



Berklee Online



SONGWRITING

DEGREE HANDBOOK

SONGWRITING DEGREE HANDBOOK

Find your voice as a songwriter with Berklee's time-tested techniques. The following lesson material is taken from Berklee Online's Bachelor of Professional Studies degree program in Songwriting. Want to learn more about earning a degree online? Contact us at 1-866-BERKLEE (USA) / +1-617-747-2146 (INT'L) or advisors@online.berklee.edu.

- 3 The 10-Step Process to Songwriting**
From the Online Course *Commercial Songwriting Techniques* by Andrea Stolpe

- 7 How to Write a Hit Song**
From the Online Course *Songwriting: Writing Hit Songs* by Jimmy Kachulis

- 10 The Business of Song Placement and Song Licensing**
From the Online Course *Songwriting for Film and TV* by Brad Hatfield

- 13 Making Your Melody Work**
From the Online Course *Songwriting: Melody* by Jimmy Kachulis

- 16 The Art of Setting Your Words to Music**
From the Online Course *Lyric Writing: Writing Lyrics to Music* by Pat Pattison

- 19 Starting With the Foundation: How to Build Harmony**
From the Online Course *Songwriting: Harmony* by Jimmy Kachulis

- 22 How to Avoid Writer's Block**
From the Online Course *Lyric Writing: Tools and Strategies* by Pat Pattison

- 26 Writing Scores for the Big and Small Screens**
From the Online Course *Music Composition for Film and TV* by Ben Newhouse

The 10-Step Process to Songwriting

From *Commercial Songwriting Techniques*

By Andrea Stolpe

We songwriters are constantly looking for great song material. We're also looking to express our ideas with an artistic voice that is as unique as we are. Furthermore, most of us want to simplify the process and expand our marketability. One important key to marketability in the hit song market is, of course, content.

Effective songs paint rich images for the listener. Imagine that your songs are paintings. Are you the proud creator of stick figures scrawled across construction paper, or does your palette of texture, color, and light capture the desires and deepest wanderings of those gazing upon it?

To ensure that the latter is the case, you can use a writing process called destination writing. In destination writing, we begin with one key word—a place—as the momentum for your song content. The key to destination writing is to use all of your senses—touch, taste, smell, sight, sound, and also movement—as springboards for creativity. When those senses are involved, the writing springs to life.

Six Keys of Connection:

- | | |
|-----------------|--------------------|
| 1. Touch | 4. Smell |
| 2. Taste | 5. Sound |
| 3. Sight | 6. Movement |

The connection that your audience makes with your lyrics depends on the power of this one key word. But how do we build that connection with the audience? By illustrating our piece through specifics and actions. We immediately know the meanings of words like 'walk' and 'say'. But these words are generic and will not engage any audience by themselves. But there are dynamic alternatives. Consider the sentence below.

And I was saying

We know what's being said, but it doesn't mean anything.

And I was stuttering

And I was stammering

And I was blurting out

All of these phrases swapped out the boring 'say' with verbs that are emotionally charged. Verbs and adjectives like these will keep your audience's attention.

Once you've got a handle on what words will draw your audience, it is time to craft a compelling narrative. Any destination writing will consist of two types of detail: external and internal. Assume that your song is centered on a primary character. The external details will be what happens around your character and the internal details will be their thoughts and feelings. Any good song will be a mix of both. Toggling, or the art of combining internal

The 10-Step Process to Songwriting

and external detail, is integral to providing balance in your lyrics. Too much internal detail and your song will be weighed down by the thoughts of the characters. Too much external and the audience will have nothing personal to identify with.

So how are our words going to work with the music? How we expect the melody to move is going to influence how the lyrics move as well. Every new melodic idea presented in a song – a movement from the verse to the pre-chorus, for example – will go hand in hand with a new lyrical idea. I'm sure you're familiar with "Mary Had a Little Lamb."

Mary had a little lamb
Whose fleece was white as snow
Everywhere that Mary went
The lamb was sure to go

These four lines contain two musical and two lyrical phrases ("Mary had... white as snow" and "Everywhere...lamb was sure to go."). But this isn't the only way to attack these four lines. We could have kept describing the various attributes of Mary's little lamb over all four lines. In that case, we would continue the same melodic idea for the entire verse. We could also change ideas with each new line if we have a new melodic idea to accompany these ideas. The melodic phrasing determines not only where the topics begin and end but also where a rhyme might occur. For "Mary Had a Little Lamb," the rhyme was occurring between the two large musical phrases.



Mary had a little lamb whose
fleece was white as snow **A**
And everywhere that Mary went
the lamb was sure to go **A**

If the four lines were all representing four smaller melodic phrases, the rhyme scheme might look more like this. Note that wherever the melodic phrase closes, rhyme occurs.

