



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>

## What Do I Say and How Do I Say It?

At the top of the "Anatomy of a Song" chart (Chapter 2) sit two imposing elements: the focus and the vehicle. There is a reason they are at the top of the chart – everything else in the song acts in support of these things. The focus is the song's core message -- its "aboutness". The vehicle is the method you choose for conveying that message. One of the central choices a songwriter makes is how to balance a universal message and specific, personal experiences.

As we pointed out in Chapter 7, a common weaknesses in songs is lack of clarity and specificity. Quite often, a writer, having stumbled upon a good musical progression or catchy lyrical phrase, will scramble to assemble a song around it, without first giving careful thought to what the song is actually about, and how the intended message is going to be conveyed to listeners. The resulting effect on listeners at critique sessions is usually one of blurred incompleteness.

The questions "What do I want to say?" and "How do I want to say it?" are two ever-present questions in the realm of songwriting. Have you ever had someone say they have something to tell you, ask for your attention, and then just ramble, never seeming to make a point? Do you enjoy this experience? Without a clearly defined message and a well-thought-out method of presenting it, a song will struggle to hold a listener's attention.

Many writers who seem to be able to write a good song quickly have indicated that a great deal of prior thought occurs before the song actually hatches out. It is a type of crafting which occurs even before the creative process...a thought process which serves to focus the energy of the creativity which may follow. In the absence of this, the result of the creative process may be

very diffuse and require more revising and fine tuning afterward. Either way, before a song can be considered a finished and finely crafted product, it must have addressed those two key questions.

## Hocus Focus, Show and Tell

The answer to "What do I want to say?", is the focus. It is the main point of the song, usually a message, concept, idea or emotion that the writer wants to share. *There can only be a single idea addressed in a song.* With just a few minutes to develop an idea, trying to mix two or more messages would dilute the impact of each one. The same is true of the scope of the idea. A cosmic, abstract concept like "What is the meaning of life?" can barely be answered in a philosophy book of several hundred pages, let alone in a three minute song. The focus needs to be narrow and specific.

A song which attempts to show that "An important thing in life is \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank with "love", "friends", "family", "money"), has a reasonable chance of succeeding in a three minute format. Note that I said "attempts to *show*", not *tell*. Don't just *tell* the listener something about an abstract idea like love, joy, sorrow, or loneliness. It's far more effective to *show* it by the actions and descriptions of people, deeds, or concrete things. To say "My soul is empty when you're gone" is an abstract image, because a hundred different people have a hundred different perceptions of ideas like "soul" and "empty", when used in this way. However, "My soul is an empty bed" now provides a concrete reference to give sensory meaning to the concept of "soul".

Besides being abstract, "My soul is empty when you're gone" has been said that way many times before, because it's easier to be vague than to be specific. To say "the bed's a little bigger when you're gone" shows, reveals, and evokes the feeling rather than just telling. Most importantly, it conveys a great deal of information about the relationship between the singer and singee, revealing that they have shared many tender, intimate moments together. Economy of words is a key skill in songcrafting. The ability to convey lots of information by showing actions and describing objects is what enables a complex idea to be clearly communicated in a three minute song. (See also Chapter 16, "Writing in the Key of W")

What makes a good focus for a song? The more universal it is, the better. Ideas like "What goes around comes around", "Look before you leap", "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush", "The rich get richer and the poor get poorer", "Love conquers all", etc. are all understood and accepted as general truisms. However, you need to find an original way to present them to raise your songs above baseline clutter. This brings us to the second question, "How do I say it?". Once you know the point you want to make, you need to find a way of presenting it which is original and clear. Many writers get entangled here by being too personal or introspective. Either they require a degree of mind-reading on the part of a listener to understand what is being said, or they don't allow entry portals for the listener (Chapter 8).

To help you find the right balance, use the Stranger Test – if a stranger came up to you and started saying what you are saying, would you have enough information or interest to invest yourself in the interaction?

