

SONGCRAFTERS COLORING BOOK

by *Bill Pere*

More on Meter, White Space and Ornyms

In previous articles we have discussed how meter, ambiguity, accents and white space can ruin an otherwise good lyric. It is not too difficult to see how an accent on the wrong syllable of a word can make a line sound awkward. (She's buy-ING the stair-WAY to hea-VEN just never would have made it if it were sung like that). But it is a more subtle (and equally devastating) effect when the accents are on the right *syllable*, but the wrong *word* is accented. The other subtle villain in a lyric is the white space...the open space between the words. Since it's empty, it's easy to overlook its importance, but it can kill a good line as well as any poison can. Let's look at these hidden bugs.

More Stress in Your Life...

In virtually any sentence we speak, there are some words which are spoken with more emphasis than others. The thing that determines this is called the principle of *contrastive stress*. Now you may not want to deal with any more stress in your life, but if you write lyrics, you need to deal with this kind. Contrastive stress means that we tend to emphasize the word in a sentence *to which there is an alternative*. Look at the sentence: "He was a fan of the New York **GIANTS**".

With the stress on "Giants", what the sentence says is: "He was a fan of the New York Giants *as opposed to* the New York Mets or the New York Jets or the New York Yankees, etc." There are many New York teams as alternatives to the Giants, so that word is stressed. Now look what happens if the stress is moved: "He was a fan of the **NEW YORK** Giants". Now, the same sentence means something different. It means "He was a fan of the New York Giants *as opposed to* the San Francisco Giants". Now, the alternative is a matter of *which* Giants. Still another meaning is conveyed by "He **WAS** a fan of the New York Giants". This clearly implies that he used to be a fan of the New York Giants, but may not be one now. Finally moving the stress to say "**HE** was a fan of the New York Giants" points to the alternative of some else also being a fan of the same team.

When we speak, this is an instinctive part of our communication skill. When the elements of music and rhythm are introduced, it is not difficult to see how a word which is normally unstressed can get an accent, if it gets aligned with an accent in the music or rhythmic groove. Thus, a primary skill of the songwriter must be to make sure that the meaning of a lyric is not altered because of the way it is aligned with the music. A classic example:

1. **WHAT** is this thing called love? (as opposed to *Who* is it or *Where* is it...)
2. What **IS** this thing called love? (as opposed to what things is it *not* ?)
3. What is **THIS** thing called? Love? (as opposed to what is some *other* thing, which is also called love)
4. What is this **THING** called love? (as opposed to a *feeling* or a *philosophy* or a *dog* called love)
5. What is this thing **CALLED**, love? (as opposed to wanting some other piece of information about the thing,

as you address your partner with a term of endearment)

6. What is this thing called? **LOVE**? (as opposed to this thing being called by some other name)

To fully understand the importance of this principle and how powerful the effect is, take each of the above six lines, and make up a conversation with a few lines before and after the line in question, so that the given stress makes sense in that conversation. You'll find that you have six distinctly different conversations.

White Space Revisited

While errors in contrastive stress can be pinpointed with a little attention to detail, errors in white

space hide with great camouflage in songs. and can be very difficult for writers to identify in their lyrics. Simply stated, white space is the small pause between to words. In normal speech, we deal with this instinctively, using longer or shorter pauses to make our words flow normally and to keep our meanings clear. Music however, introduces a great deal of unnatural constraints on lyrics. If there are three notes to be sung, one of three things can happen: (a) - they are all equally spaced -- ♪♪♪ (b) - the first and second are closer together than the second and third -- ♪♪ (rest) ♪, or (c) - the second and third are closer together than the first and second -- ♪ (rest) ♪♪. The result of these three small differences is actually quite significant. Most words in English can act as more than one part of speech, i.e., a noun, verb, adjective, etc. The word *night*, in addition to being a noun (silent night), can be an adjective (night light, night life); the word *sound* can be either a noun (loud sound) or a verb (sound the alarm) or an adjective (a sound decision); the word *ring* can be a noun (wedding ring), a verb (ring the bell) or an adjective (a ring danish); At a recent critique session, a writer had the line “night sounds ring”. Obviously, *night* is an adjective, *sounds* is a noun, and *ring* is a verb. When spoken in a sentence, it would be “night sounds (pause) ring” (♪♪ (rest) ♪). However, in the song, the music forced the words to fall as “night (pause) sounds ring” (♪ (rest) ♪♪), which implies that *night* is a noun, *sounds* is a verb, and *ring* is an adjective, which doesn’t make much sense. The result is confused listeners. This is exactly the same principle shown in the classic example:

- (a) “Time flies like an arrow”
- (b) “Fruit flies like a banana”

In (a), *flies* is a verb and *like* is an adjective while in (b), *flies* is a noun and *like* is a verb. The natural timing of the two are

- (a) “Time (pause) flies like an arrow” (the underlines indicate stresses)
- (b) “Fruit flies (pause) like (pause) a banana”

If the timing of (a) were changed to “Time files (pause) like an arrow” then *time* would be a verb, *flies* would be a noun, and the sentence would have a very strange meaning (i.e., someone with a stopwatch comparing the speed of insects to that of an arrow). It is easy to see how the introduction of an independent musical rhythm could override the natural rhythm of speech, and thus change the meaning. Even if the meaning is not changed, deviating from a normal spoken rhythm can make a phrase sound odd and unnatural. A common example is our National Anthem. The first line, “O say can you see”, sings quite naturally. If a crowd of thousands at a baseball game sings it, it is reasonably understandable. The second time this melody is repeated, however, we have “Whose broad stripes and bright stars...”, which, if sung by a crowd, is a muddled mess. When spoken, we would say:

