

# SONGCRAFTERS COLORING BOOK

## The Metric System...For Songwriters

by Bill Pere

One of the most important but most often overlooked aspects of lyric crafting is metrics. Metrics deals with the patterns and alignments of syllables and accents in a lyric, and their overall alignment with the musical rhythm. It is this latter element which differentiates song lyrics from poetry. Poetry does not have to contend with aligning accents to an independently moving rhythmic entity, and in that respect, a song lyricist is working under a more complex set of constraints than a poet.

There are three distinct elements to consider when shaping the meter of a lyric, and this fact is sometimes simplified by writers and publishers by reducing metrics to an exercise of counting syllables, believing that if the number of syllables of equivalent lines in all the verses matches, then the meter is correct. This is quite untrue, and we will now examine in detail the reasons why.

What is a lyric? It is the expression of a well-focused idea or concept using clear but colorful language. The key word here is language. Language is the medium through which most communication occurs. If the music were totally removed from a lyric and it were simply read, the meaning should still be clear to the listener. This is absolutely the prime consideration in crafting any lyric, for if the meaning is unclear, then no amount of perfection in the meter or anything else is going to make it a good lyric. However, if you've carefully chosen your words to effectively express your idea, then you must turn your attention to the meter, which will either enhance or diminish the impact of your words. Language, when normally spoken, has a distinct pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, called *arses* and *theses*, the combination of which is called a *cadence*. For example, in English, the majority of multisyllabic words have the accent on the first syllable, whereas in some other languages, like Italian, the second syllable is more often accented. Each language has a natural rhythm inherent to it. The process of fitting words to music introduces a new rhythmic element. If the music's rhythm forces the natural rhythm of the language to deviate from its normal spoken cadence, then an awkward, unnatural feeling is created and the meaning gets lost as the listener must work extra hard to compensate for the unexpected sounds. Fitting language to music and retaining a natural cadence involves blending three things:

1] **The Syllable Accent**, or where the accent occurs in a given word. For example, in the word 'happily' the accent is on the first syllable, thus the word has an rhythmic pattern of LOUD-soft-soft (this pattern is called a 'dactyl'). An accent forced to fall on the wrong syllable of a word is called a wrenched accent, and usually stands out negatively in a lyric (unless you want to be humorous). A wrenched

accent may be sufficient cause for a publisher to pass on what might otherwise be a good song, until the offending line is rewritten.

2] The **Rhetorical Accent**, or which words in a sentence are accented.

For example, in the sentence "He didn't drink his beer today", if you just read it in a normal fashion, you would probably tend to put a stress on the words "didn't" and "beer". Now try reading the sentence several times with the stresses on different words:

.break

.nofill

- a. HE didn't drink his beer today.
- b. He DIDN'T drink his beer today.
- c. He didn't DRINK his beer today.
- d. He didn't drink HIS beer today.
- e. He didn't drink his BEER today.
- f. He didn't drink his beer TODAY.

Notice that though it is the same sentence, the meaning is different each time as the accent shifts, and it greatly affects what you expect to hear as a followup sentence. In example (a) above, it is implied that the important aspect of the sentence is the idea that somebody did in fact drink some specific beer, but it wasn't 'him'. Example (c) suggests that he did do something with his beer today, other than drink it. Example (d) tells us that he probably did drink beer today, but it was somebody else's, not his. Thus you can see how immensely important the rhetorical accent is in a lyric. Having the accent fall on the wrong word can totally alter your meaning.

3] The **Musical Accent**, or which of the musical beats are emphasized.

Musical rhythm is an essential element of a song, and is usually the dominant factor in pulling the listener's sense of forward motion along through time. Note that this does not mean only the rhythm of the drums. The melody to which the lyrics are being sung has an inherent rhythm, which, because it is carrying the lyric, is as important as the percussive rhythm. Every song has a basic pulse or 'time base', which is usually a quarter note, and which serves as the basic unit for counting 'beats'. Each pulse may be divided into two or three sub-units, which in turn may be divided into quicker groups of two or three. It is these subdivisions that give the song its 'feel' and it is the loudness of some subdivisions relative to others that determines the musical accents. If all accents fall on the first subdivisions of each pulse, then you have a regular, steady rhythm. If they fall on a second (or third) subdivision, then you have syncopation.

To preserve the meaning and effectiveness of your lyric, you must be absolutely sure that the syllable accent AND the rhetorical accent AND the musical accent are ALL aligned on the same beats in the song, and it must be consistent from verse to verse. This is one of the primary skills of a song crafter.

