



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>

SONGSCRAFTERS COLORING BOOK by Bill Pere

Sonic Activity -Making Your Songs Radio-Active

Definitions: Each place in a song where there is some phonetic entity to grab your ear is called a "**ping-point**". The sum total of all the ping-points in a song make up its "**sonic activity**". The higher the sonic activity of a song, the more it holds attention and etches itself into the listener's memory.

Identifying and Creating Ping-Points.

The semantic parameters in a lyric have to do with the meaning of the words and conveying your message. Although clarity is a major element of effective and successful songwriting, we all know songs where the lyrics are obscure in their meaning, or have no significant message, yet still tend to "work" on some level. This is usually due to sonic activity – the structural and phonetic properties of words which are completely independent of their meaning. *(NOTE: This does not mean you should use sonic activity as a substitute for clarity of meaning - both together make for an unbeatable combination and both are needed for that Perfect 10).*

Think of certain moments in your life that were fleeting, perhaps just a second or two, yet they generated a feeling that you remember to this day. Some of these might be: the moment you first set eyes on the person who was destined to be "the one" in your life; the

Christmas morning as a child when you saw that present under the tree that you thought you'd never get; the instant you had your first Spiritual connection with something greater than yourself; the first moment you set eyes on something of incredible beauty like the Grand Canyon or the childlike wonder of Disneyworld.

To this day, I recall the moments as a child when I'd walk into the corner Mom and Pop candy shop after school and see the first issues of the Amazing Spider-Man, the Fantastic Four, the Justice League, and all those great comic books for the first time.

The moments were fleeting but the impressions were deep and lasting. That's the same idea with a ping-point in a song. How many moments can you recall when, hearing a song for the first time, something in that song made you just tingle and feel an inner "wow"? I recall with total clarity, sitting in the audience at Broadway shows. At "1776", hearing the intricate sonic dance of "Cool Cool Considerate Men", and so many of the other great numbers, feeling a chill each time, and remembering those key phrases long after the show was over. The cross-verse rhyming in "At the End of the Day" in "Les Miserables" was lyrical electricity. As a young kid, I was absolutely spellbound by the phonetic frenzy of the lyrics from Tandy Almer's "Along Comes Mary".

In the musical "Wicked" the delightful freshness of the assonance and rhyme of "frank analysis"/"personality dialysis", and the semantic pivot of "I don't know if I've been changed for the better, but since I met you, I have been changed for good" hit with the high-voltage that etches the moment into memory.

I vividly recall the first time I heard "A Whole New World" (from "Aladdin"), how the "splendid" and "when did" pair just jumped right out. And the indelible first line of "Higher Than She's Ever Been Before" by Jim Morgan, "Pretty Patty Peterson from Patterson New Jersey..." And one of my all-time favorites from the Lee Adams lyrics in "Put on a Happy Face", from the musical "Bye Bye Birdie":

*Take off that gloomy mask of **tragedy**, It's not your style.
You'll look so good that you'll be **glad ya de-cided** to smile!*

These are the bits of songwriting magic that keep a listener spellbound. They go way beyond the simplicity of a rhyming dictionary (no rhyming dictionary will show you "glad-ya-de-" as an option for rhyming with "tragedy"). These sonic gems come not just from the meaning of the words, but from the physical sound of the words – their phonetic properties. The phonetic properties of words are distinct from their semantic properties. How they sound is generally independent of what they mean (except for onomatopoeia). Obviously, when semantic AND sonic properties are both working at the same time, you're well on your way to that Perfect 10.

If it's not your natural instinct to hear and generate the specific types of things discussed below, then practice listening to lyrics and picking out the ping-points. Then imitate.

Your Phonetic Crayons:

There are several phonetic properties which contribute to overall sonic activity, but the big guns are rhyme, assonance, alliteration, para rhyme, and sonic reversal.

Rhyme = words or accented syllables where only the initial sound differs (i.e. the internal vowel and final consonants of the accented syllable are identical)
(over/clover; coming/strumming; reusing/refusing;)

Assonance = words or accented syllables with identical vowel sound but different consonant sounds preceding and following. (sign/time; gave/name). Sometimes referred to as near-rhyme, assonance is an adjunct to, but not a substitute for, a perfect rhyme.

Alliteration = words or syllables with the same initial sound. (big/bear; choose/champ; strong/street, inflate/reflect)

Para-rhyme = same initial and final consonants with a different vowel sound in between (seem/same; tripping/trapping)

Sonic reversal (a subset of palindromes) = the same sound given in reverse. (lever/revel, lap/pal, stop/pots, car/rock . This differs from palindromes which only need to *look* the same backwards and forwards, not necessarily have the same sounds, e.g. lane/elan , or the word "racecar".

