

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>

(This is additional material for the discussion of the topics presented in Songcrafters' Coloring Book, Section II-C)

Adding Sparkle to your Songs: Why Does He Have to Live in Detroit?

You work hard to make your lyrics clear, and rich with images. They convey a message or story that is universal and heard in many other songs. Yet somehow, they still don't measure up to other songs that are considered great. What's missing?

Great lyrics not only are clear and relevant, they also tickle the ear, the way bubbles in champagne tickle the palate. They have *sonic activity*. Sonic activity is the sum of all the points in a song (called "ping-points") that use the physical sound of the words, independent of meaning, to grab the ear. The primary ways of doing this are:

(a) **Perfect Rhyme** (two strings of sound in one or multiple words with exactly the same accents and sounds, except for the initial sound e.g., tumble/crumble; period/myriad; syrup/clear up; coincide/go inside) Perfect rhyme produces the strongest "ping" of any literary technique. Fresh, innovative rhymes jump out even more than the tired overused ones like love/above, heart/apart, life/knife, seem/dream, etc) NOTE: Multi-syllable rhymes should have the same accent pattern to work as effective pings. (e.g. the word "happily" flows as HAP-pi-ly; The most effective rhyme will be with the accented syllable "HAP", e.g. "RAP to me" not the last syllable e.g. "that will BE".

(b) **Assonance** (same vowel sound between two different consonants, e.g. sign/time; woody/fully; zipper/killer, etc.) NOTE: Assonance is not rhyme. It is sometimes called near-rhyme or slant rhyme, but it is NOT the same as a perfect rhyme, as it does not produce the same degree of 'ping'.

(c) **Alliteration** – words with the same initial sound e.g. "big bouncing ball"; "fresh fried fritters"; "silent searching souls"; etc. The repeated consonant sound does not always need to be at the front of the word: "complete unconditional hectic chaos"; "SnaKe Skin inKS"
A repeating consonant sound creates a very strong ping.

(d) **Para-Rhyme** - Same consonants at either end, with a different vowel in between: Hip-Hop; pit/pat/pot/putt; bitter/butter/better/batter; etc. Again, like assonance, a very strong ping.

(e) **Lexical Repetition** - This is a repeating of the same sound, word or phrase multiple times. "I love you in the morning/I love you in the night/I love you when I'm sleeping/So why are you uptight?" If used well, it can enhance the ping experience: "I was at the bottom of the bottom when the bottom fell out...". If used excessively and without clear reason, it dulls the senses. It dulls the senses. It dulls the senses. Oh yeah baby, it dulls the senses.

(f) **Sonic Reversal** - Same sounds, reversed (same SOUND, not same LETTERS). e.g., "at the TOP of the POT, and the TIP of the PIT" ; 'DRAWN ONWARD';

(g) **Chiasmus** – Reversing the order of key words in a sentence. e.g. "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country"; "Never let a kiss fool you or a fool kiss you". Chiasmus is considered one of the most effective devices in persuasive speaking and oratory.

So, armed with these devices for injecting sparkling bubbles into your lyrics, you can see why some songs tickle the ear while others fall flat, even if they are about the same thing. Sonic activity is not something that a listener is always aware of. It works under the surface to make the song hit with more impact and penetrate deeper into the listener's vault of good feelings.

Great songwriters write with sonic activity – some do it instinctively without conscious effort, and some very consciously choose and shape their words and sounds.

Everyone knows these lines from Journey's "Don't Stop Believing"

*Just a city boy, born and raised in south Detroit
He takes the midnight train goin' anywhere...*

Why does he live in Detroit as opposed to New York, L.A., or Racine (all of which have the right accent pattern)? It's so that the "oy" of "boy" can mate with the "oi" "Detroit" and give your ear a ping, followed up with the alliterative pair *take / train*. Of course he could also live in LaCroix, Des Moines or Hanoi, all sonically equivalent, but not quite the same image as urban Detroit.

Sonically active lyrics are nothing new. It's been going on since Gilbert and Sullivan and before. (*"I am the very model of a modern major general...*). Look at any of the Gilbert and Sullivan scores and you'll see masterful use of all the above techniques. That's one of the reasons their work has survived for more than a century.

If I were **seekin'** someone else, I could **find** a place to hide
But I'm just **pleading** like a **pauper** babe,
And it leaves no place for pride...