Mary had a little lamb **A**
and Mary had a pony too **B**
the sun was rising on the land **A**
and May was slipping into June **B**

Once you have your primary lyrical sections in place and developed, it is time to contrast. Imagine if every section of a song had the same number of lines, the same rhyme scheme, the same rhythm and the same toggling pattern. Sounds boring. By changing up the rhyme scheme, changing the rhythm, adding or subtracting lines, and altering the toggling pattern, a songwriter can keep things interesting over the course of their work.

The 10-Step Process to Songwriting

Just from these short exercises, it's clear to see that the process of commercial songwriting is based on a number of patterns. These patterns make up the content of hit songs and these are patterns that a songwriter can reproduce while still maintaining

a unique voice. Knowing these patterns is critical to the success of both beginners and experienced writers. With this in mind, the best way I've found to approach commercial songwriting is through something I call "The 10-Step Process."

The 10-Step Process

Step 1:

Destination-write.

Step 2:

Find rhyme pairs.

Step 3:

Choose a rhyme scheme and toggling pattern.

Step 4:

Add prepositions and conjunctions.

Step 5:

Choose a plot progression.

Step 6:

Destination-write again using thought/feeling language.

Step 7:

Look for titles and write the chorus.

Step 8:

Write a second verse and pre-chorus.

Step 9:

Write the bridge.

Step 10:

Assess verbs, tense, and point of view, and conversational quality.

By utilizing all of these steps, you'll be able to craft commercially viable songs with ease.

How to Write a Hit Song

from *Songwriting: Writing Hit Songs*

by Jimmy Kachulis

How do they do it? Why does a Beatles or a Michael Jackson song capture a listener's attention the way they do? What is their secret, what's the formula? If all of us songwriters had the answers to these questions, we would all be a lot richer.

While there's no real "formula" to crafting a potential hit, there are methodologies to it. As anyone who has spent time listening to the radio can tell, hit songs come in a few well-defined forms. This is no accident. These writers, producers, and singers on the radio all know how to put together a song that will probably be a smash. So how do you think the pros do it? They listen to hits of the past and they use them as resources for their ideas. That's one of the less well-kept secrets of pop songwriting. The way they make it their own is by using some of the skills I'll mention below to make variations.

The structure of a song will determine what kind of effect it will have on the listener, whether it will be a hit or not. One of the most common and possibly the most effective forms of a hit to write is the verse/chorus. This song form goes hand in hand with the dynamics of the audience:

1. The audience usually listens to the story the verses are telling
2. And then the chorus will come around, summarizing the story as the audience sings along

Lyrical speaking, the chorus is going to summarize the main idea of the lyric and is going to be the emotional high point – the highest intensity section – of your song. It wouldn't be a bad idea to include song title in there too. You want people to know what your song is called, right? Now how do you want the music to feel? Want something happy and upbeat? Make your chorus major key with a high tempo and maybe use eighth notes. Want something a bit funkier and maybe a bit more intimate? Slow the tempo down and use a mixolydian mode instead.

Once the general feel of the chorus is in place, we can start to think about emphasis. If you're featuring your title in the chorus, the cadence is going to be your friend. By having the title "straddle" the cadence – starting at the beginning and then ending on the I chord – you're guaranteed to have it planted in the listener's head. Let's not forget the melodic tools we still have at our disposal. Long notes will make any lyric, especially the title, far more dramatic. Ending on the downbeat, on the first beat of the measure, is a subtle but very common way to bring out the title too. What do "Message in a Bottle," "No Woman No Cry" and "Born in the USA" all have in common? They were all massive hits and they all used these melodic tools I just mentioned. So how many ways can we use these tools? Well, there are seven standard types of choruses – choruses that state the title at one point or another. You can use all of the tools in standard types of choruses different ways with each type of chorus. So you do the math.

How to Write a Hit Song

The chorus alone could have whole lessons written about it. But it's not the only part of a song. Any hit needs to be greater than the sum of its parts and the section that is going to make up most of those parts are the verses. As the verse is a supporting idea, many successful tracks will have verses that remain melodically, harmonically, and lyrically static. This ensures that your verses not pull the power away from other sections. For example, the same way that we use cadences to ramp up the chorus, we shouldn't be using cadences in the verses. Instead, you could resolve to have your verses end on chords that aren't the tonic.

I mentioned before that you're going to be telling the story in the verses. If you want to build a conversational vibe in the verses, make use of short notes, a limited pitch range, and having the melody in the low to middle register. All of this doesn't mean that the lyrics have to be boring. The audience is going to be listening during the verses. That means that the verses can be the perfect time to bring in some complex, sophisticated melodic ideas.

The verse/chorus form we need two more sections to act as connective tissue for the verses and the chorus: the bridge and the pre-chorus. These sections function in similar ways—they connect and contrast with the material that comes before and after, and they both build intensity into the next section.

Lyrically speaking, our bridge will contrast in content with the verse and the chorus. This can be as simple as changing the tense, by generalizing if the lyrics prior were specific, or by focusing on a new emotion. Musically speaking, you can make

the bridge “move” with a different chord progression, then the verses or chorus (and again, avoiding a cadence), or by having the bridge modulate away and back to the key of the song. Making the bridge a bar longer or shorter than the other sections is a great way to build tension.

