



Songwriting, a Mini-Course

John Silliman Dodge

In his autobiography called *The Life*, Paul Simon says that songwriting isn't memoir or autobiography, it's fiction. You certainly use aspects of your personal life and perspective but you should absolutely feel free to invent. Poets, playwrights, authors, screen writers, all these people creatively make stuff up all the time. So why do songwriters often feel trapped in the autobiography box? I don't know. It doesn't have to be that way.

There are *three primary songwriting modes*:

1. Enhanced journalism. This is what folk ballads are all about—taking a real life story and turning it into a song
2. I call this mode MSU or “make stuff up.” This is the freest approach
3. All about me, me me. This too common method can be a trap because unless and until your listener empathizes with your lyric, unless she can put herself in your shoes and feel what you feel, your me-me song can have all the relatability of a self-obsessed diary entry

Making the Personal Universal. Feelings are natural sources for ideas. The trick to writing a good song about your feelings is to ask yourself, Is somebody else feeling exactly the same way I'm feeling right now? In other words, can I write a song about me that someone else can easily put themselves into? Taylor Swift is great about this. So many of her songs are about her own feelings but you can easily imagine yourself feeling exactly the same way she feels and so you identify, you put yourself into her song as you listen. That's *Making the Personal Universal*.

It may sound counterintuitive but your song isn't about you. It's about your listener's relationship to your lyrics. It's about making your song everyone's song. The best personal narratives capture one-of-a-kind experiences *and* cast a light on larger themes and universal truths at the same time. They tell unique stories that millions of people might hear and say, “this describes me

too." Without those empathetic echoes between songwriter and listener, a lyric can feel myopic and self-indulgent.

One key tactic is getting specific. Using concrete sense-based details to paint a picture. I have a line in one of my songs that goes, "I see nine white horses flying through a field of deepest green. Red rocks, blue sky shining in my fantastic dream." Made you look.

Here's artist/producer Charles Cleyn on getting specific: "Think of your lyrics as a window into a story that you're trying to tell to your audience. A window that's clear, detailed, and vivid will draw the listeners in. But if the window is foggy or the details are too vague, the connection gets lost.

When you get specific with your lyrics, you're not just telling a story—you're painting a picture, creating a world that your listeners can step into. It's the difference between saying "I'm sad" and "I'm sitting on the cold kitchen floor, staring at your empty chair."

It takes courage, though, to share intimate moments in song. In fact, having the courage to share the emotion and growth that comes from a very private moment can catapult your creation into the hearts of an audience.

So how can writers transform a personal experience into a universal song?

- Focus: what is the message behind the song experience? You need an answer for the question, "What's this song about?"
- Create real characters. Listeners care about real people and filling out detail with specifics such as what the physical setting is, what people say, how they look, the way they dress. You want to give your listener a clear and visual picture of who the main character is and what they're going through.
- Take care with references and cultural short hand. Leonard Cohen once complained that no one understood his reference to Hagar and Ishmael. Well duh. Your song needs to be understood without the listener knowing the reference. "Squirming like Nixon in the witness box" is one of my favorite examples. Your younger listeners will have zero idea what you're talking about.

- Listen to yourself—are you merely reporting or are you adding a new viewpoint or focusing on a detail not covered elsewhere? If your character is fully-drawn it won't be hard to find some individual detail that makes your lyric original.
- Accept that not all personal experiences can be transformed into a universal experience and some may be best kept private or for sharing with friends and family only.

What comes first, the words or the music? It happens in every combination of ways you can imagine. Sometimes a lyric line you hear or think of yourself can start a song going. Or you have a little piece of melody in your head with no words attached. Or you have one line of melody AND words and you have to take it from there. I call these things snowballs. By themselves they're not worth much. But if you roll them around and gather up more snow, building things up bit by bit, you can make a snowman from them. Or roll them down the hill and make an avalanche.

Ideas. Where do ideas for songs come from? Could be something you dream or read in a book or something you hear somebody say. Listen to people everywhere you go and pretty soon you'll overhear somebody say something unique or different or quirky. Quick, write that down in your notebook or your gadget. Two famous examples: Glenn Frye of the Eagles was having a drink with a friend who noticed a younger woman with an older man at the other end of the bar. The friend said, "Check her out, she's got lyin' eyes." Glenn took that one line and ran with it. Paul McCartney was headed to John's house for their weekly songwriting session when he asked his driver, "So how's it going, mate?" Paul's driver responded, "Really busy, man, like eight days a week." You know what happened next.

What do I write a song about? The answer is as varied as there are different people reading this paper. But here are just a few ideas:

Pay attention and observe your world. Something that happened or something somebody said that made you think or caught your ear and stayed with you a while. I use this example when I talk about songwriting with school-age kids. Say you overheard somebody give a nice compliment to the uncool kid in class and you saw that kid smile and stand up a little

straighter and you realized that being kind to people makes YOU feel good and the OTHER person feel good, too. There's the beginning of a song. Or the opposite: you watched somebody bully someone else, saying or doing mean things or smack talking about them behind their back. And you asked yourself, is that the kind of world I want to live in? There's song material right there.

Make up a story. I like to think of certain songs as short stories. I invent a character and make up things that happen to them, like a mini-movie. (For example, listen to the invented character in "The Ballad of Sean Murphy" at JohnDodgeMusic.com.)