Whose broad stripes and bright stars,

where *broad* and *stripes* receive equal stress and equal time, with a distinct gap in between. However, since the music of The Star Spangled Banner is written in 9/8 (yes, it’s 9/8, not 3/4), it has a natural swing, which means that notes (and thus words and syllables) less than one beat in length are not evenly spaced. They occur in a ratio of two-to-one. Thus, the words *whose* and *stripes* are held twice as long as *broad*, and both are accented while *broad* is not. This varies so much from the natural speech that it doesn’t sing well.

The point to remember is that it’s not enough to have good words in a lyric. They must be words which work with the music so that the stresses and open spaces make a natural sound. This is particularly important in collaboration efforts where one person writes lyrics and another writes music. They may be great independently, but they may not make a happy marriage. Read your

lyrics as speech, without music and see where the stresses and pauses fall, then compare it to what happens when you sing it to music. Attention to these small details will make a big difference in the effectiveness of your songs.

The Oronym Will Get You If You Don't Watch Out

As if the elements of stress and white space weren't enough to contend with, songwriters also face the specter of the oronym. This is one of the worst things that can result from altered stress or white space. An oronym is a mishearing of a group of words so that they sound exactly like a different group of words which may make sense by themselves, but don't belong in your song. For example:, your lyric says: "Can't you see that I love you?" In normal spoken language, it would be

"Can't you see that I love you" (as opposed to *hate* you or *despise* you)

↓ ♯ ↓ ♯ ♯ ↓ ♯ (this is a rhythm which subdivides all pulses into twos instead of threes;

it is an even tempo, with no swing.)

OR

"Can't you see that I love you" (as opposed to me loving anyone else...)

↓ ♯ ↓ ♯ ♯ ♯ ↓ (Same rhythm as above. Only the stress is changed)

This is clear and unambiguous. However, if it's put to a rhythm and stress pattern of:

"Can't you see that I love you" (this is a rhythm which subdivides all pulses into threes instead of twos.

↓↓ ♯ ↓↓ ♯ ↓↓ ♯ ↓↓

It swings. Each stressed syllable takes two pulses, and the unstresses syllable takes one, making groups of three. The 2-to-1 pattern defines swing.

Is there a problem with this second version? Well, not if you read it on a page like this, or in sheet music. But if it is being heard by an audience for the first time, the rhythm and accents will suggest a hearing of "Can't you see that aisle of view". Obviously, not what you meant.

How about this fine line: "The stuff he knows just blows me away...". Without a distinct stop between the appropriate words, the lyric leaves us cold as we hear "The stuffy nose just blows me away..." Upon hearing this, a critiquer said to the writer "Are you aware of the words you just uttered?", to which the writer replied indignantly "What words did I just stutter?" Those little pauses between words are really of the utmost importance. I recall a nicely produced demo of a serious cowboys lament at the loss of the buffaloes. The line "it was the biggest herd I'd ever seen" drew chuckles from the listeners. Obviously they thought it was the biggest turd he'd ever seen. As we go prospecting for golden oronyms, here's some more (or is that some ore?)...Well, here are some others I've seen (or is that some mothers?): A song about a poor person's struggle to laugh at his misery was lost on an audience when the chorus of "I'll take an ice cold shower" was heard as "I'll take a nice cold shower". A lovely wedding song told about "White shoes the groom wore...", but to the audience it was a protest song that asked "Why choose the groom war?" Finally, what would John Lennon say when the elderly woman, hearing about the "girl with kaleidoscope eyes" wondered why he wrote "the girl with colitis goes by?"

Seriously, oronyms are very easy to introduce and very difficult for the writer to detect, simply because you, as the writer know what you wrote and the singer knows what was sung. Only an impartial listener can tell you how it comes across. In some cases, with enough practice and awareness, you can detect potentially troublesome phrases, but the real test is playing the song

for people and asking if they understand what you're talking about in your lyric. All it takes to correct many oronyms is very clear enunciation, with distinct stops between words. Those which are caused by misplaced accents or mismatched rhythms require some rewriting.

In the Rupert Holmes song "Timothy" about three starving men trapped in a caved in-mine, the producers and/or the singer were aware of the importance of enunciation. On the record, you can clearly hear the over-pronunciation of the final 't' in the line "Joe said that he would sell his soul for just a piece of meat...". Without that final 't', the last word is heard as "me" which makes perfect sense in this song, but totally destroys the foreshadowing and building of a climax.

Church hymns are notorious for having misaligned accents, which are made worse by the fact that they have to be sung by a choir. Choral singing usually requires merging the end sound of a word with the beginning of the next word, because it makes it easier for the group to stay together in precise rhythm. Unfortunately, it's not the same as speaking rhythm. I remember a particular church service where, with great fervor, the choir was singing "So that I may see, So that I may see...". It took some concerted effort for me to keep a straight face as I watched this group of people giving encouragement to their tailor, saying "Sew that tie, Macey! "

As stated in a previous chapter, oronyms can be a great humor device, but when you're trying to convey a clear message in your lyrics, avoid them like a plague."

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