



SONG DYNAMICS

Is Your Song a Roller Coaster or a Freight Train?



By Alex Forbes

In my 20-something years as a professional songwriter, I've noticed that it's usually the most dynamic, manipulative, thrill-ride-type songs — mine and other's — that become the most successful. Why? Because listeners who've "heard it all before" respond most strongly to well crafted lead-ups and payoffs, highs and lows, and unexpected twists and turns. Sure, a little bit of predictability is fine — in fact it's rather comforting — but to be effective a great song has to deliver some real punch, too.

So how can you increase your song "thrill factor"? In this article, we'll address many ways to enhance the lyrical dynamics of your song. For the sake of brevity, let's assume you're writing a song in the classic Verse/Chorus form, though many of these guidelines apply to AAA and AABA songs too.

Part I: Creating Lyrical Dynamics

A skilled lyricist has dozens of tools available to magnify a song's dynamic flow. Starting with the first few lines of Verse 1, your purpose is to "suck 'em in" and "build 'em up." I liken this to the part of the roller coaster ride where the car pulls away from the platform and starts inching up the first steep incline. This is where you set the scene, establishing who, what, when, where and why. How can you make your listeners sit up, fasten their seat belts and hold onto their hats? Consider these elements:

- **The speaker/listener relationship.** Who's speaking to whom? Am "I" addressing "you," are "we" addressing a larger "you," or is the singer speaking in the third person about "them"? Make the strongest possible choice.
- **The tone and mood.** Is the song's tone formal, slangy, conversational, arty? Is the mood you create edgy, soothing, romantic, anthemic... or something else entirely?
- **The speaker's point of view or perspective.** Is he or she angry, euphoric, mournful, yearning, wise? A strong point of view is much more compelling than a wishy-washy one.
- **The song's organizing principle.** Is it a story song, a "laundry list" song, a novelty song, a "state of being" song? Do your first few lines clarify your song's essential nature? Does each successive line add momentum and

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pique listeners' curiosity?

- **Your use of literary devices.** Have you used repetition, imagery, alliteration, metaphor, onomatopoeia, symbols, humor and more to enhance and amplify your meaning?
- **Rhythm, rhyme and meter.** Have you made the most of the language, using sounds, accents and metric patterns to enhance your meaning? Are your lines short or long, wordy or sparse? Does your rhyme scheme feel strikingly fresh, or boxy and predictable?

By less than a minute into your song, listeners should know where the singer stands, what's going on, and why they should care. Ideally, they are invested in the outcome, sitting on the edge of their proverbial seats, yearning for the "pay 'em off" crescendo of the Chorus.

A great Chorus delivers a breathtaking thrill of intense gratification. After the lead-up of a well-written Verse, the Chorus feels inevitable, yet not predictable. Check out these elements of your Chorus:

- **The song's hook.** Have you condensed the essence of your song into a diamond-like nugget of lyrical truth? Does it effectively provoke thought, emotion, laughter, or spiritual uplift?
- The level of "stickiness." Is your Chorus like gum on your shoe? Is its lyric singable and simple, pithy without being ponderous? Ask yourself, Does my chorus, and especially my hook, contain enough substance to bear repeating? Because a killer chorus will be repeated endlessly through the ages!
- Amount of contrast with the Verse. Bend over backwards to amplify the contrast between sections, using different rhythms and rhyme schemes, lyrical densities and line lengths, declarative rather than descriptive lines, new patterns and styles of repetition, etc.
- Clarity of your song's message. By the chorus, your moment of truth has arrived! Work to discover the strongest possible way to convey your song's deepest conviction.

After this peak moment, your dynamic flow will generally ease up somewhat in Verse 2. But keep your song's momentum going strong by advancing the story or deepening the insight into the situation you're exploring. Verse 2 is equivalent to the part of the roller coaster ride after that first big drop when you catch your breath and pick up speed for the next hill. Give your listeners lots of reasons to keep listening! Then your successive Choruses can continue to provide more and bigger thrills and spills.