As easy as it is to be too vague, it is also easy to be too direct e.g.,:

*When I'm sad I start to fall,  
You pick me up, love conquers all".*

This is clear, but drab and trite. It's been said that way too many times. To find new ways to convey old ideas, we need to explore the realm of cinema, so...

## Welcome to the Movies

Think of a song as a three minute movie. There are pictures to be displayed, which in turn show us the who, where, what, when and why of the story. Several movies all about the same idea (e.g., "Love conquers all") will all turn out very different if one changes the setting, the time frame, the character types, etc. For example, the story told in "*Coward of the County*" takes place in the present in a typical country or western setting. Suppose it was put to new music and set in outer space a hundred years from now. Same message, but fresh perspective, because the where and when have changed. The lyric imagery would have to change to suit the new setting. Also important in cinema is the camera angle. One set of events can appear in many different ways, depending on how it is being viewed. Are the events being observed by a male or female or adult or child, and are they being seen firsthand, or being viewed on TV, read in the newspaper, recalled from memory, or being overheard in conversation? One idea or one set of events can become many different songs, just by changing the things listed above, and each of those songs can say the same thing in distinctly different ways.

Here is a complete example of this technique. Presented here are two lyrics, each about the exact same events and feelings and the same two characters. The only difference is that the roles of singer and singee are reversed between the two characters. The setting remains constant, i.e., a 19th century maritime town, and they are both simply ways of stating "love conquers all".

***Crest of a Wave*** (female sings to male) *words and music by Bill Pere*

*You had salt water in your blood, you longed to be  
Another Billy Budd, a sultan of the sea  
I longed to be the one to break your fever,  
But I couldn't have begun to make you leave her;  
She had more allure than I, so when they signed up a crew  
You were first in line, there was nothing I could do;  
You had to tame the tide, so you signed on  
The sails billowed with your pride, and you were gone*

*You said you'd send me your love on the crest of a wave,  
And the water wouldn't keep us apart  
I was blue sky, you were ocean, the horizon was our heart.  
You said you'd send me your love on the crest of a wave,  
But I wonder, "Do you think anymore  
Of the love-struck lonely lady you left standing on the shore?"*

*It's been almost a year, and I've not heard  
In all the thunder of the sea, a single word,  
I guess you took the sea by storm, and you don't need  
Someone like me to keep you warm, so I won't plead  
But if your harem is the waves, then what's the good  
If they behave as fickle women would  
One day they'll be kind, but the next day they will kill  
Though you've cast me from your mind, I love you still...*

*You said you'd send me your love on the crest of a wave,  
And the water wouldn't keep us apart  
I was blue sky, you were ocean, the horizon was our heart.  
You said you'd send me your love on the crest of a wave,  
But I don't think you think anymore  
Of the love-struck lonely lady you left standing on the shore?"*

*Winter finds the ship's yet not returned  
Some fear it was wrecked  
When the water churned like a mistress spurned,  
But it was me who drowned, in your neglect...*

*You're six months overdue, there's no doubt anymore  
I say goodbye to you as I walk along the shore  
But then I see there in the sand, surrounded by debris  
A scrimshaw by your hand, and the image there is me...*

*You said you'd send me your love on the crest of a wave,  
And the water wouldn't keep us apart  
I was blue sky, you were ocean, the horizon was our heart.  
You said you'd send me your love on the crest of a wave,  
Now I know you thought evermore  
Of the love-struck lonely lady you left standing on the shore...*

***The Other Side of the Wave*** (male sings to female)      *words and music by Bill Pere*

*I remember the night I first met you  
You reminded me I had a heart.  
It's kind of hard for me to be gentle  
Maybe it's too late to start  
I never had much practice with loving,  
I mean the kind where you don't have to pay...  
This big tough old salt was just a scared little kid  
When he found himself feeling that way...*

*People say I've got a mean-tempered mouth  
I even swear in my sleep  
But a couple of cuss words are easier to spit out*