(b) place to hide
(c)
(b) place for pride

Sonic activity often does its best work while hiding, subtly embedded in the lines so that you don't readily see it, but you certainly feel the 'pings' when they hit you. Consider these opening lines from Kay Pere's "Quiet Little Life":

*Welcome to my quiet little life
Well, come on in, leave your cares at the door...*

Seems simple, but look closely:

WELCOME QUiet Little Life
WELL COME Leave Cares

Take these lines from "Put on a Happy Face" from the musical "Bye Bye Birdie"

*Take of that gloomy mask of tragedy, it's not your style
You'll look so good, you'll be glad you decided to smile*

So we see *style/smile*. That doesn't seem like enough to make these lines jump out the way they do. The big 'ping' comes from the exceptional hidden rhyme:

TRA-GE-DY / GLAD-YOU-DEcided

All it takes to sprinkle effective sonic activity through your songs is :
(a) to be aware that you can and (b) to push yourself to get as much 'ping' into each line as you can *without sacrificing meaning or making it seem forced*.

Take this line:
There's a lot of good holiday food in their freezer.

It has a natural rhythmic flow; It sits easily in 4 beats; It is clear and specific; It conveys information. It has the alliteration of *food/freezer*

By those measures, it is an adequate line. However, it still comes across as dull and flat. No sparkle. It's like reading a government report on regulating cabbage. The key question to ask yourself: Can I say this exact same thing in a more sonically active way? Of course!

Their freezer is filled with a fine festive feast...

Everything is exactly the same as above, except now you have the spicy zing of five-fold alliteration on the "f". Fantastic five-fold phonetic fun!

How about this line:
Her needle and thread bound together the sail for his ship.

Clear, specific, flowing, and you've got the two "s" sounds of *sail* and *ship*, so you're happy. Still, ask yourself, can you do better? Of course!

She sat and sewed the sails that swept him out to sea...

Now you've got a six-fold repetition of the sibilant sound of "s" like the hiss of surf on the deck of a ship. Much more sparkle.

One more:

*Leeta is a popular girl, she don't let many guys into her world
She knows she's got the fire, but no guy fills her desire*

Now you must be on a roll, since you have two lines with two internal rhymes: (*girl/world* and *fire/desire*). so you're happy. Can you do better? Of course!

*Leeta's so elite, she says 'bout every guy she'll meet
That they just don't have the heat to hang with her very long...*

Why does this version have so much more sparkle? A rhyming threesome: *elite/meet/heat*; A lexical repetition *LEETa / eLITE*; And a three-fold-alliteration: *heat/hang/her*, with a minor bonus of *she/says* and *that/they*. Lots more sonic activity than the first version.

As a final example of the sonic tools are used in the hands of a master craftsman, let's look at a simple song which says absolutely nothing except "I love you". It's the most common topic for all songwriters. Most love songs from inexperienced writers, although sincere and heartfelt, are just too plain to make an impression. You also see lots of current popular hits which have no lyrical zing at all – they are popular solely because of fancy production and good musical grooves. As popular as they are they don't represent good songwriting -- just great production and performance. How much better and long-lasting would they be if all that great production and performance also had great lyrics?

Randy Edelman is widely known as a writer of well crafted songs. His hit "Concrete and Clay" is totally simple in its message of "I love You". Yet it endures for almost five decades, while so many other love songs remain in oblivion. What elevates to a higher level?

A look at the lyrics below only seems to reinforce the idea that it is ordinary, with nothing particularly unusual.

CONCRETE and CLAY (words and music by Randy Edelman)

Verse 1: You to me are sweet as roses in the morning
 And you to me are soft as summer rain at dawn,
 In love we share that something rare

Chorus: The sidewalks in the street
 The concrete and the clay beneath my feet
 Begins to crumble but love will never die
 Because we'll see the mountains tumble before we say goodbye