TT
TTTT
- T - T
T - T -
T - - T
- - - T
T - - -

Figure 1: The seven standard types of choruses

The pre-chorus will also contrast with the chorus and verse melodically, harmonically, and formally. However, a pre-chorus will also break down the intensity at the beginning of the section only to ratchet it back up toward the end into the coming chorus. Slowing things down, lower notes, and longer phrases will break the intensity down. To build the pre-chorus back up near the end, an ascending melodic shape and losing some of the space between the words will get the audience ready for the chorus.

Within a single type of song form, the verse/chorus, there are endless possibilities and countless variations to be made. But there are other forms and variations to explore. As you continue to hone your craft and create new material with some of the tools I've shared here, you might just come up with a smash hit or your own. When that happens would you mind crediting me as a co-writer?

The Business of Song Placement & Song Licensing

from *Songwriting for Film and TV*

by Brad Hatfield

You are about to become a more marketable songwriter. At least in terms of having your songs work great in movies and TV shows.

Have you ever heard a song in a movie or television show and exclaimed, “I could have written that!”? Well, you probably can, but as you’ll find, writing for movies or television shows is more than just writing a good song. It’s about making a good song work with visual media.

Writing songs for film and television is nothing new, but the explosion of visual media output today has created an increased demand for a broad range of songs that will work dramatically as part of the overall production. And a director’s or music supervisor’s choice of a song can make an unknown songwriter or musical act an overnight sensation and potentially open doors to a fruitful and lasting career.

This increased popularity in music featured in television shows has come with the changes of use of the featured songs. In the old days, a featured song might have been the equivalent of sonic wallpaper. Today, the melody of a placed song will weave its way into the DNA of the scene it is featured in. If there is lyrical content, it may become part of the storyline. The feel of the track supports the onscreen atmosphere, just like underscore would.



Now for one of the unglamorous realities of songwriting for film and TV: you’re not going to have the final word on your material. A good skill to pick up early on is the ability to write on demand. In fact, songwriting for film and TV is almost always “by emergency.” When writing on demand you have to realize that the song itself is not the star of the show. One needs to understand their role as a contributor. Besides that, people involved in any film or TV project are going to give input and you’re going to take that input. After all, the people you’re working for might not be musicians or songwriters but everyone knows about music – just ask them!

You’re also going to get conditional requests. A producer might want a song to feature female vocals or have a guitar lead or be written in a certain key or mode. Not only that but chances are you’re going to be working on a number of projects that will require you to make some changes after you’ve handed them the “finished” song product. This is a business where you will have to check your ego at the door if you want to succeed.

The Business of Song Placement & Song Licensing

But writing on demand isn't the only way to have your material featured in film or television. Some songwriters are probably already familiar with the concept of song libraries. Song libraries contain "stock" music that can be licensed out to TV shows, movies and commercial productions. These song libraries could easily be what gets your career off the ground and what sustains you in the long run. Your material needs to be up to snuff though. After all, these libraries are only good as the material they host, so they're only going to include the best of the submissions they receive.

So you might already have all the skills in place to write great songs, get them produced, and be well connected enough to get your songs placed all by yourself. That's great, but it's inefficient. Why labor alone when you can strike up a creative partnership? Having a writing partner (or better yet, a team) will expedite any song writing process. And

“This is a business where you will have to check your ego at the door if you want to succeed.”

I'm speaking from experience here; I would not be where I am in the music industry if it weren't for collaboration. Period. The end.

The power of collaboration extends to every phase of the songwriting process, especially during production and post-production. A key to successful collaboration, outside of clear communication, is establishing recording guidelines. The rules of collaboration need to apply to the people you are used to working closely with as well as to

outside parties. Here are a few quick examples of where some adherence to guidelines will help the songwriting process.

- Say a singer contributes their tracks with the reverb and delay already on. That's fine but be sure to get the "dry" tracks, or the tracks without the effects in place.
- Are you recording a live drummer? Make sure your mic arrangement allows for a clear sound on each track from the floor tom to the crash, just don't go crazy.
- Speaking of tracks, don't forget to give those tracks obvious names (example: for the overhead left mic track, OL.wav; the floor tom mic track, FL TOM .wav; etc...)
- Before sending a MIDI track, prepare your file for export, then open up the exported file yourself to make sure everything is there before you send it. I call this an "idiot check."

To make it in the world of commercial songwriting, it's a given that you need to know how to put a track together. But that's not enough. You'll need to sharpen your technique as a writer. You'll need to expand your work possibilities by exploring collaboration and all of the writing and production opportunities it can afford. Finally, you will also gain a better understanding of the business side – especially for licensing and getting exposure for your songs. Once you've got all that down then the TV and film music world is your oyster.

