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# Steve & Vikki Cook

## EDITING YOUR SONG

### I. The Importance of Rewriting

- A. ALL successful songwriters do it and consider it essential.
- B. “Great songs are rarely written—they’re rewritten (and rewritten and rewritten) Rewriting is one of the songwriters most important tools” – (Jason Blume, *6 Steps to Successful Songwriting*)
- C. Johnny Mercer on rewriting: “I type dozens of alternative lines. And I look at these alternatives, and I gradually weed out the poor ones until I think I’ve got the best lyric I can get.”
- D. It is said Picasso painted up to a dozen versions of each of his most famous works, destroying each one until he felt it was the best it could be. Having to struggle and rewrite (and rewrite and rewrite) doesn’t make you a bad writer-but failure to do so might. (Blume)
- E. “I once read an interview with legendary songwriter/artist Leonard Cohen (“Suzanne”), in which he said that when he writes a lyric, he might spend the day filling an entire notebook and if one line actually makes it into the song, he’s had a good day! At first, that seemed incredible to me, but then I realized that most songs don’t have more than eight lines in each of two verses (sixteen); a maximum of another eight lines in the chorus; and at most another four lines of lyric in the bridge. That’s a total of twenty-eight lines (although some songs might have a few more or less). Taking twenty-eight days to write a song with each line being an extraordinary line could produce twelve incredible songs per year. It’s easier to get one great song published and recorded than a hundred “pretty good” ones.” (Blume)

### II. How to Evaluate Your Song - SMACU

- A. Areas to evaluate your song and questions to help you do it.
  - 1. SKILLFULLY WRITTEN-Uses devices and methods proven to impact people.
    - a. Does my song contain devices and methods proven to impact people such as; song form, rhyme, alliteration, contrast, irony, metaphor, good prosody, hooks.
    - b. Are there extra notes “crammed in” to make the lyric fit?
    - c. Does it sound as though notes or syllables are missing?

- d. Does the song have a clear hook?
  - e. Does the song have a pleasing combination of repetition and contrast?
  - f. Does my melody emphasize the most important words?
2. MESSAGE/CONTENT-Biblical truth; a focused message to awaken hearts to God
    - a. Does the song contain substantial biblical truth?
    - b. Does it provide food for the soul?
    - c. Is the song message clear? Can I summarize in one sentence?
  3. ACCESSIBLE –The average person can easily learn it
    - a. Is the range more than an octave? If so, will the average person be able to sing it?
    - b. Are the melody rhythms too complex?
    - c. Is it written in a conversational manner?
    - d. Is it sing-able? Memorable? Does it pass the “da, da” or hum test?
    - e. Does the melody evoke an emotion all by itself?
  4. CREATIVE-A freshness in the music and/or words that engages people
    - a. Have you found a new way to express an “old truth”? Are there surprises contained in your melody, lyrics and chords.
    - b. What is the musical style of my song? Is it overused or out-dated?
    - c. Does my melody contain an interesting combination of adjacent notes and intervals?
    - d. Do I have contrast in my melodic phrasing?
    - e. Do I have a unique title?
    - f. Do I have any unique phrases or metaphors?
    - g. Are there any “tired” phrases or overused metaphors?
    - h. Is this song just like all my other songs?
  5. UNIVERSAL-The average person identifies with it
    - a. Do people want to sing it?
    - b. Do they want to make the lyric and perspective their own words?
    - d. Have I written about a common experience?

### III. Strategies for Improving Your Lyrics

#### A. Focused Song Vision

*“Each line of lyrics has to stand on it’s own and deliver a complete thought. Each line needs to lead to the next and relate to the central thought, expressed in the title.” ~ Luboff*

1. Say ONE THING...clearly.

2. Get to the point...quickly!
3. Who is singing...who is being addressed?
  - a. Don't change pronouns without telling the listener/singer
4. EXERCISE: Try outlining your song
  - a. Start with a title
  - b. Outline what is to be said in each verse, chorus, bridge, in general
  - c. Write out each line of every song section, using conversational language, describing what you want to say, conceptually
  - d. Now you can start crafting your lyric
5. EXERCISE:
 

Imagine you have to send a telegram to someone. Pretend that each word will cost you \$100 dollars. You only have \$1200 dollars to spend. Write your telegram describing your song in 12 words or less.