*Than talkin' 'bout feelings down deep...  
Somehow, you just saw right through it  
And I needed I safe place to hide  
So I signed up on a ship but before I sailed off  
I told you what I felt inside...*

*I said I'd send you my love with day dawning  
That's the promise I gave,  
If you could see through the mist of the morning  
To the other side of the wave  
You'd see this sailor out standing and looking  
At the ocean meeting blue sky  
Two worlds far apart that make beauty together,  
Not unlike you and I*

*I said I'd send you my love with day dawning  
That's the promise I gave  
If you could see through the mist of the morning  
To the other side of the wave  
You'd see this sailor out standing and wishing  
For each wave that this bow's cuttin' through  
To send you a sign, spill my love at your feet,  
So you know that I'm thinking of you...*

*We caught us a big whale this morning  
Now I'm scratching some lines in a tooth  
I hoped it would help me forget things  
But this picture is telling the truth  
I know I'm no kind of artist  
But the lines are all finding their place  
No matter what I want this picture to be,  
It will end up being your face...*

*I said I'd send you my love with day dawning  
That's the promise I gave,  
If you could see through the mist of the morning  
To the other side of the wave  
You'd see this sailor out standing and looking  
At the ocean meeting blue sky  
Two worlds far apart that make beauty together,  
Not unlike you and I*

*The weather has been turning angry  
There's a dark, jealous sky up above  
It's funny what a man can learn about himself,  
Cause I'm less scared of that than of love...  
and I hear this old ship's planks complaining  
So if I don't get to see you once more...  
I hope that some day, some way, someone will know I love*

*That lady I left on the shore...*

*I said I'd send you my love with day dawning  
That's the promise I gave  
If you could see through the mist of the morning  
To the other side of the wave  
You'd see this sailor out standing and wishing  
For each wave that this bow's cuttin' through  
To send you a sign, spill my love at your feet,  
So you know that I'm thinking of ...  
That love-struck lonely lady I left standing on the shore...*

Here are two lyrics which tell the exact same story from two perspectives, thus they are two independent songs. There are even specific images which use the same metaphor, but say it in two different ways:

*I was blue sky, you were ocean  
The horizon was our heart*

This is the exact same statement as:

*You'd see this sailor out standing and looking at the ocean meeting blue sky  
Two worlds far apart that make beauty together, not unlike you and I.*

Thus goal in a successful lyric is to take a very common idea and say it in an uncommon way. Because so many songs have been written and are still being written about the same topics, it is almost impossible to write a fresh presentation without a cinematic approach. There are many different ways to SHOW something, but very few ways to directly TELL it.

Here's another example of two songs, written independently by two different writers, which both have exactly the same focus. Both songs are about values, and convey the same message, i.e., material wealth cannot substitute for the happiness provided by love. Yet the two lyrics have completely different cinema. One is set in the present and one is set in the 19th century. Each song features a male and female character, but their relationships and backgrounds quite different. The images and concrete references are appropriate to the respective settings.

***Down on Easy Street***      *words and music by Les Julian*

*Down on Easy Street, we drink fine champagne wine  
Honey, you bathe in milk and wear your silk and jewels that shine  
Down on Easy Street we drive those fancy cars  
I get business hunches over liquid lunches in classy bars  
Down on Easy Street, there's nothing we can't buy or sell  
But it's feeling like our little bit of Heaven's turned into  
A little bit of Hell*

*Down on Easy Street, our hearts are running dry*

*Loving only things money can buy  
Down on Easy Street we thought living was easy as pie  
But it's so hard to hear a heart beat down on Easy Street...*

*Down on Easy Street I wear a three piece heart  
I can mix and match if I have to act a part  
Down on Easy Street you wear that fine mink stole  
It keeps your shoulders warm but there's a storm down in your soul  
Down on Easy Street there's nothing we can't buy or sell  
But it's feeling like our little bit of Heaven's turned into  
A little bit of Hell*