Making your Melody Work

from *Songwriting: Melody*

by Jimmy Kachulis

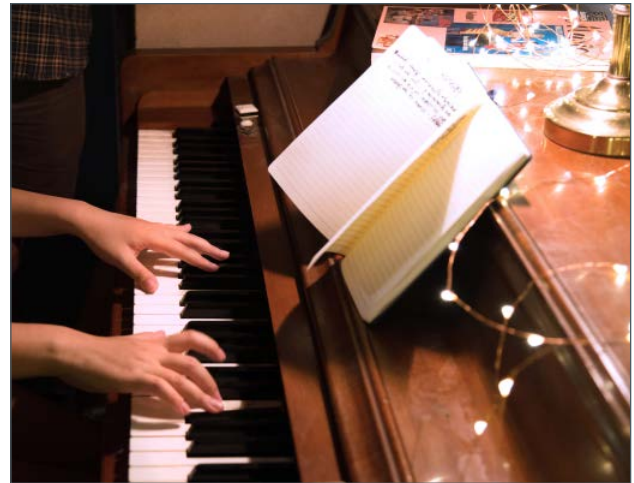
Melody is one of the most important and immediate aspects of a song. It's the element that the audience sings along with. It's the one that most intimately brings out the emotion of the lyric story. The melody also exists alongside and on top of the harmony. But that relationship can differ depending on the effect you are trying to achieve with your song.

When we're setting our lyrics together with the melody, there are three considerations we need to make.

- What is the length of each note?
- What is the length of the phrases?
- What is the space between the phrases?

These may seem like trivial questions, but the note length, phrase length, and phrase space will determine how your lyrics feel to the listener. Let's start with the notes. Listen to Bob Marley's "No Woman, No Cry." You'll find that the verses—which are conversational in tone, and build the story of the track—generally have shorter notes. The chorus, where the title of the track is repeated, consists of longer notes. This is no accident. When lyrics are set to longer notes, they are emphasized and are automatically more dramatic.

The melodic phrases you use for your lyric sections can be of a standard or surprising length. Standard



two and four bar phrases will give a song a steady feel. Surprising phrases – any other bar length – will keep things fresh and draw the listeners' attention. Good songs will have a mixture of both. And those phrases will gain additional power from the spaces in between them. Verses will benefit from having lyrics be more closely packed together with little room to breathe. Choruses, on the other hand, benefit from being drawn out and require more space between the lyrics as a result. Once you have the basic lyrical ideas in place for your melody, try developing them with some repetition or present new ideas as a contrast.

Sure, setting the lyrics to your melody is important. But it is the interaction between melody and harmony that will define your song. Let's say we already have a harmony in place, or we have a way in mind that we want our melody to work so we're not thinking of melodic ideas with no context. So let's develop a pitch. When it comes to the pitch of a melody, there are three approaches.

Making your Melody Work

1. **Melody On Chords**—Where the melody stays on a chord
2. **Melody Over Chords**—Where the melody is in the key, but is only loosely related to the chords
3. **Melody Against a Bass Line (Counterpoint)**—Where there are two melodies and the vocal melody moves against a bass melody

No matter what approach you take, you're going to start on one of the tones in the chord. Starting from the tones will allow you to build a compelling melody consisting of even the simplest materials and development. The example that comes to mind is Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire," a song whose melody would resemble a straight line if mapped out. If you want to decorate a melodic line like this (and you might, considering how flat it could sound), you can zig-zag between the neighboring notes that reside right above and below your original tone. However many chord tones you try to base your melody on, understand that each will have an effect, creating a distinct melodic shape.

- **Stationary**—A straight line
- **Zig-zag**—Decorates a straight line with a neighbor
- **Ascending**—Starts low and goes up
- **Descending**—Starts high and goes down
- **Arch**—Starts low, goes up and then down
- **Inverted Arch**—Starts high, goes down and then back up

But say you really want to spice things up with your melody. Counterpoint between a bass line melody moving against the vocal melody might do the trick. But not all bass lines are built equal. The easiest way to determine if the bass melody would make for good counterpoint is if it could be sung. Bass lines that move all over the staff will be useless unless you're going to be scat singing. There are four kinds of standard counterpoint: parallel, similar, oblique and contrary. If a bass line has the same melodic shape as the vocal line, then it is a form of parallel counterpoint. Similar counterpoint features a bass line and vocal melody that move in essentially the same direction, though not as closely as parallel. Now here's where things get interesting; oblique counterpoint will have either the bass or vocal line revolve around a limited number of notes. The bass line might stay on one note or move around in an ostinato. The vocal line will stay in basically the same place. If you've heard the opening verse of "Stairway to Heaven" then you've heard oblique counterpoint. Finally, contrary counterpoint, as its name implies, have the bass and vocal lines moving in opposite directions; the bass line swings down while the vocal ascends, or vice versa.

These are just some of the basics of melodic development. I haven't begun going into developing a riff or making a melody from a mixolydian mode or in blues form. But you never leave the building blocks. The simplest methods of developing melody are tools you'll be using for the rest of your songwriting career. These methods are the gifts that keep on giving.

