

CW's Song Writing Workshop

Welcome. I'm going to run through some ideas and then we will write a song together. Visit nevadamusic.com and listen to some of my stuff. Also note my books! This document is available there. As I go through the outline below, check off areas where you might want to know more. Decide later whether it is actually an area where you want to know more. None of this is vital to song-writing—which can often be done simply through good imitation. However, a more conscious approach can help you avoid merely At the same time, much of this represents fundamental ideas in the craft of song-writing—where a higher level of intention occurs. This is a lexicon—a list of terms that you can use to organize ideas in song. CW

THE TWO MAIN AMERICAN POPULAR MUSIC ROOTS AS HARMONIC METHODS

I, IV, V, VI minor or Tonic, Sub-dominant, Dominant, Relative Minor. AND Cycle of 5th progressions. Culturally: these are the British Isles tradition versus the Blues/Jazz/Ragtime tradition. Almost all forms of American popular music mix these influences in difference ways.

TONALITY IN HARMONY

PART STRUCTURE AND DYNAMICS VERSUS ATONALITY AND EVOCATION

Tonality— tension and resolution through I, IV, V. Uses structure and dynamics to move from description to feeling. Most popular European/America music and some classical since about 1750.

Structure.

The more parts the more potential for dynamics.

One part—the simple jam tune. The tonic and dominant: 1st and 5th.

Two parts—verse/chorus or AB and AABA

typical chord shifts—the 4th, the 5th, the minor 6th.

Three parts—the sonata, lots of possibilities.

Transitions/intros—turn around. The 5th/dominant chord.

Dynamics

Tension and resolution. The build and drop back—not always vital but vastly underused today

Circular progressions—rhythm changes and the jam tune. The riff/groove based song. Very common in modern popular music. Not really atonal.

Atonality—lack of direction. Uses melodic subtlety and, sometimes, rhythm to create feeling. Ambiguity, evocation, uncertainty. Feelings that build without resolution. A visual list in lyric. Wandering in melody. High art. Fugal/mathematical, minor chords, partial chords, power chords, single drones, open tuning. Atonality may be partial or complete: may or may not resolve. Some modern jazz, ethnic music, electronic music.

LYRIC—mirroring the choices in harmony

STRUCTURE: PROBLEM AND SOLUTION. Much art comes from pain. It provides a means to express and hence contain that pain—that's why art thrives on containers/structure/method. In some way, the song is about a problem. When listening to a song, always ask yourself—is the problem made clear? It might be literally stated. It might be in the form of a plea. Allow yourself to go to the edge of pain—don't write another Pepsi commercial. And then, if you intend a story, ask yourself if you have illustrated your picture concretely. If it is a plea—is it strong?

CONCRETE WORDS AND PLACE. Song happens in a place. The place may be explicit or may be in your head—as in a plea. In the story, concrete language cues the listener to that place. Rose, Flower, Tree, Sky—that’s nature/the garden. Barroom, drinks, loud band—that’s the saloon. Etc. If there is ANY story, cue your listener in early and stick with your place.

SIMPLE ACTIVE WORDS. In general, not always, song-writers use simple Anglo-Saxon words and you often place open vowels where the melody has longer notes.

SLANG. Since the mid 19th century, much American song has used street language to make the emotions accessible. Your choice of idiomatic expressions is part of setting your place or location as well in creating twists—interesting expressions.

HOOK. The hook or title or repeated phrase is often a word or phrase that sounds like slang. Repetition of the hook and, often, of a chorus, changes the words from literal—the informational language of speech—to the poetic language of symbol and allegory, increasing the impact.

LYRIC WITHOUT RESOLUTION. As with melody, lyric can move in a direction all the time or it can lack direction—as when melody is atonal—becoming images in a list. As with atonal elements in music, in tonal popular music non-directional lyric is generally done when inserted into a larger, structured form that has direction and resolution.

STYLE

Don’t start song-writing by reinventing the wheel. Basic style question: What is your style? Your models? This choice tends to set how much structure versus atonality/evocation we want in the melody and the lyric. And how we create it. Study your models a lot! Learn some of them. Analyze them.

LANGUAGE—SAY ENOUGH, NOT TOO MUCH. MAKE IT SING

Some lyric is story. Some is a plea.

Painting pictures—good writing: paint a concrete picture—but only enough, leave the listener space, active verbs, visual. Often, story is for verse, emotional summary for chorus—putting abstract summary of meaning in a verse is often a mistake except if it means repeating the hook, often in the line last of verse. Often, verse is the story/setting.

Vernacular—the low down, common, guttural, street culture, accessible.

Sound—it needs to sing. Test it, over and over. Revise. It’s subjective—to a point.

Fitting words to rhythm—lots of decisions and editing. Based on style.

Understand the importance of placing words with respect to downbeat or offbeat in 20th century American popular music.

PLACE YOUR VOICE—the setting/story or plea

When you start writing—who is speaking? The voice? It doesn’t need to be you.

Do you have a location in mind? Where is this happening?

Do you know the style models well enough that you are pushing the envelope a bit?

Are you using concrete active language to set a scene? Or an emotional plea?

What is the emotional summary—often for the chorus?

GENERAL THOUGHTS

Generally, I think, people start their song with either the hook or the first line of what they think will be the first verse, beginning the story.

Revise, revise, revise. A lot of writing occurs in the editing.

Agonize over every syllable. Is there an alternative word that is better? You are painting a sparse picture. Every word counts. And the song needs to sing. Sing it. Test it. Over and over as you write it. Pay attention to how the words fit with the rhythm.

Do it. A lot of song-writers write a lot of bad songs as a matter of habit. It can be hard to know if a song is any good even after its written. Sometimes singing it for a while and for people is the only way to tell. They provide you with a different way to listen to yourself. As you sing, ask yourself: is interesting and clear? You are ultimately the judge of that—no one else.

Remember that spending a year arranging a song with midi tracks on a computer takes up your time—time you could spend with pencil and paper writing more songs. A song is a work.

Examples/Exercise. In each, what is the problem or question? How is the problem conveyed in both story and concrete language? Note the tone of the first line! What do all these examples have in common with respect to that tone?

A plea:

As I went down in the river to pray
Studying about that good old way
And who shall wear the starry crown
Good Lord, show me the way!

A Come All Ye:

Come all you young fellers, so young and so fine
And seek not your fortunes way down the mine
It will form like a habit and seep in your soul
Till the stream of your blood flows black as the coal

A love song:

Something in the way she moves attracts me like no other lover.
Something in the way she woos me

Beautiful dreamer, wake unto me,
Starlight and dewdrops are awaiting thee
Sounds of the rude world heard in the day
Led by the moonlight have all passed away

A love song as plea or anthem:

Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so faraway
Now it looks as if they're here to stay
Oh I believe in yesterday