In addition to these primary tools, you have *lexical repetition* and *Klang association*, both discussed below, to add even more zing to your songs. If you master these elements in all their forms and variations, you'll be producing lyrics that really grab attention and stick in people's ears.

Although I write primarily for impact though meaning, I usually try to make the sonic activity equally as important. Here's an example of a high level of sonic activity I worked on in one of my Christmas songs. In the five line chorus of this Christmas song, the key word, "ornament" is permuted seven times, within other words and across multiple words, while maintaining even cadence and semantic sense.

Ornament (words and music by Bill Pere)

Ornament , a child was born, it meant	<i>a -- a</i>
No more lament in the world tonight	<i>a -- b</i>
In the morn it meant for the poor was sent	<i>a -- a</i>
A new wonderment with the star's ascent	<i>a -- a</i>
Sound the horn, present the good news	<i>a -- c</i>

Exercise: Identifying Ping-Points

It is no coincidence that so many of the made-up, iconic names in our pop culture have high sonic activity: Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Betty Boop, Porky Pig, Roger Rabbit, Clark Kent, Lois Lane, Lex Luthor, Peter Parker, J. Jonah Jameson, Wonder Woman, Hulk Hogan, Gorgeous George, Captain Kirk, Andy Panda, Blue Blazer, Silk Spectre, Hunter Hearst Helmsley, Chubby Checker, Big Bopper, Deputy Dawg, Quick-Draw McGraw, Hannah Montana, and many more.

Lexical Repetition and Combinations

Along with the five primary sonic crayons mentioned above, there is also the technique of lexical repetition. This is the use of the same words in equivalent places in lines, e.g., starting or ending lines with the same word or phrase. In the above example from *"If My Mary Were Here"*, lexical repetition is combined with rhyme and alliteration to give the very strong combination of "place to hide" and "place for pride". Dan Fogelberg's *"Longer"* uses it as each line changes the first syllable, but the second and third syllables are always "-er than" (longer than, higher than, deeper than). And the verses each end with the same phrase "in love with you".

In the Frank Sinatra hit *"It Was a Very Good Year"*, written by Ervin Drake, the first three verses each start off with "When I was...", and the second and third lines of each verse are "It was a very good year". The line is again repeated as the last line of verse four. Lots of lexical repetition in this song of AAAA form, which anchors the concrete picture being unfolded of a person's lifetime of living and loving.

Much of the memorable "stickiness" and appeal of Bob Dylan's lyrics lies in their sonic activity beyond the rhyme scheme. Among Dylan's songs, look at *"Like a Rolling Stone"* as an example.

I often use this repeated sound technique in many of my songs. An example from the chorus of *"Another Touch of Gray"* (follow the vowel and consonant sounds separately):

*Just in that moment she made me feel like a kid again
Days of new blue jeans, summer scenes, ice cream every day
Whatever anyone called fun, you know I did it then
But jeans and dreams and the scenes, it seems, like ice cream, fade away*

When I was writing my *"High School My School"* collection of songs, I was beginning to work on a song about being picked on and bullied at school. Once I thought of the key word "taunted", the following phrases wrote themselves, from the related sonic elements.

*Taunted, run a gauntlet down an endless hall
Haunted, relentless echoes of the names they call...*

The high sonic activity is a result of lots of practice in developing sensitivity to the sound of words, so that it becomes automatic. What we have in two short lines are: two rhyme pairs, alliteration (haunted/hall), assonance (aunted/auntlet/all) (en/es/ech) (name/they), and para rhyme (down/n an/ n en)

Taunted, run a gauntlet down an endless hall
Haunted, relentless echoes of the names they call..

The sonic crayons, though each powerful alone, become ever more potent when use in combinations with multiple repetitions. In the previously mentioned example from the song "Popular" in the musical "Wicked", the phrase "frank analysis" not only rhymes with "personality dialysis", but there is also sonic repetition within each pair and across pairs: frANK ANALysis -- and -- anALYsis / personALity / diALYsis.

The take-away message: Phonetic techniques used in repeated combinations have a greatly multiplied effect as opposed to when they are used alone! However, no matter how well used, assonance, alliteration, para-rhyme and lexical repetition cannot substitute for the impact and stickiness of a good perfect rhyme.

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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 analysis and critiques are among the best in the industry.

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