Part II: Creating Melodic Dynamics

If the purpose of your song is to sear a fresh idea indelibly into the hearts and souls of your listeners, a killer

melody has the power to really make it stick. Whereas your lyrical lines hit people above the neck, the right lyric married up with the right melody hits 'em more in the gut. It's this one-two punch that gives songwriting the potential to move others to laugh, cry, dance, act and feel.

For my money, the best melodies, like the best lyrics, are the most manipulative ones — and I mean that in the most positive sense of the word. A successful melody unfold like a great short story, packing a lot of action into a brief span of time, and delivering a valuable realization by the end. So the question becomes this: how can you "suck 'em in, build 'em up and pay 'em off" most effectively with your melody?

For the sake of simplicity, let's imagine that you have a near-completed lyric in a Verse/Chorus form, and are experimenting with finding the best melody for it. First, dive deeply into your lyric, letting it permeate your innards. Then turn on your recording device, quick!

- **Let the lyric tell you what it wants.** Is it begging to be a soaring ballad, an edgy rock track, or maybe a groove-oriented dance or R&B song? Every spark of inspiration has, at its core, a strong identity, and your job as songwriters is to honor and serve that unique expression.
- **Speak the lyrics out loud.** I know it feels silly, but it's a great way to notice where the natural accents, pauses and internal rhythms occur. Try underlining words, circling rhymes, and putting accents on the page to indicate strong accents or rhythmic patterns. Indicate which lines bear repeating.
- **Which comes first, the Chorus or the Verse?** Either... just start somewhere! The key to writing better melodies is writing lots of melodies, and the more risks you take, the more likely you are to hit upon a something that marries up perfectly with your lyric. So try 10 or 100 ideas on for size, knowing you'll narrow it down to the best ones. Just don't settle for mediocrity.
- **Establish "home base" right off the bat.** Use your first few notes to carve out some melodic territory, i.e. what key you're in, and what scales or families of notes you're choosing from. Let the lyrics point you in the right direction, but don't be afraid to play against expectations by putting a "happy" lyrical line against notes in a minor scale, for example.
- **Soak your lyrics for all they're worth.** In other words, use your melody to wring meaning out of every syllable, every silence, every rhythmic nuance in each line. For example, it was no accident when Holland/Dozier/Holland put that glorious pause in "Stop... In the Name of Love." Or check out the yearning implied by that daring octave leap in the first line of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." What unexplored opportunities is your lyric giving you?

In terms of thematic development, the moment you string a few notes together you're off and running. Once you've found a melody that suits the meaning and rhythmic/rhyme schemes of your first few lines, the question becomes this: How can you keep the ride exciting, unpredictable and yet still accessible? How can you build

on what you've started, eventually bringing your song to a climactic payoff?

The trick is to use enough repetition to make your melody catchy, while gradually adding enough "new information" to keep it from becoming boring. Too much new information and listeners will just tune out, overwhelmed. So it becomes a balancing act, and your instincts really come into play. The mind and the body both love repetitive patterns, so it's a matter of making up stimulating, fresh patterns and putting them in the most satisfying order.

Also, contrast is key. Make each section of the song melodically distinct, or people will feel that they're treading water. Here are some ways to juice up your melody:

- **Always seek out the best marriage with your lyric.** Make the most of the meaning, the sound and the "vibe" of each line.
- **Decide what's most important, and emphasize it.** Use every trick in the book to drive home your main points. Make your best line or your hook stand out by using a killer high note, a rhythmic jolt, a surge of repetition, an unexpected melodic twist, or all of the above!

- **Create drama using tension, release and resolution.** Once you've established your "home base," use your verse melody to ratchet up the tension, which you'll finally release in your chorus.

- **Use melodic range for effect.** For example, place your verses lower in the singer's register, with closer intervals, saving the "money note" for the chorus.

- **Vary your note lengths and rests.** Don't get into a rut of making each syllable last 1 beat, for example. And give listeners ample time to absorb new melodic information by using a "pause that refreshes." These are also great spots to insert instrumental riffs and hooks. Keep listeners on the edge of their seats wondering what will happen next.

Hit songwriter Alex Forbes helps aspiring songwriters find their muse. To unleash the full potential of your creativity through the powerful medium of song, and receive other free articles, visit

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