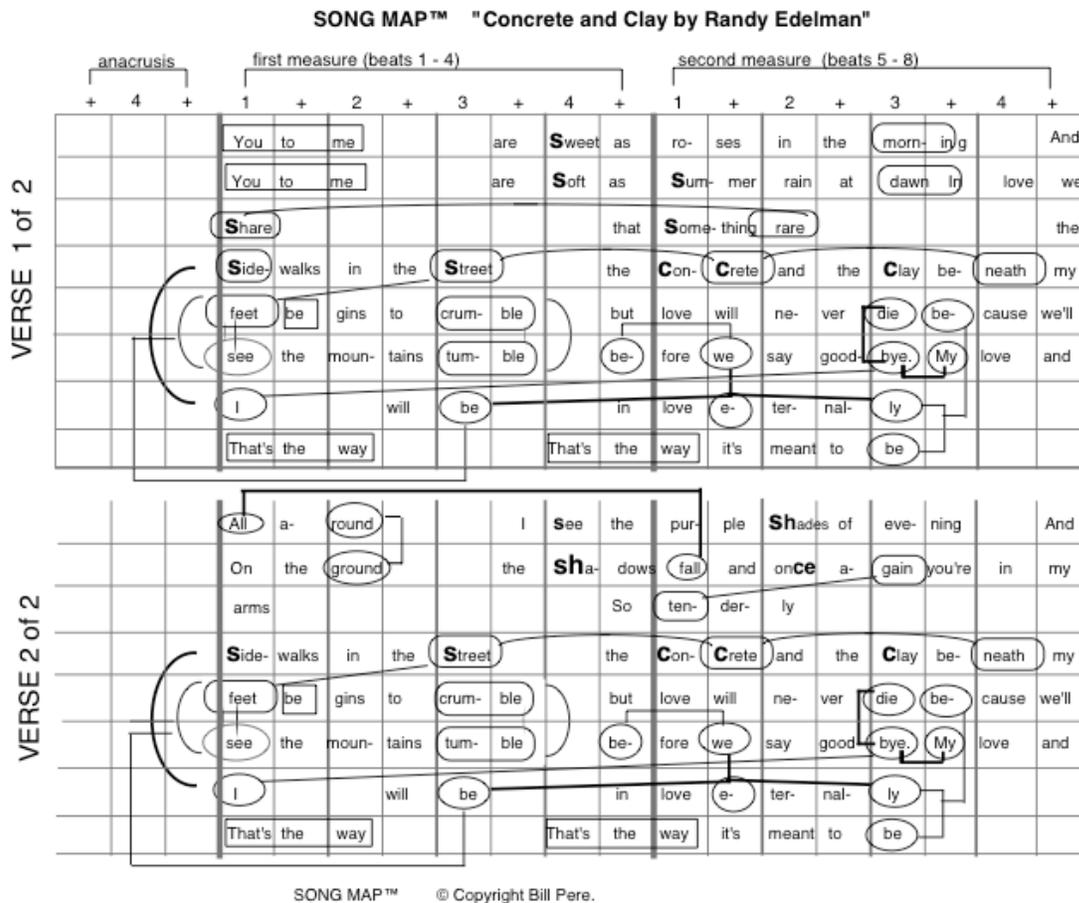
My love and I will be in love eternally
 That's the way, that's the way it's meant to be

Verse 2:
 All around I see the purple shades of evening
 And on the ground the shadows fall
 And once again you're in my arms so tenderly

[REPEAT CHORUS]

So let's do a full [Level 3 analysis](#) and see why this is not just an ordinary love song. In the song map below, you can see the massive amount of sonic activity that is constantly pinging the ear at every phrase. There is barely a wasted syllable in the song. It is high level songcraft, applied to a very simple message, and lives on after more than half a century.

(You can enlarge the view below for greater clarity)



([You can also see this SongMap online](#))

BOTTOM LINE:

Map some of your own songs (the technique of mapping is discussed in detail in [Songcrafters' Coloring Book](#)) and look at the amount of activity. When you have your song as "done" as you want it to be in terms of what it says and how it flows the information to the listener, give it one more pass with an ear toward sonic activity. Go line by line and ask "Is there another way I can say this exact same thing while adding more sparkle to the line?" With that sparkle, you'll turn your song from grape juice into champagne.

Bill Pere, is a Grammy-nominated songwriter, 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](#). Twice named Connecticut Songwriter of the Year, Bill is a qualified MBTI practitioner, trained by the Association for Psychological Type. He is 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. Bill has a graduate degree in Molecular Biology, an ARC Science teaching certification, and he has received two awards for Outstanding contribution to Music Education. The New York Times calls Bill "the link between science and music".

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