Now where does syllable counting fit in? As stated above, a common error about metrics is the belief that equal numbers of syllables in equivalent lines means perfect meter. This may be true in certain poetry forms, but the problem with this in song lyrics is that it does not in any way insure that the three types of accents will be properly lined up. Let's look at some examples. Consider these two lines as if they were the first line of verse#1 and the first line of verse#2:

- Verse 1) Sitting on a rotten stump...
- Verse 2) Umbrellas fall and make a thump...

If you just read them, they seem to flow naturally, with no misplaced accents. However, in counting syllables, we find that the first line has 7 syllables, and the second line has 8. Now suppose we adjust the second line to have 7 syllables, as the first line does. We could have:

- Verse 1) Sitting on a rotten stump...
- Verse 2) Umbrellas fall and go thump...

Now both lines have the same number of syllables, but something sounds wrong with the flow of the words. The only way to really understand what's happening is to take a look at the alignment of accents. First, let's forget about any music, and look at the syllable and rhetorical accents for this second version. Normal speech would give us:

SIT ting ON a ROT ten STUMP  
um BREL las FALL and GO THUMP

From this, it is clear that the problem is caused by the fact that there are SIX non-matching accents. Thus, even though the syllable counts match up, the meter is way off, and it is a poor lyric. Musically, since these are equivalent lines, one being the first line of verse#1, and the other being the first line of verse#2, it would mean either that these two lines would have to be sung to the same music, which would make one of them have three wrenched accents or they would have to be sung to rhythmically different music, which is not done on equivalent lines of verses. Clearly, this is a hopeless situation.

Why then does the original example, with 7 syllables in the first line and 8 in the second line work? Let's look at the alignment of the syllable, rhetorical, and musical accents:

4 + 1 + 2 + 3 + 4  
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SIT ting ON a ROT ten STUMP  
um BREL las FALL and MAKE a THUMP

The reason that the different syllable counts work properly is that the extra

syllable in the second line is shifted to occur one subdivision before the down beat. This is called an 'anacrusis'. Shifting syllables to occur before the down beat is one common technique for bringing accents into alignment when the syllable count does not match. Here, all the natural language accents match up with the 'beats', i.e., the first division of each group of two. If any of the accented words or syllables fell on one of the second subdivisions, (the '+' sign), this would create a syncopation. Putting a musical accent on a normally unaccented pulse is a very effective musical tool, provided it does not cause conflict with the lyrical meter.

While anacrusis is extremely common in song lyrics, there is a potential drawback. On a lead sheet, where the lyrics are aligned with the music, one can 'see' an anacrusis, but on a lyric sheet, the anacrusis is not readily visible, and it becomes easy for the reader of the lyric sheet to begin reading the line with the wrong accents, creating the impression that the lyric is awkward. This becomes particularly important if you are submitting a lyric sheet to a lyric competition or for a lyric analysis. One way to remove this problem is to actually align the downbeats when you type a lyric sheet so that any anacrusis is offset to the left. This helps clarify the metrical structure of your lyrics, but if you have too many anacrusis, then the lyric sheet might start to look messy. You'll have to find a point of balance.

There is yet another variation of the 'lyric sheet' problem. Let's look at some lines from the international hit "Who Will Answer?" (Sunbury Music, Inc, ASCAP) written by Sheila Davis, author of "The Craft of Lyric Writing".

### Syllables

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#### (VERSE A)

From the canyons of the mind (7)  
We wander on and stumble blindly (9)  
Through the often tangled maze (7)  
Of Starless nights and sunless days... (8)

#### (VERSE B)

Side by side two people stand (7)  
Together vowing hand in hand (8)  
That love's embedded in their hearts (8)  
But soon an empty feeling starts...(8)

As you can see, the syllable counts for lines 2 and 3 do not match between the two verses. Does this mean we have a poorly crafted lyric and we should throw out this international hit? Of course not. If you line the words up according to accents, everything matches perfectly; syllable, rhetorical, and musical. When written as just lyrics, without musical measures, there is no way to see that the 'ly' of the word 'blindly' is really the first syllable of the third line, and not the last syllable of the second line (in fact, there is a two-syllable rhyme, i.e., 'mind we' with 'blindly'). In writing just a lyric sheet, you can't very well start a line with "-ly". You can help this situation by spacing out the lyrics a bit to help align the rhymes and

matching accents wherever possible, as shown in the above example, (this is analogous to proportional spacing, which is used by typesetters or computers to align individual letters). Again, you must balance it with the overall appearance of the lyric sheet. Note that in just reading the lyrics from "Who Will Answer?", they tend to flow well, unlike the situation we discussed when an anacrusis is read with a wrong accent. There is a clear difference of which you should be aware.