The Art of Seeing your Words

from *Lyric Writing: Writing Lyrics to Music*

by Pat Pattison

Stressing syllables, note values in swing time, and writing in 3/4 and 4/4 time. Did you think I was talking about the melody? One of the most beautiful aspects of the written and spoken word is how it lends itself to interpretation. When writing songs, the title, melody, harmony, and lyrics are all going to contribute to the impression that will be with whoever is listening. As the songwriter, you want to ensure that the feeling of the track is conveyed in both the music and lyrics. Without cohesion between the music and lyrics, the song will be hurt. Matching lyric and melody communicates your ideas smoothly and naturally, giving your listeners easy access to the feelings you created when you wrote your song. It gives them an entry to your intent.

There are many different ways to go about writing the words for your music. It doesn't matter if you write the lyrics or the melody first for a song. When you write lyrics first, it will help you create your melodies, because you'll already know what your lyric's rhythms are. There are cases where your lyrics and music are playing leapfrog—one piece of lyric generating a larger piece of music, which in turn, creates more lyric rhythms to match. And, of course, there are always those situations where you have to write that pesky second or third verse after most of the rest of the song is finished.

How the lyrics should be set to the music depends on the strength of each beat in the melodic line. The 4/4 two bar phrase on this page will illustrate the strength of each beat relative to one another. The strength of the beats, from strongest to weakest is 1, 3, 4, and 2. But what if we change up the wording a little bit, like changing "long days, long nights" to "day time, night time"? Look at the four bar phrase. Even reading it in your head it sounds different, but say it out loud. This illustrates the power of secondary stresses, the relationship between a phrase with a strong/secondary emphasis in the words.



So what happens in cases when we need to set lyrics to music that is already written? Lead singers and band lyricists will be very familiar with situations like this. Check out the diagram below. The bar is



in 4/4 time and is populated primarily with eighth notes. Because we're dealing with eighth notes, we have three levels of strength: beats 1 and 3 of each bar are strong, beats two and four of each bar are secondary stresses, and the upbeats (&) are weak. So look at the measures. The first and second bar

The Art of Seeing your Words

function in a pretty straightforward fashion. But look at bar 3 and you'll notice that the last two notes are on upbeats. Since there is no note on the fourth beat, and no note beginning on the downbeat of bar 4, these are both anticipations. They both gain a little more strength. Let's focus on this third bar then. When setting the lyrics, we have to consider where the syllable is going to fall. The third beat is, of course, strong, so put a strong syllable there. The final note is strong, too, so put a strong syllable there. The only question is what to do about 3. Should it be strong, secondary, or medium? Let's look at all three possibilities.

DUM DUM DUM — hard day's night

DUM dum DUM — daylight shines

DUM da DUM — first in line

I prefer the middle syllable being a secondary stress, since the anticipation makes it stronger, and especially since it's a surprise after all those regular eighth notes in a row.

So we now have a good sense of how the setting should work. But we can't forget about the story. At any point in a track – in the lyrics for the bridge, the verses, the pre-chorus, wherever – always make sure you can get the answers to these two questions:

- 1. Where did I just come from?**
- 2. Where do I go from here?**

Where did the first chorus come from, for example? What situations, people, actions, perspectives or attitudes preceded it? You're looking for ideas that lead naturally into the chorus's statement. Keep in



mind that when putting the lyrics together you're crafting a narrative. The listener is not going to have the same insights into the meaning of your track so it can be easy for a listener to get left behind if you're not careful.

Even with all the right words and a Pulitzer worthy narrative, if the structure of the words doesn't conform to the shape of the music then all of your power will be lost. There are simple tricks to building power in your music and lyrics. By separating or isolating a note by itself, it automatically gains prominence and power. Notes that are preceded by rests but followed by notes of lesser value gain power in this same way. But if that following note is longer, the first note will act as a pickup, lending power to the material that follows it.

Lyric writing is an integral skill for any songwriter. The melody and harmony will give your song its sonic power. But that is only a part of the equation. Good lyrics will be matched to your music. Good lyrics will communicate your intent. Good lyrics will let your words sing naturally. And good lyrics will make your song greater than the sum of its parts. So what's stopping you from taking your writing to the next level?

How to Build Harmony

from *Songwriting: Harmony*

by Jimmy Kachulis

Harmony is one of music's profound dimensions. Harmony is a background player, supporting the rest of the sonic cast. While melody articulates the conscious narrative, harmony gives shape to a song's subconscious emotional message or subtext. From building suspense to lending your song a polished, balanced feel, without harmony, no other part of the song will have context.

When we're talking about harmony, we're often thinking about the groove. So what is the groove? It's not just a funky bassline. The groove is a combination of elements—including tempo, feel, and rhythm—that make up the rhythmic core of a song. Whether the groove is played by a lone guitarist or a 15-piece mambo orchestra, all of these elements are present in their groove.

