



## Hit or Miss?

Are Your Songs  
Ready For the World?

By Alex Forbes

**Most songwriters dream of the day when their song wins a Grammy, blares out of millions of speakers, and hits the top of the *Billboard* charts. Regardless of the genres you write in, it is possible to scale the heights of the music world with your material, if it appeals to a huge number of people. So how can you judge whether your song has the potential to "make it big?"**

There are several key characteristics that make hit songs stand out from the pack. Take a giant step back from one of your best songs and answer these questions. When your answer is "no," use that as an incentive to polish your work or make your next song even better.

Also, note that many songs are "ends in themselves," created to fulfill a less commercial purpose or answer a more private need. Some of the guidelines below don't necessarily apply to such personal songs.



### Does the very beginning of your song set an intriguing MOOD?

The first few moments of your tune are akin to the establishing shots at the beginning of a movie, laying out the landscape you're about to explore. What, exactly, are you setting your listeners up to expect? Envision the impact you want to have, and come out swinging.

You might open up with a signature beat, a hint of your melodic/lyrical hook, or a catchy instrumental riff. Usually you don't want to "give away the store," but rather pique your listeners' curiosity and create a hunger for the big payoff to come.



### Do the opening lines establish a strong POINT OF VIEW?

People look to songs to express powerful emotions and ideas that they can't necessarily express themselves. "Wishy-washy" doesn't cut it. The courageous songwriter takes a strong, passionate stand right from the start, carving out an acre of territory both lyrically and musically.

Of course, taking a stand on anything is more likely to provoke others and open you up to criticism. This can feel vulnerable... and extremely alive. If you dig deep and dare to unearth

what you really think and feel, you'll write a more compelling song. And in the end, you'll be speaking for others who share your experience — and there may be millions of them out there. It's a risk worth taking.



### Are your ideas FRESH & FLAVORFUL, as opposed to stale & tired?

Musical and lyrical clichés might be the first things you latch onto when you start to write. Love, sadness, anger, inspiration... all of life's mysteries can seemingly be reduced to cheap, easy shorthand. The only problem is that if your purpose is to move people, clichés have no power whatsoever.

Experience and relish your unique way of seeing the world, then express it fully instead of playing it safe. Experiment with all of the colors on your palette, making each song a celebration of your passion, unlike any that came before.



### Do your song's DYNAMICS keep peoples' interest?

A great song is a thrill ride full of twists and turns, tension and release, more like the path of a roller coaster than a freight train. Is your song simple enough to follow, always propelling listeners forward, with peaks and valleys along the way and a sense of resolution at the end?

As I like to say, "suck 'em in, build 'em up, and pay 'em off." Start out creating melodic and lyrical tension, build up that sense of expectation, and finally pay it off with your chorus or hook. Then do it again, only heightening the action and forwarding the story. Maybe the addition of a bridge will add additional interest or insight. Don't take one limited idea and flog it over and over, flattening out the dynamic flow.

(continued on the next page)

Feel free to reprint and distribute this article with attribution to Alex Forbes and [CreativeSongwriter.com](http://CreativeSongwriter.com). Thanks!

Also, when you hit upon a melodic or lyrical passage that bears repeating, go for it. The brain enjoys repetition, to a degree.



## Are your lyric and melody perfectly married, forming a UNIFIED WHOLE?

The beauty of songwriting is that it combines your skills as a speaker of the language with your musical, non-verbal side. In a hit song, the melody is often inextricably linked to the lyric, and one immediately calls up the other. A skilled songwriter can sustain this marriage throughout the song, creating a seamless unity of the two streams that can never be torn asunder.

“Prosody” is the literary term used to describe this marriage. Important words, syllables and ideas might receive greater emphasis with a held note, an interval leap or a rhythmic accent, for example. And lyrical meaning can be magnified with fitting melodic choices. For example, if you’re expressing anger, an abrupt, angular jolt of dissonance might serve the line better than a flowing, languorous passage.