## B. Clear Song Form

*Just by looking at a songwriter's written lyric sheet, a song evaluator can tell if the lyrics are structured well...every verse has matching metered lines and the chorus and bridge sections reveal the contrast to the verses.*

1. 3 Common Song Forms
  - a. Verse – Chorus
    - i. The title of the song sits in the chorus
    - ii. The emotional highpoint of the song is in the chorus
  - b. Verse – Bridge
    - i. The title is contained in the verse
    - ii. The verse tends to have a completed feel
    - iii. The bridge does not contain the title, but is the emotional highpoint of the song
  - c. Verse – Verse – Verse
    - i. Hymns, classic and modern
    - ii. The song is about one topic, but each verse adds a new related facet to the topic
2. Talking about “meter”
 

*The number of syllables in a lyric line*

- a. All verses should agree in meter (line 1 of verse 1, should be the same as line 1 of verse 2, etc.)
  - b. Different sections should vary in meter (verses, choruses, bridges)
  - c. Example: A 4 line Verse, followed by a 6 line Chorus, followed by a 2 line Bridge
3. EXERCISE: Study the 4 line verse below...

*"True bread of life, in pitying mercy given           12*  
*Long-famished souls to strengthen and to feed; 10*  
*Christ Jesus, Son of God, true bread of Heaven 11*  
*Thy flesh is meat, thy blood is drink indeed       10*  
 ~ Horatius Bonar

Rewrite this verse reducing the size of the meter to 6-5-6-5

4. EXERCISE: Take a verse you wrote and work out the meter of each line. Now, try rewriting each line decreasing the meter by half. Or, if you already have lines that are short (5 to 6 syllables long) try extending your meter of each line to 10 to 12 syllables.
- C. Creativity...the "fresh spark" breathes life and emotion into our lyrics

*"The best lyrics, and the ones that are easiest to remember, are the ones expressing feelings through clear and fresh images." ~Molly-Ann Leikin*

1. Show me, don't tell me!  
*Paint a picture with your words*

*"From the mount of Crucifixion  
 Fountains opened deep and wide  
 Through the floodgates of God's mercy  
 Flowed a vast and gracious tide  
 Grace and love like mighty rivers  
 Poured incessant from above  
 And Heaven's peace and perfect justice  
 Kissed a guilty world in love" – the hymn "Here is Love"*

2. EXERCISE: Open a dictionary, drop your index finger down on the first picture noun (chair, computer) or proper noun you find. Find four more words the same way. Next, find 5 visual, or action adjectives in the same way. Match each noun with each adjective. You just might find an amazing word combination to use in your next song.

3. EXERCISE: Now find 5 nouns that you would use in a worship song. Pair these 5 nouns with 5 new action, or visual adjectives found in your dictionary.
  4. Remember to use those tools you learned in English 101...similes, metaphors, personification, poetic imagery, etc.
  5. A Plug for Metaphors. They are a mainstay for good lyric writing. Simply put, a metaphor is a collision between ideas that don't belong together.
    - a. There are 3 types of metaphors:
      - i. Expressed Identity Metaphors (between 2 nouns)
        - a) X is Y (hope is light)
        - b) The Y of X (the light of hope)
        - c) X's Y (hope's light)
      - ii. Qualifying Metaphors
        - a) Adjectives qualifying nouns (lazy moon)
        - b) Adverbs qualifying verbs (dance wildly)
      - iii. Verbal Metaphors
        - a) Formed by conflict between the verb and it's subject and/or object. (clouds sail, frost gobbles down Summer)
  6. EXERCISE: Select 5 nouns and put them in a column. Select 5 visual nouns and put them in a separate column. Create new Expressed Identity Metaphors using these nouns.
- D. To Rhyme, or not to Rhyme...that is the question.