Individual groove elements are often very simple out of context. The power of a song's harmony will come from how these simple elements work against each other and how they are developed. Visualize the sound of a lone sustained chord. Without a groove, that chord would hold only limited interest. However, inside a groove, that same chord could be interesting enough to last the duration of an entire song. There are endless rhythmic variations that can be used to build up a groove. A guitarist and a bass player might use the same rhythmic ideas, though the idea might be offset by a beat or two. Similarly, the rhythmic ideas of the groove may share rhythmic



ideas in the melody. Basing some song's elements on others is an easy way to develop an organic, connected feel.

We can see how rhythm can add to the feel of the track. But how do we develop the overall sound? Like any artist you have access to a palette of different colors to work with. Major, minor, power and seventh chords are the four types of chordal colors. Each key color can serve as a source for harmonies that will work with the primary chord. Let's describe a C major chord color as bright yellow. Like a painter, you may choose to "paint" your song entirely with that shade of yellow. However, as the emotions of a song become more subtle, you may find yourself wanting to use other shades of yellow, and maybe even related colors. These chord colors are suggestive too.

It's important to remember that harmony thrives on variation. Changing the progression's length, chord rhythm, and chord order can all keep a harmony fresh. All of these are variations of timing, and the chords themselves stay intact. Varying the timing

How to Build Harmony

and order of a chord progression preserves much of its essential character, and helps you adapt a standard progression to a song. These changes can highlight a unique lyric, change the pacing of the groove, build excitement, and otherwise support the songwriter's dramatic intentions.

Putting together these variations in timing, color, and rhythm are easy enough out of context. The real trick is putting everything together. But how do we develop the harmony throughout a song? Think back to some of the songs you've heard over the years. Many of these songs use the same chord progressions, chord progressions that become familiar very quickly. These progressions occur so often, and are so powerful I refer to them as power progressions. They are so strong, that you can use any one of them alone to suggest an entire key color. The power progressions will be your constant allies as a songwriter. Consider the power progression below.

I IV V

This progression is arguably the most famous chord progression in rock music. Countless songs have been written around it. So what can we do with it? What if the chord progressed backwards? How would adding a minor second or a minor third into the progression change the feel of the harmony? By just considering the different chords we can add to this progression, we've opened up Pandora's box.

But we're not limited to the realm of major and minor. Let's look at how we can utilize modes in our progressions. For example, the difference between the major and mixolydian key colors is only one note. But what a difference it makes! Listen to Jimi Hendrix

“Without harmony, no other part of the song will have context.”



“Manic Depression” and pay attention to the riff. The song moves in an I bVII IV progression, another power progression. What kind of feel does it give the whole track? How does it support the lyrics? More importantly, now that you've heard it, what kind of variations could be made to mix things up a bit?

Power progressions like these are common phrases of speech, or expressions—tried and true musical objects. Though they may have been used countless times before, there is always something new that power progressions can be used to say. By modifying the power progressions, or any chord progressions, you can create endless variations of them, and spin countless songs from the same essential material.

Chord progressions, the power of a groove and the colors of the keys are all just barely scratching the surface of harmony. Harmony is the bedrock, the backbone of any song. Every harmonic development and every means of variation will become a tool in your arsenal. And with the more harmonic tools at your disposal, the easier the songwriting process will be.

How to Avoid Writer's Block

from *Lyric Writing Tools and Strategies*

by Pat Pattison

How important are the lyrics really? What kind of question is that?!

A well written song should be able to bring in a listener on the strength of its melody and harmony alone, right? Well consider this. The relationship between words and music is what makes a song, by definition, a song. Words build into phrases just like musical notes build into musical phrases and can be developed as such. Finally, the nature of the lyrics defines the feel and the interpretation of the song. But how do we do that?

Your job as a lyricist is to write words that work with music. You can write the lyric before the music, write the lyric to already written music, or write them both together. However you do it, you will always be working with at least three elements: ideas, sounds, and rhythms.

- Ideas are compelling concepts that you can convey to the listener and the words that will act as a the vehicle for those ideas.
- The sounds, the sonic relationship words have with one another, will raise a listener's expectations, speed up or slow down a song and can signal the beginning and end of a song.

- The order and delivery of the words builds a cadence that, when meshed perfectly with the rhythm of the music, create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Much of the power of your lyrics relies on their balance. In every aspect of our lives we try to even things out—bring them into symmetry. That's why being able to create a regular rhythm is so important. It gives you the ability to satisfy the listener's need for symmetry. Rhythm is created by repetition of figures through time. Music and language move through time and symmetry is measured by the relationship between what has been and what is now. So, if you have already heard

da DUM...

And then you hear another

da DUM...

you will hear the symmetry the two together create as

da DUM da DUM...

And if we then hear two more

da DUM da DUM...

you see even more symmetry

da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM

You can start tapping your foot now. You have established a regular rhythm. So an even number of lines with the same syllabic count in each line will create a balanced, even-feeling piece of prose.