## Are you effectively using LYRICAL AND MELODIC DEVICES to increase the impact of your song?

Skillful songwriters have dozens of tricks up their sleeves, enabling them to craft powerful songs that are also lasting works of art. Expertise in using rhyme, meter, imagery, alliteration, symbolism and many other literary devices will bring your lyrics to life. And your use of musical tools including melodic sequences, rhythmic surprises, interval leaps and more will make your melodies truly sing.

Learn the various terminology and practice using these devices until they’re second nature to you. Why settle for the mundane when all of these tried and true elements of craft can better communicate the colorful, exciting truth of your experience?



## Have you used INSTRUMENTAL FIGURES to catch the listener’s ear?

Sprinkling tasty little lines and riffs throughout your song really spices it up. Experiment with repeating patterns, unusual sounds and effects, or juicy rhythmic nuggets that stick in people’s heads and amplify your meaning. Hit songs usually have several of these catchy bits, making them instantly identifiable and memorable.



## Does each section of the song CONTRAST with the ones before it?

It’s essential that songwriters learn the basics of song structure and are able to construct AAA, AABA and especially nowadays, Verse/Chorus songs. These song forms have endured over the years because they work, and they work best when there are clear contrasts between sections, enabling the listener to experience forward movement over time.

You can heighten the contrast between sections by using the many tools at your disposal: melodic variation, rhythmic shifts, new chord progressions, contrasting rhyme schemes, metric patterns, line lengths, etc. I subscribe to “the theory of compensation” that says that if, for instance, your chord pattern stays the same over the course of several sections, your melody and lyrics need to work overtime to add

contrast, or your song gets boring, fast. Honor your listener’s attention span. It’s notoriously short, and requires constant stimulation.



## Does your song have a KILLER HOOK?

All roads lead to your hook, which most often resides in your song’s chorus. That delicious tension you’ve built up, musically and lyrically, is gloriously released, delivering a huge, palpable payoff. A great hook is an ear-gasm, begging to be repeated over and over for maximum satisfaction. These wondrous peak moments are much-sought-after and rarely achieved, and the ground shifts beneath your feet when you’ve written one. It’s unforgettable, and everyone in earshot will agree.

The killer hook is the holy grail for songwriters, separating the amateurs from the pros, the singles from the album cuts. Of course, not all songs reach this level of “hookiness,” but practice makes perfect! Also, keep in mind that more hooks is merrier. Some of the greatest songs have many vocal and instrumental hooks in addition to the main one.



## Does your TITLE immediately grab attention?

Your title needs that special something to make it stand out from the crowd. Does it have a clever twist, a strong point of view, an invented phrase, a provocation of some sort? Does it use rhyme, repetition, alliteration, or some other literary device? What will make it stick in peoples’ minds? The title often uses the same lyric as the hook, for obvious reasons, but not always.



## Does your theme, your message, your story, strike a UNIVERSAL chord?

In many great songs, universal truths are strikingly captured in the most detailed, specific lyric. This might seem counter-intuitive, but it works like a charm. By delving into the deep well of your life you could tap into the collective human experience, capturing the essence of a time, a culture, a political or social movement or a shared state of mind. Songwriters chronicle the human story line, and your message might speak for millions of others.



## Does your song PROVOKE EMOTION, making people laugh, cry, or feel strongly?

Compare your song to a court case. Each lyrical line and every melodic phrase is a piece of evidence in support of your side of the story. The hook is your summation to the jury, and the verdict rests on whether or not the listener is moved, swayed, convinced of your point of view. Have you made a strong appeal and won them over with every tool in your kit?

This is the job of the songwriter: to let listeners look deeply into your world, and see themselves reflected there.

Happy writing!

---

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 [www.CreativeSongwriter.com](http://www.CreativeSongwriter.com)

Phone: (845) 220-7543 • Email: [alex@creativesongwriter.com](mailto:alex@creativesongwriter.com)  
Snail Mail: P.O. Box 764, Wingdale NY 12594