*Down on Easy Street, our hearts are running dry  
Loving only things money can buy  
Down on Easy Street we thought living was easy as pie  
But it's so hard to hear a heart beat down on Easy Street...*

*Honey, lovin' you is really all I need  
Won't you come with me and see where love will lead...*

### **Wrought Iron Ring**      *Words and Music by Bill Pere*

*The hammer stopped at the top of the stroke  
as the blacksmith looked up from the doorway  
Where the young woman waited and watched and he started to say  
"I'm glad you weren't hurt when your carriage wheel broke.  
It won't take too long to repair..."  
But like the jewels that she wore, her eyes were just fixed in a stare*

*The afternoon sun shone off the silk in her dress  
and the silver she wore on her ears  
He wondered if it might be the soot that was causing her tears  
He followed her gaze through the swirls of the smoke  
to the photograph up on the shelf  
Her eyes asked the question her voice wouldn't ask by itself...*

*Who is that woman in the old photograph?  
Though it's faded and cracked, you can still hear the laugh  
In that face out of focus, a poor artist's portrait  
An unsteady hand's rendering  
But captured with clarity there on her finger, a wrought iron ring...*

*He said "I've forged all the links of a hundred strong chains,  
My father taught me to make things that last,  
But I've never been able to find this one link to my past...  
That's a picture of the only woman my father loved,*

*He still would if he were living today,  
But he was poor, she was rich, so her parents sent her away...*

*He loved that woman and he made her that ring,  
All he could offer was a poor blacksmith's life  
Though he made her my mother, he never made her his wife...  
She was made to marry a rich man that she didn't love  
She was told 'Give it a chance for awhile'  
I know she found neither money nor time could buy her a smile"*

*Who is that woman in the old photograph?  
Though it's faded and cracked, you can still hear the laugh  
In that face out of focus, a poor artist's portrait  
An unsteady hand's rendering  
But captured with clarity there on her finger, a wrought iron ring...*

*"Your carriage is fixed, it works good as new"  
Then he told her how much it would be  
She said "That's quite fine, money doesn't matter to me..."  
It's just something I have that doesn't mean much,  
I can spend it just once, and it's gone...  
It's the dreams in your head and the love in your heart that live on..."*

*"That's the one thing in life that my mother taught me,  
and I'm reminded of that every day  
By the one special thing that she gave me before she passed away"  
As she went through her purse, he tended the forge  
It grew hot as the fire was fanned  
Then he felt his blood running cold as she held out her hand...*

*Who is this woman that he'd never met  
Who shimmered in shadow as his eyes became wet?  
She was a face out of focus, a poor artist's portrait  
An unsteady hand's rendering  
But captured with clarity there on her finger, a wrought iron ring...*

Thus, two different writers convey exactly the same message, in totally different ways, by using different elements of cinema. The images and objects mentioned are adjusted to fit the time and place depicted. Same focus, different vehicles.

Yet another example can be found in two well-known songs: "*Slipping Though My Fingers*", written by Bjorn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson, recorded by ABBA and enjoying further success in the soundtrack of the musical "*Mama Mia*"; and "*Tangled Up Puppet*", written and recorded by Harry Chapin. Both songs deal concretely and emotionally with the issues of children growing up and a parent's feeling of losing touch with the child they once were close to. Same focus, different vehicles.

In balancing universality and specifics, the key is that *universality applies to the focus*, the main message of the song, while *specificity applies to the vehicle*, or method of conveying the message. Specificity means referring to specific objects, people or places. It means providing clear answers to who, what, where, when, why and how. The opening lines of virtually any classic hit song directly address one or more of these things. In Billy Joel's "Piano Man"

*It's nine o'clock on a Saturday, the regular crowd shuffles in  
There's an old man sittin' next to me makin' love to his tonic and gin.*

From this first couplet, we know the day and time, and without being directly told, we know the setting is a bar with several patrons, and the singer is in the bar.