You can write a song about absolutely anything. I wrote a song called *Black Crow on the Roof*. I was sitting in my upstairs music room watching a crow fly onto my neighbor's roof, then fly away again, then fly back, back and forth all dang day. I didn't stop myself and say, That's a stupid idea for a song. I let the artist do his job and only when the song was done did I let the judge come in and...judge. And the judge said, "Not bad."

Imitate. One very important thing to remember—your favorite songwriter, I don't care who it is, started out by imitating their favorite songwriters. Only after writing a bunch of songs that sounded like somebody else did they start to develop their own sound. So don't worry about copying in the beginning. Just make sure you choose somebody great to model yourself after. "Steal from the best!" One of my favorite mottos.

Art + craft. Art might be the inspiration, the idea, the first impulse that gets you going, whether that means writing down some words or singing a line or playing a riff on your instrument. That's just the beginning. The craft part, which is the biggest part of making anything, even a loaf of bread, involves working at it, fine-tuning it, making sure every word is in the right place. The craft part takes the most time but it's time well spent.

Repetition: why is this important? You "teach" your listener your song by repeating either words or melodies or both. Can you think of ANY song that doesn't have repeating parts? Probably not. That's why—we want our listeners to learn our songs because it's easier to accept and remember

when you repeat. This is how the arc goes: the first time you hear something, it's new and different. Even if it's good, it's too new to wrap your head completely around. After you've heard it several times, you start to know it. If you like it, you want to hear it again and again and sing along. Now you love it. So you hear it again and again and again. Until finally, you're sick of it. Next new song please!

The Creative Roles (from "A Whack on the Side of the Head):

Explorer—this is the person who goes out and looks for stuff. Doesn't matter what it is, the explorers job is to go find stuff and bring it back.

Artist—the artist looks at the stuff the explorer finds, picks something and starts to tinker with it until it takes some kind of shape.

Judge—this is the step when you or someone else you trust says "this part is really good, that part over there, not so great."

VERY IMPORTANT: these roles have to take place *one at a time and in exact order*. What happens, for example, if the judge comes into the room just as the artist gets started on something and he says, "Well that's pretty stupid, that's not very good at all." Most often the artist will shut right down. DO NOT let the judge into the room until the artist has done their work. If the judge starts to whisper in your ear, tell him to go away and wait his turn.

Rhythm and rhyme. Do song lyrics have to rhyme? No. But they often do, especially in the spoken song categories like rap and hip-hop. And not just a rhyme at the end of a line but rhymes inside lines everywhere. And words have rhythm, so when you write, speak your words out loud to see if they have a beat, an emphasis to them. If not, tweak them until they do. Think of the syllables in your words like a drummer thinks of her beats.

Don't wait to be inspired. Be willing to write a song that's not great. Who do you know who was great at something the very first time they tried? Or even the second? Every songwriter you know and love wrote really BAD songs in the beginning but they kept at it and slowly got better and better.

Song Construction. Time to look more closely at this part of the craft. Song segments are like the parts of speech—each one designed to achieve a certain and different purpose. And like parts of speech they can occur in almost random order and in limitless combinations. There are no rules for how you combine these elements. And the following “parts of speech” pertain mainly to pop songs. Folk songs, for example, can be one verse after another with no chorus.

1. **Intro.** This sets up the groove, captures or focuses attention, hints at things to come, either in sound or lyric. Very important due to the “first seven seconds” rule of capturing attention and establishing credibility. That’s how long you’ve got to engage your listener.
2. **Verse(s).** These tell the story, what the song is about. And like a story, they unfold in a revealing sequence.
3. **Pre-chorus.** A transitional device away from the verse, an elevating on-ramp to the chorus, the emotional set-up.
4. **Chorus.** The most identifiable, repeatable part of the song—the singalong, the “hook.” Nobody can define a hook but everybody knows when they hear one. Your pulse picks up in response.
5. **Bridge.** A departure from the sound and construction of both the verses and the chorus, this is designed to give the listener a break from earlier repetition so when we return to either the verse or the chorus, the ear has been refreshed and is ready to hear again the familiar pieces.
6. **Solo/Break.** This is often an instrumental but can use vocals as well. As the name indicates, it’s another relief segment that provides a brief release from hearing the verses and choruses.
7. **Outro.** How we end the tune. Can be a fade out (in a recording), a big strum, a slight retard, almost anything that is definitive, that says OK, we’re done here.

Example: Read this list of song parts while you listen to how the Beatles constructed **She Loves You**:

1. Chorus
2. Verse-1
3. Pre-Chorus
4. Verse-2
5. Pre-chorus
6. Chorus
7. Verse-3
8. Pre-chorus
9. Chorus
10. Repeat chorus
11. Outro

And finally.....Seven Do's and Seven Don'ts:

- **Do** write something every day, even if it's the process called free writing
- **Do** use simple, visually evocative, sense-based language
- **Do** share your song with at least one other person
- **Do** be willing to accept feedback and edit accordingly
- **Do** stockpile incomplete lyrics and musical bits in a folder
- **Do** record and listen back to your song
- **Do** study your favorite songs and observe how and why they work

- **Don't** do it for money, do it for love
- **Don't** tell yourself you don't have time
- **Don't** tell yourself you won't make anything good
- **Don't** tell yourself you don't know what to write about
- **Don't** tell yourself you don't have enough musical training
- **Don't** compare yourself to anyone else. "Comparison is the death of joy."
- **Don't** wait for inspiration, show up regularly and summon it

I hope this sheds a little bit of light. Thanks very much for reading—

John Silliman Dodge

