

Put Your Song to the Tests

By Pat & Pete Luboff

We've been listening to songs in a professional capacity for over 20 years, as songwriting consultants, workshop leaders, contest judges and Taxi screeners. Along the way, we've learned some simple tests you can perform on your songs. Using these tests as you're writing will help you to craft songs that create more than a passing interest from listeners.

IT'S WHAT'S UP FRONT THAT COUNTS

Look at the first two lines of your lyric and only the first two lines. Imagine yourself walking down the street and having a perfect stranger come up to you and say those two lines. How much of the “who, what, where, why and how” of the story/message of your song has been communicated? If you don't know much from the first two lines, i.e., if you don't know enough to care what's going to happen to the protagonist, a publisher or a producer will most likely not listen further.

TIED UP WITH A BOW

Dean Pitchford, who wrote “Flashdance,” gave us this one. Each lyric line (and its accompanying melodic phrase) is like a present tied up with a bow. Neat and complete. That means, if you say that line alone, it's completely understandable on its own. It doesn't need the next line to have it make sense. We often see songs with these “lyrical hangovers” – the lyric line has come to an end, the melodic phrase resolves, but the words don't make sense unless and until you complete them in the next line. Look at each of your lyric lines separately and make sure it presents a complete, independent picture.

THINKING INSIDE THE BOX

Type/print your lyric sheet flush left (all the lines starting on the left margin) on a sheet of white paper. (By the way, if your lyric doesn't fit on one sheet, you're in trouble.) Can you draw a rectangle around the lyrics of the verses? In other words, are all your lines exactly the same physical length? How about your chorus or bridge? Can you draw a box around them? Now, can you draw a big box around your verses and chorus and have most or all of the lines touch on the right side of your box? If so, it's more than likely that your song will sound monotonous because you do not have enough variety in the lengths of lines and patterns of lyrics. Look for a really ragged right edge as a sign that your lyrics are conversational and interesting rhythmically. Also, look for the box around the chorus lines to be of significantly different size than the box around the verses. It's an indicator of sufficient variety between the chorus and the verses.

“NOT ALL THAT COUNTS CAN BE COUNTED”...Albert Einstein

Part 1: Albert's right about that, but some of what counts can be counted. For instance, count the number of lines in each of your verses. Now, count the lines in your chorus. If they're exactly the same, e.g., 4-line verse, 4-line chorus; or, 8-line verse, 8-line chorus, you probably haven't made enough contrast between the two sections.

Part 2: This is one we see all the time! Count the number of beats in the lyric of verse 1, line 1. Then, count the number of beats in verse 2, line 1. Do they match? Sometimes, we need to insert a little pick-up note for an extra syllable and it's OK because the rest of the line falls naturally into the accents of the basic pattern. But,

we often see 8 beats in verse 1, line 2 and 13 beats in verse 2, line 2, for example. No way those extra 5 beats are going to fit comfortably on the melody you worked so hard to establish in the first verse! Count all the beats in all the lines and make sure they match from verse to verse, so they can be sung on the same melody with ease.

TITLE SEARCH

You may have heard of the saying, “Position is everything in life.” In the life of your song, the position of your title tells the listener what your main point is. There are certain power positions in a song. What they are depends on which structure you choose when you write your song.

Is it a verse/bridge structure (aka A, A, B, A)? Then your title will be in the verses. It will be in the first line of the verse or the last line of the verse. These are the power positions in that structure. Example: “Yesterday” by The Beatles. (There are exceptions, but they are rare and compensated for by strong melodic emphasis when the title is not in the natural power position.)

In the verse/chorus structure, the power positions are at the top of the chorus and the last line of the chorus. Your title could be in either one or both of those places, and repeated more often if the repetition works. Example: “Yellow Submarine” by The Beatles. Look at your lyric and see where the title is. If it’s buried in the middle somewhere, your listener probably won’t be able to identify it, i.e., know what the song is about, how to ask for it to be played on the radio, or find it at the store.

THE ULTIMATE TITLE TEST

The word “ultimate” has several meanings. 1. last, 2. decisive, 3. most desirable, 4. basic, etc. This test encompasses all those meanings. It was taught us by two songwriters in Nashville, both of whom claimed authorship! Take your typed lyric sheet. Write (or imagine writing) your title after each and every line of lyric. Say the line of lyric, then say the title. If the two hang together and make sense, then your song is about the title. If you go for lines and lines without the verse lyrics having much to do with the title—meaning they don’t make sense when you say them next to each other—it’s time to go back to the drawing board. Your song is not about your title.

THE BEST LAID SCHEMES

Take an overview of your rhyme scheme. If you’ve established an a, b, a, b, c, c rhyme scheme in verse one, do you keep it up in verse 2? In other words, do the lines rhyme with the same pattern (not the same sound) in verse 1 and verse 2, and verse 3, if there is one? Now note the sounds of your rhymes. Are they all a long o sound? That can get pretty dull. We’ve seen songs where every line ended in the long ee rhyme. The ear gets tired of that very quickly. If you’ve inadvertently rhymed everything with the same sound, you might consider going back and creating more variety in your rhyming sounds.

PRONOUN HELL

This is the name for the confusion that results when, in mid-song, someone who was a “she” becomes a “you.” Or, all of a sudden, “he” switches to “me.” Or, there are three “I’s” in a row, referring to three different people and we’re supposed to know which one is which. Or, someone starts to quote someone else, the pronoun

shifts, but there's no way to really tell a quotation has begun. Scan your lyrics for pronouns. If you've made one of the changes we describe, it's probable your listeners will go straight to pronoun hell. There are always exceptions, but, for the most part, it's best to have one person represented by one pronoun. If a quotation is part of your song, make sure you introduce it with a clearly audible, "She said" or "He said" so your listeners can understand when the "I" singing the song begins to be addressed as "you."

THE NAKED TUNE

Part 1: Sing your melody a cappella (with no instrumental accompaniment) and without the lyrics. Sing it into a tape if you have trouble being objective about hearing what you're singing. As a stranger to your song, could you honestly tell where the title would sit on your melody without ever hearing the lyrics? If the most outstanding part of your melody is where you did put your title, give yourself a pat on the back. If not, your title needs to be moved or your melody changed.

Part 2: While you're singing your melody a cappella, does it have emotional dynamics? Is there a variety of lengths of notes and intervals between the notes? Or, does it sound like a sing-songy nursery rhyme; the same rhythm pattern over and over? If someone heard just your melody, could they make a pretty good guess at the emotions in the story of the song? If your melody is not emoting, you need to write it once more—with feeling!

IT CAN BE ARRANGED

Your chords give shadings to your melody. Each chord has an emotional tone. Minor chords tend to express doubt or sorrow. Major chords have a happy, positive feeling. Adding 6ths, 7ths, 9ths, suspensions, and inversions, gives the basic chord still more

nuances of feeling. Is your song down home country or uptown sophisticated? High-power rock or soft mellow jazz? Appropriate choice of chords will bring the message of your song into sharp focus. The frequency of chord changes and the style of playing the chords are both important considerations. Style examples on the piano: arpeggios, block chords. On the guitar: all the strings at once, some of the strings, one string at a time. Listen to the chord changes in your song. Are they distracting because they are too rapid and complex? Are they boring because they don't change enough or your strum is too repetitive? Do they work against the emotional message of the song or support it? Look at each chord individually. Try an inversion for a different coloring. Leave no chord unturned in your search for the perfect setting for the message of your song.

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