



The concepts discussed in this article are a part of the comprehensive analysis of songwriting presented in the complete book "Songcrafters' Coloring Book: The Essential Guide to Effective and Successful Songwriting", by Bill Pere. For additional information or to order a copy, visit <http://www.songcrafterscoloringbook.com>

SONGCRAFTERS COLORING BOOK by Bill Pere

Snips, Snails, and Puppy Dog's Tails

That, as the nursery rhyme goes, is what little boys are made of. But what is a song made of? In order to make informed choices and fine-tune your songs, it is essential to understand the basic elements.

A parameter is a factor which can have settings or values which can vary over time, or which can remain constant. A song (or painting, novel, film, etc) is the sum total of the settings of its parameters. All art forms have their own set of parameters, but all art forms apply those parameters toward a common end – connection and communication with an audience to share emotions and ideas.

Consider a painting -- unlike a song, a painting does not involve the dimension of time. All of its parameters, once 'set' remain constant. Some parameters in a painting include hue (color), value (intensity), texture, outline definition, subject matter, perspective, type of media. Note that styles (abstract, realist, surreal, cubist, impressionist) are not parameters. They are the *result* of particular combinations of other factors. A single subject can be rendered in many different styles, depending on how other factors are treated.

In a novel, some parameters would be: characterization, time flow (linear, flashback), scope (does it cover hours, years, generations?), point of view ("me/you", "he/she"), subject matter, pacing, tone, setting (time and place). As in the case of a painting, the 'style' is the *result* of the combined values of all the other factors. A gothic horror novel and a Western could be written with similar styles (characterization, time flow, point of view all equal),

but differences in the subject matter and setting would result in very different end products. Conversely, two novels could have similar settings (both 1890's Westerns) but differences in the other parameters could turn one into a comedy and one into a horror tale.

A song is a very complex art form because it typically entails *two* complete entities, music and language, and they must be soul-mates of each other. Each of these have their own set of parameters, all moving in time, thus interacting at yet a higher level of complexity. As in the above examples, musical *styles* like jazz, folk, country, hip-hop, or blues result from particular combinations of parameter settings.

The number of factors to be considered in a song is formidable (See "*Anatomy of a Song*" Chapter 1). Think of them as your options for making choices. Many writers tend to work instinctively, not really viewing the elements of a song as discrete factors to be set by conscious choice. You may in fact freely choose how to set each of these variables, but to do so, you must know what the possible settings are, and the result of making a particular selection.

Song parameters can be divided into three broad groups:

- 1)- **Lyric factors**
- 2)- **Music factors**
- 3)- **Whole song factors**

The three broad categories of lyric parameters are:

- **Semantic elements** (relating to meaning)
- **Prosodic elements** (relating to rhythm/cadence of words and phrases)
- **Sonic/Phonetic elements** (relating to the sound and structure of the words)

The individual factors in each category above will be all be discussed in detail later on. For now, consider that semantic elements are prominent when a song is about something of depth and importance, and the phonetic elements play the key role when a song is a simple expression of feeling or emotion without attempting to convey a more complex message.

Music parameters include:

- **Melody** (the musical distance between successive pitches)
- **Harmony** (the musical distance between pitches at the *same* point in time)
- **Rhythm** (the division of time into discrete units)
- **Dynamics** (volume variation, or amplitude)
- **Timbre** (tonal color, as determined by the overall shape of the sound wave, or waveform)

These are the five primary music factors. There are some others, but these five are the big guns. Do not confuse actual parameters with the *result* of particular parameter value combinations. For example, 'swing' is not a parameter. It is the result of a particular treatment of rhythm. 'Accent' is a result of dynamics. 'Tempo' is a function of the time-divisions of rhythm. 'Key' and 'Range' are functions of melody. 'Voicing' is a treatment of harmony. 'Tremolo' is a varying of dynamics (volume) and 'vibrato' is a variation of pitch. All of these things ultimately contribute to a musical feel or style.

Consider the effects of adjusting these musical parameters like faders on a mixing board. If one or more factors are left to be totally random, (which you are free to choose to do), the result is what we know as *aleatory music*, a style championed by composer John Cage, who sometimes left almost everything to chance. We see some of this in jazz improvisation, where the music is what's created in the moment. An improvised solo may never be played exactly the same way again.

In these music styles, a choice has been made to allow random things to happen. Contemporary bands which call themselves "Jam Bands", or "Freestyle" bands choose to allow randomness to become part of the music, and they choose to create music which is ephemeral (i.e. never played the same way again). The New Jersey-based Jam Band *Elament* performs with their backs to each other so that they can't cue off of anything other than the musical groove in real time -- a conscious choice.

The opposite end of the spectrum would be music where one or more factors are carefully pre-determined according to certain rules or equations. This is a very cerebral type of music as shown by the work of Milton Babbitt. An approach to very calculated music parameter settings is to concentrate heavily on only one, eliminating others*. There is a school of composers whose music is primarily that of changing color (timbre); no melody, harmony or rhythm to speak of. Some composers deal in the extreme with melody, in the manner of Arnold Schoenberg, where the overriding factor in a piece is the *order* of the 12 notes in a chromatic scale. These atonal works, sometimes called *tone poems*, try to set the melodic/harmonic element of key, or tonal center, to zero.