How to Avoid Writer's Block

Balanced lyrical passages will have an even number of lines and a complementary rhyme scheme. But a song of just balanced lyrics will feel like a gentle, soothing lullaby. We add drama and tension to the mix with the addition of unbalanced sections. Featuring an odd number of lines, unbalanced sections are great in helping to emphasize lyrics that are presenting unstable emotions and imagery. Every song needs to be a mix of balanced and unbalanced sections. By having a mix or a split of these sections, we build the listener's interest. This illustrates the idea of prosody, the supporting of your meaning with your structure. Look at these lyrics:

*Slam the door and tell me
that you're leaving
Say you feel a darkness closing in
Tell me that you're gone I won't believe it
Just another last goodbye
It's ringing through the night
Run like a renegade
Run from the love we made
But we've gone too far too long
And we're Too Far, Too Far Gone*

The first section is unbalanced, supporting the emotion of the scene; the second section is balanced, stating the "truth." As structures into one another, the way they move should reflect the ideas they contain: worrying, feeling off balance, and then finding out everything's fine, or feeling completely content waiting here, loving you.

However balanced or unbalanced your section is won't matter if the words aren't up to par. It's not enough to have a rhyming dictionary. Though that is a good start. As a writer, you need to be



ready to find metaphor on a daily basis. Look for connections. Ask yourself:

- What quality does my object have?
- What else has that quality?

Imagine a gate. Think of all the nouns, verbs, and adjectives that go along with gate. Gates are openings or hinges that can swing, slam shut, and intimidate while being squeaky, sticky or rusty. So we've answered our first question. But what else is like a gate? What else is an opening to something else? A college exam is certainly something that opens up to new possibilities. Now we can build our metaphors.

She felt locked out by the weight and size of the exam. Her future hung on rusty hinges—would the exam open the way or refuse to budge at all? The last three questions slammed shut on her hopes for a scholarship.

We just hit the tip of the iceberg for metaphors. But what if you don't have any idea of what to write about? If you at least have a title for your song then you'll have something to work off of. Some songwriters believe that a song title is simply what you finally decide to put at the top of the page—something you decide on after you've finished the song—something that provides an interesting

How to Avoid Writer's Block

angle on the lyric content. Time for a controversial position: your title isn't just something you put at the top of the page. It is the centerpiece of your song—the target area that every aspect of the song aims for, controlling everything else. If there are elements in the song that don't relate to the title somehow, they don't belong in the song.

Even simple titles can carry a great deal of weight. A title (or hook) gives you a great deal of information immediately. For starters, it suggests ideas and concepts through the specific and the implied. A classic example of this is Elvis Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel." What does its title suggest?

1. A place you can check into or out of.
2. A place you can stay for a while, but no one really lives there.
3. Perhaps a place that, if you check in, your heart will be broken.
4. Perhaps a place that you go after your heart has been broken.

With that setting, consider all of the questions that have been brought up to the listener and the songwriter. Why would you go there? How do you feel about being there? When would you check in? Or out? We instantly have material for the story of the song.

Your title carries obvious thematic weight with the meanings of your words. But your title, like any other lyric, will have innate musical qualities. Look at the phrase below and say it aloud a few times. Don't overthink it. Just repeat the phrase until the flow of the words feels natural.

Cast Out the Demons.

Which word or syllable has the highest pitch? That highest pitch word, whichever it is, will have the most dramatic impact and it would make sense to put it in the strongest musical position in the chorus. But it's all a matter of intent. With your song, do you want to CAST out the demons, cast OUT the demons, or cast out the DEMONS? How you set the syllables rhythmically can express any of these emphases. Finding a good title and building off of it is just one of the many ways you can compose your lyrics.

This is just a brief overview into how you can come up with the material that will make up your lyrics. Now why don't you give it a shot?

Writing Scores for the Big and Small Screens

from *Music Composition for Film and TV*

by Ben Newhouse

Cinematic orchestral music is very powerful, capable of making the audience cry, laugh, cringe, jump, and/or sit on the edge of their seat. For the composer, hearing your music in a movie theater or broadcast on television is an immensely gratifying experience. Moments like these have been some of the most gratifying of my career.

At its core, film scoring is the discipline of composing music appropriate for a film. That immediately distinguishes it from any kind of absolute music, or any music that conceived of as a self-sufficient art form. Film scoring comes with a much different set of considerations compared to writing for the stage or the concert hall. More often than not, the music is not going to be the most important thing happening.

The fundamental role of music in film is to enhance the emotions that the audience is experiencing. It is invariably valuable to ask, "What do we want the audience to be feeling at this moment?" This will be the guiding question in deciding what kind of music to compose.

Look at whatever work you're writing for as though you were a literature professor. That question of what the audience should be feeling can be broken down even further:



- What is the plot in this scene?
- Who is the audience going to be relating to here?
- What is the person the audience is relating to feeling right now?
- What is the audience's perspective?

Consider a scene with intimate, close dialogue between two characters. There might be a hint of melancholy and sadness. The scene completes with a pan out of the characters looking off into the distance, towards a panorama and an uncertain future. Scenes like this call for smaller instrumentation with sustained textures running beneath the dialogue. It might work to keep the harmony in the minor key and fairly diatonic. The same applies for the melody; too many accidentals would distract attention away from what's happening on the screen. Keeping things metrically simple, either in 3/4 or 4/4, and with a slow, free tempo would work well here too.