There are two general types of lyrics, *end-stopped*, and *non end-stopped*.

End-stopped lyrics use the technique of enjambment which means that each individual line has a meaning complete unto itself, and can stand alone as a thought, i.e., they are 'stopped' at the end. Non-end-stopped lyrics carry a single thought through more than one line (they are not 'stopped' at the end) and thus an individual line does not stand alone as a meaningful unit. Because in normal speech, we tend to pause between one complete thought and another, while we do not pause in the middle of a thought, end-stopped lyrics usually have a few musical beats between the end of one line and the start of the next, and it is here that anacrusis will be inserted. Non-end-stopped lyrics, as are used in the verses of "Who Will Answer?" tend to have less 'open' space between lines and thus the connection of a line with the previous line becomes a focal point in determining accent alignment and syllabication. While it is certainly possible to have a few beats of rests between the lines of a non end-stopped lyric, it essential that they don't cause the continued thought to become disjointed.

Being mindful of the distinction between lyric lines that do and do not use enjambment can help you better analyze your own lyrics, those of other writers, and to design lyric sheets that will cause the least amount of confusion for the reader.

Of course, the best solution is to try to see if you can design the lyric to have matching syllable counts as well as matching accents, but that is an extremely difficult task if the lyric has any degree of complexity to it and if words of more than two syllables appear frequently. Words of three or more syllables will have accent patterns which tend to force the rest of the line to work around them. There is nothing wrong with this and in fact, effective use of longer words makes very colorful lyrics, but it means you have to work harder to make them fit. (For an excellent example of finely crafted lyrics using multisyllables and complex accents patterns, listen to "Ironbound" by Suzanne Vega). Continuing with our 'umbrella' example, there are two approaches to adjusting the syllable count: remove a syllable from the second line, or add a syllable to the first line. This could give us:

1 + 2 + 3 + 4

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SIT ting ON a ROT ten STUMP  
 SOME um BREL las FALL and THUMP

or

+ 1 + 2 + 3 + 4

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while SIT ting ON a ROT ten STUMP

um BREL las FALL and MAKE a THUMP

These are now perfect in syllable count and accent alignment, but do they subtly alter what you want to say, or are they still true to your intended meaning? That is for you decide on a case-by-case basis, remembering that the effective expression of your meaning is the primary consideration, followed closely by accent alignment as the next consideration. Syllable count is at best, third on the priority list.

An examination of many classic hit songs shows endless examples of corresponding lines in verses with differing numbers of syllables. Some examples would be "The Gambler", "The Rose", "Summertime", "You Light Up My Life", and many more. However, in all cases where the syllables don't match, the accents are in fact perfectly aligned. One must always be careful in citing examples from hit songs. All rules have exceptions, and it is important to make sure that you are not citing exceptions to the rule, instead of the rule itself. For example, there are hit songs which have wrenched accents. Two famous examples are "You Are the Sunshine of My Life" by Stevie Wonder, i.e.,

(verse1) Though I've LOVED you f or a MIL-lion YEARS  
(verse2) Be cause you CAME to MY res- CUE

And a couplet from 'Sounds of Silence', by Paul Simon. i.e.,

Be CAUSE a VIS- ion soft-LY creep-ING  
LEFT its SEEDS while i WAS sleep-ING

This does not mean it's okay to use wrenched accents. A new writer who is trying to land a first contract or establish a track record cannot afford to take the liberties that an established writer like Stevie Wonder or Paul Simon can, without increasing the risk of rejection. And even in the two examples cited here, there is a significant difference. In the "Sounds of Silence", the wrenched accents are there because of a musical syncopation, and the two lines have matching wrenched accents, thus it was clearly a conscious decision on the part of the writer, and not a matter of lazy lyric writing. In the Stevie Wonder example, there is no musical or lyrical reason for putting the accent in the wrong place on the word 'rescue'. The line could have been reworked.

There is yet another significant consideration in the area of lyrical metrics, and that will be addressed in the next Coloring Book article as we look at "White Space...the Final Frontier".

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