Any time a music parameter is set to an extreme, the result is going to be something that is far out of the mainstream, and difficult for most to listen to and appreciate. There will however, always be a niche which appreciates the experimentation. As composer Brian Eno once said "*Avant-garde music is sort of research music. You're glad someone's done it but you don't necessarily want to listen to it.*"

If you are the type of creative person who likes to explore the boundaries of music, push the envelope and try radically different things, one of the EWO choices you'll have to make is the balance between fulfilling your desire to experiment, and the smaller audience size that goes with experimental styles. It's not a matter of right or wrong, just your conscious choice.

If your songwriting objective is to write something with a broad appeal, you probably don't want any particular parameter to be extreme, but you would want to fine-tune each one to contribute optimally to the whole.

** We don't actually "eliminate" a parameter. We make a choice to set it to zero, so it is not present in the overall result. It's like pulling a fader on a mixing board all the way down. The track controlled by the fader is still there, but no longer in the mix. Its absence is a conscious decision. Consider Hip-Hop, or any type of rap, where there is essentially no melody (it is set to zero by choice). The musical emphasis is on rhythm and timbre, and the lyric has a high sonic activity setting (discussed later). Some music consumers say that rap is not really music because there is no melody to sing. The melody parameter is there, consciously set to zero, in favor of emphasizing rhythmic and phonetic elements. That may produce a result which does not appeal to people who want to hear a melody, but it's not accurate to say it isn't music or song.*

Because of the complexities of language, lyric parameters are quite numerous, which is why a truly good lyricist is the most rare and valuable commodity in the songwriting world.

Some examples of lyric parameters are foot/meter (the rhythm or cadence of the words); white space (the empty space between words); rhyme scheme; conceit (an implied, unifying metaphor); and various language devices, both semantic (dealing with meaning) and phonetic (dealing with sound). These include simile, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, chiasmus, oxymoron, etc.. All these elements are discussed in detail in later chapters.

There are some musical and lyrical elements which affect the song as a whole. Whole song parameters include: Subject matter (focus); point of view ("I/you" vs. "he/she"); tone (serious, satirical, preachy, humorous); time flow (How does time progress in the song? What is its scope?); format (story-song or list-song); prosody (the interaction of the lyrical cadence and the musical accents); structure (verse-chorus-bridge); and marriage (the meshing of the mood / feel of the music and mood of the lyrics); The sum of all the musical and lyrical factors combine to give us 'style', 'genre', 'feel', 'mood', 'groove', etc.

Many parameters interact with one or more others to produce particular results. For example, if the subject matter (focus) of a song is 'the happiest day of my life', then you would probably not use minor harmony (this is why focus is a whole-song parameter, rather than just a lyric factor). However, if the *tone* of the lyrics was satirical or humorous then you very well might use minor harmony to emphasize this point.

If all of this sounds complex, it is. That's why it's so important to remember the Olympian, never surrendering, always striving for the Perfect 10, even though it's difficult to achieve. There is tremendous allure to following the path of least resistance, saying, with great pomp and certainty, "I'll just write what I feel , however it comes out, and be true to myself". Unfortunately, this is often a mask for surrendering to the effort it takes to wield the tools of the songcrafter.

What does it take to really be "good" at songwriting? In his book "This is Your Brain on Music" (pages 190-195), Daniel Levitin describes studies at several universities which examine how one develops an expert level of ability in music or any other activity (chess, sports, writing). The essential finding is that it takes about *10,000 hours of practice* to achieve world-class expertise in *anything*. That is essentially twenty hours a week over ten years. And it is important that one genuinely *cares* about what is being practiced. One can be born with great natural talent, but expertise as a craftsperson comes with the price tag

of work and patience. Further, one must not confuse practicing the skills of *performance* (stagecraft) and *production* (studiocraft) with those of *songwriting* (songcraft). They are completely different (yet equally artistic) endeavors.

The intricate nature of song parameters makes clear why a good song is such a treasure, and so often takes a great deal of skilled craftsmanship. Frequently, we work in the dark, not realizing what parameter setting is 'off' and how we need to adjust it to make it better. A common method of doing this is to solicit feedback, rewrite, solicit more feedback, and keep doing this until the majority of unbiased listeners 'like' the song. In this way, you can get the song to 'work' but you may not ever know exactly why. Thus, you may not be able to replicate your success in the future, or avoid repeatedly making the same missteps in subsequent songs.

Taking the time to learn about song parameters allows you to make better use of the feedback you get. If people tell you the lyric 'doesn't work' for them, you could then analyze each parameter of your lyric and see if the rhyme scheme is off, or the meter, or if you have a mixed metaphor i.e., a metaphor about apples in a song full of oranges. Maybe someone will say the 'rhythm doesn't feel right.' Only by analyzing it would you see that perhaps your music is in a duple meter while your lyrics are in a triple meter. If you understand these factors, you will know how to correct the problem. Remember, the average listener does not know all the technical vocabulary and can usually only indicate that 'something isn't right'. It is up to you to develop the skills to analyze the song and identify the specific problem.

I cannot over-emphasize the usefulness of learning to view things as being made up of parameters. It's like donning a special pair of glasses that allows you to see music, art, or most anything in a new way, with a new understanding. But most importantly it clarifies for you what your choices are, what will result from those choices, and puts you in control of your creative output with your Eyes-Wide-Open.

(For related information and a visual representation of song parameters, see the “Anatomy of a Song” chart)

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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). 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.

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