*A consistent rhyme scheme helps a song be sing-along-able, as well as makes the song easier to remember.*

1. Rhyming usually feels more sing-songy when your meter is the same in those rhymed lines. Change your meter for those rhymed lines and it feels totally different.
2. Make use of inner rhymes (rhymes within the lines)

*The broadcast on the orange radio all morning  
Was just the same ole global warming buzz*

*The Hymn," Immortal Invisible"  
Immortal, invisible God only wise  
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes  
Most blessed, most glorious the ancient of days  
Almighty, victorious Your great name we praise*

*Unresting, unhasting and silent as light  
 Not wanting, nor wasting Thou rule us in might  
 Your justice like mountains high soaring above  
 Your clouds which are fountains of goodness and love*

3. Use False or Near Rhymes
4. EXERCISE: Rewrite the lyrics to “Jesus Loves Me” Try changing the meter of lines 2 and 4, while keeping the original rhyme scheme. Or mix up the rhyme scheme by using false or near rhymes instead of perfect ones.

#### **IV. Strategies for Improving Your Melodies and Harmonies**

- A. Rooksby-More than with other aspects of songwriting, the best melodies do often come as sheer inspiration. Many great melodies are composed by songwriters untutored in any music theory or songwriting craft. They’ll recall how the tunes of some of their most famous numbers simply “came” to them-sometimes even with a few words of lyric. Paul McCartney has described how he heard the entire melody of “Yesterday” in a dream. It seemed so familiar and so rounded he was convinced it must have been a tune he had once heard and forgotten. He later realized this wasn’t the case... So given that inspiration is vital to melody, does that mean melody writing cannot be learned? Not quite? What CAN be learned is an awareness of how melody works and what possibilities are hidden in any given idea.
- B. Baloch/Owens-Good melody writing is a combination of the creative and technical.
- C. Fourteen Melodic possibilities to explore. (See handout for notation of these)
  1. Try breaking up your original line into smaller segments. (See #1 on handout)
  2. Try following interval leaps with adjacent notes, and vice versa (See #2 on handout)
  3. Try inverting the movement heavy measures (See #3 on handout)
  4. Try unique phrasing or meter that feels natural (See #4 on handout)
  5. Try mixing in and out of chord notes (See #5 on handout)
  6. Try using the same rhythmic pattern and move the notes with the chord changes. (See #6 on handout)
  7. Try repeating the same melody over different chords. (See #7 on handout)
  8. Try retaining the same pitch and changing the rhythm.

9. If your phrase starts on the measures downbeat, try leaving it open. (See #8 on handout)
10. Try experimenting with Matched (identical), Inexactly Matched (retains some components of original) and Unmatched (entirely different) melodic phrases (See #10a, b, c on handout)
11. Try Outer Matching (Two shorter phrases followed by one longer of same length or vice versa) (See #11 on handout)
12. Try an ascending line (See #12 on handout)
13. Try a descending line ((See #13 on handout)
14. Try an arched or Inverted Arch melodic contour (See #14 on handout)

#### D. Harmony

1. The chords you choose helps to set the emotion of your song, provides interest, texture and sometimes becomes a hook in itself. The first chords that come to mind may not be the best for your song.
2. Be aware that a specific chord progression can become popular for a season, not unlike a kind of beat (disco!) or a production sound. After time it can become “tired” or overused and not have the impact of a possible alternative.
3. Explore Your Harmonic Possibilities (See handout)

## VII. Recommended resources on songwriting

1. Jason Blume, 6 Steps To Songwriting Success, (New York, New York, Billboard Books 2004)
2. Pat Pattison, Writing Better Lyrics (Cincinnati, Ohio, Writers Digest Books)
3. Sheila Davis, The Craft of Lyric Writing (Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer’s Digest Books, First edition, 1985)
4. Sheila Davis, The Songwriters Idea Book (Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer’s Digest Books, First edition, 1992)
5. Joel Hirschhorn, The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Songwriting (Indianapolis, IN: Alpha Books, 2001)
6. Jimmy Webb, Tunessmith (New York, New York: Hyperion, 1998)
7. Molly-Ann Leikin, How to Make a Good Song A Hit Song, (Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Hal Leonard Corporation 1990)