now take a look a look at those.

What is a List Song?

A list song is one where:

- (a) the main point of the song (the focus) is stated completely in a single verse (or verse-chorus combination) i.e., any verse (or verse-chorus) could stand on its own as a complete unit.
- (b) each subsequent verse *re-states the same point in a distinctly different way*
- (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 to 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). Thi 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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