As for orchestration, there are a few different routes to take. It's important to remember that the highest pitched instrument in the score is automatically going to command the most attention from the audience. Considering that, handing the melody off to a solo oboe or flute (with support from lower register strings) might make sense. A scene like this would benefit from a structure of "incremental complexity." A strategy frequently used by master of orchestration John Williams, incremental complexity finds the composer presenting multilayered material one layer at a time, saving complex textures for later renditions of the material. This means that you might present the harmony alone at first. Then add the melody and harmony together, followed by the melody, countermelody and harmony. Ultimately, the music needs to develop and move in time with the structure of the scene. Don't think of the scene requirements as a restraint, rather as a way of framing your musical ideas.

I'm assuming that anyone trying to break into film scoring has some past composing experience. So let's get down to the nitty gritty, the business end of film scoring. Say you want to build a portfolio for prospective film music supervisors. Try getting in touch with student filmmakers. They'll be very excited about the idea of anybody composing for their films and they will probably be receptive to letting you use their material to promote yourself.

“Enhance the emotions the audience is experiencing.”

It's also important to have examples of your work that are set to picture and examples that are just the music. Any music set to film that you send to a filmmaker is going to be scrutinized by the merits of the film itself. What I'm saying is you don't want to not be hired for a project just because the producer has a real problem with the lighting in the scene you sent them.

Once you've got the job, you're going to be beholden to the work flow and the habits of the production team. In the past I have produced music for a project where I've never seen a picture. This is found more frequently in smaller scale projects, like commercials or TV shows. More frequently the producer or director will hand you a scratch version of the film with a temp track in place to help give an idea of the music that they are looking for.

Pat Pattison



Pat Pattison is an author, clinician, and Berklee Professor of Lyric Writing and Poetry whose students have

composed for major artists and written number one songs. At Berklee, he developed the curriculum for the only songwriting major in the country. His books, including *Songwriting: Essential Guide to Rhyming* and *Songwriting: Essential Guide to Lyric Form and Structure*, are recognized as definitive in their genre, and have earned many ecstatic reviews. His clinics are attended by songwriters all over the country, and his articles appear regularly in a variety of industry publications. Several of his students have won Grammy Awards, including John Mayer and Gillian Welch.

Pat's Online Courses

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Get the most out of your lyrics by learning how to combine them accurately and effectively with melody.

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Lyric Writing: Tools and Strategies

Express your ideas in compelling and original ways, learn how to generate better ideas, and organize rhythms and rhymes into verses, choruses and bridges.

Creative Writing: Poetry

Learn to craft and control your writing, enhance your ideas, and write better lyrics through the study of poetry.

Creative Writing: Finding Your Voice

Learn to write clearly and strongly in your own unique voice, bringing your full self to your writing process every time you write.

Jimmy Kachulis



Jimmy Kachulis is an accomplished composer, arranger and conductor, who has worked with renowned

artists like George Coleman, Jon Hendricks, John Lewis, and Martha Reeves. His compositions have been featured on scores from *The Sopranos* and *Touched By An Angel*.

Jimmy's Online Courses

Songwriting: Writing Hit Songs

Move your listeners and express yourself more effectively by crafting your songs the way hit writers do.

Songwriting: Harmony

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Songwriting: Melody

Learn to construct strong, expressive melodies that your audiences will remember.

Brad Hatfield



Brad Hatfield is an Emmy Award-winning composer and one of Boston's most prolific musicians. His musical

compositions have been heard on movies such as *Borat* and *Iron Man 2*, as well as the TV series *The Sopranos*, *CSI*, *Saturday Night Live*, *Friends*, and dozens more.

Brad's Online Courses

Songwriting for Film and TV

Explore the techniques of writing music that will appeal specifically to music supervisors, editors, directors, and producers across any number of different genres.

Andre Stolpe



Andrea Stolpe is a multi-platinum recorded songwriter, performing artist, and educator. She has worked as a staff writer for EMI, Almo-Irving, and Universal Music Publishing, with songs recorded by such artists as Faith Hill, Daniel Lee Martin, Julianne Hough, and many others.

Andrea's Online Courses

Commercial Songwriting Techniques

Learn to write for commercial success by reproducing the time-tested characteristics of hit songs while maintaining your own unique voice.

Ben Newhouse



Ben Newhouse has worked as a music supervisor and composer on dozens of television shows, films, and stage productions for media corporations including ABC, FOX, MTV, and Disney.

Ben's Online Courses

Music Composition for Film and TV 1

Learn to write music in the style of big budget Hollywood films and TV programs. Analyze melody, harmony, counterpoint, tempo, rhythm, and orchestration in a variety of genres to gain a complete recipe book for writing for film and TV.

Music Composition for Film and TV 2

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