Being specific should not be confused with being too personal. This is the same principle as balancing control of your meaning while allowing for some personalization by the listener (Chapter 8). To say "My girl from Tennessee walked out on me" is fine, because it sets up a situation, and "Tennessee" is a name familiar to almost everyone. Another way to convey this same sentiment would be "She treated me rotten in Groton", however, this is not going to have the same breadth of appeal (except if humorous) because it uses a reference that is too personal. Most people have never heard of the town of Groton. If you are niche-marketing to folks in regions where they are likely to have heard of such a place (e.g. Connecticut or Vermont), then you may offset the narrow breadth of appeal with a greater depth of appeal. If you use a non-universal reference, then you will have to use valuable additional lines to explain it, and those lines cannot then be used to move your story along.

Let's look at one more example of focus, vehicle, and tone constant semantic field. What are more songs written about than anything else? Love, of course. There are many sides to love, so let's take the general truism that "a life filled with love is a life well lived." Love is an abstraction, so we need a vehicle to make it concrete. We also need a way of presenting this common truth that is not the same as millions of other love songs. Taking the conceit life=a movie/play we will use this vehicle to convey what we want to say about love. The semantic field of movies and plays is rich, so we have lots of words to use and supporting metaphors e.g., life=script; loved one = co-star; events=scenes, death = fade to black. (The rhyme scheme is shown here for later reference).

### **What Love Really Means** *words and music by Bill Pere*

<i>A million stories never told</i>	(a)
<i>We start out young and then grow old</i>	(a)
<i>But the movie cameras never roll</i>	(a)
<i>Still we fade to black, never coming back</i>	(b) – (b)
<i>And in a day a week, a year, who will know</i>	(c) – (d)
<i>We were even here?</i>	(c)

*If love is all we leave behind  
From the first day that two people find each other  
Then write that scene  
And hope someday someone will say  
This should be a film or play on a stage, on a screen*

*To show the world what love really means.*

*Some may say the plot is slow* (a)  
*We have some kids and watch them grow* (a)  
*We turn around and then they go,* (a)  
*That leaves just you and me, in our script that's just PG* (b) – (b)  
*And if we're left with minor parts, we'll play those roles* (c) – (d)  
*With all our hearts* (c)

*If love is all we leave behind*  
*From the first day that two people find each other*  
*Then write that scene*  
*And hope someday someone will say*  
*This should be a film or play on a stage, on a screen*  
*To show the world what love really means..*

*There's only one leading lady in life*  
*You are my co-star, my lover my wife*

*We watch the credits roll on past,* (a)  
*Our names not listed in the cast* (a)  
*Cause the edits happen very fast* (a)  
*Never know quite what's in store, we could be outtakes on the floor* (b) – (b)  
*And if our movie's never made. we'll always know* (c) – (d)  
*The roles we played* (c)

*If love is all we leave behind*  
*From the first day that two people find each other*  
*Then write that scene*  
*And hope someday someone will say*  
*This should be a film or play on a stage, on a screen*  
*To show the world what love really means..*

Since I wrote this in 2005, it has been performed in front of diverse audiences in many parts of the U.S. The feedback and ullage (See Chapter 7) confirm that the song is working effectively and generating appeal.

**To Summarize:** One of the keys to a successful lyric is to clearly define what you want to say (the focus) and how you want to say it (vehicle). The focus should be a specific, universal truth, topic, or experience. The vehicle should employ a combination of setting, time frame, characters, motives, and situation (collectively called "cinema") to allow a fresh presentation of the focus. Avoid the vague language of cosmic, philosophical ideas and abstractions. Don't just state your point in a preachy way. Reveal it by showing supporting events, actions and motivations of realistic characters. Refer to concrete objects and places that people know. Remember that 7 out of 10 people prefer to get information in a concrete rather than abstract way.

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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](http://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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