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LESSON NOTES

How to Write a Song Like Tom Petty (Part 2 of 3)

Repeating Anthemic Chorus Hooks

This next tip is a lyric-writing technique, specifically regarding **hook writing**. The big take away is to really pay specific attention to selecting a really good word or phrase around which to build the whole song. Being patient is key in this step.

One of the most memorable quotes I came across while researching Petty's process was centered on his discussion of how he wrote the tune *Wreck Me*. In the interview, Petty explained that for the longest time the lyric was actually "You Rock Me". To Petty, this lyric was somewhat trite and wasn't quite cutting it for his standards, until he realized that if he could just change the word "rock" to "wreck" a whole new fresh perspective emerged from the lyric, translating into a great song. In this regard, Petty noted "I've learned this from experience, that one word can mean so much. It can change the entire thing."¹ Petty wasn't afraid to be patient and wait it out until the right word choice would come to him.

In this same regard, many of Petty's songs really draw back to a powerful repeating phrase or word in the chorus. This emphasis on the hook, and one that repeats over and over, is that the songs become instantly memorable to listeners and it becomes so easy to want to sing along. For instance *Breakdown* has the following chorus. I've bolded all the times he repeats the word "breakdown."

Baby, breakdown, go ahead and give it to me
Breakdown, honey take me through the night
Breakdown now I standin' here can't you see
Breakdown, it's all right, It's all right

Other notable examples are *Free Fallin'* ("and I'm free, free fallin'"), *Refugee* (You don't have to live like a refugee; Don't have to live like a refugee), *Runnin' Down a Dream* (Yeah runnin' down a dream; That never would've come to me; Workin' on a mystery, goin' wherever it leads; Runnin' down a dream). In each of these songs, the hook is right in the spotlight, positioned in the chorus of the song, which repeats over and over. This highly emphasized and dressed up form of presenting the hook, makes songs instantly very catchy.

¹ See *Songwriters on Songwriting*, pg 518, Paul Zollo, Interview with Tom Petty Da Capo Press, 1997



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In addition, vocally Petty really finds great melodies that complement his word choices. As you read the above bolded words/phrases, sing the melody that goes along with each one. The marriage between the melody and the words is spot on in each one of them. For instance, *Runnin' down a Dream* has a melody that goes lower and lower with each word, symbolically matching the downward motion of "running down a dream". In *Breakdown*, the melody has an angst contained within in that really captures the pent up frustration of the word "breakdown". In this way, the phrase has this great cathartic release to it that is very satisfying in the song. Some people refer to this matching of elements within a song as "prosody," that is to say the elements each serve the overall essence of the work/song (here melody and lyric to convey the underlying message of the singer).

To put this technique into practice, next time you're working on a song, see if you can uncover a really memorable single word or single phrase that you can sing over and over. Be patient with this, let the hook come to you rather than forcing the issue. Find a melody that frames your words perfectly and captures the emotion or theme of what you're communicating. Play some chords and find a vocal melody that really fits the words perfectly. Then, you can even just start with that word/phrase before writing any verses or other sections. Once you have that hook in place, everything you write will have a sort of magnetism that pulls everything back to your hook, where people can't wait to sing that one word/phrase over and over. It will help you write really catchy material.

Recap/Exercise:

Step 1: Choose a word or phrase around which to build your hook (be patient, come up with a strong choice). Also, remember not to over think things and have fun with this stuff. In the words of the master himself, Petty once said "[i]t's kind of a dangerous business looking really deeply into the germ that creates songs. I don't like to stare at that light very long."² Let those great ideas arrive intuitively to you as you explore this technique.

Step 2: Sing that word/phrase with a melody that captures the essence of what the word/phrase is trying to communicate

Step 3: Try adding some chords (if you can) that support the hook you've written.

Visit www.songwritingresources.com for more information

Best of luck! -Mike

² July 14, 2014 Petty talks with interviewer Jian Ghomeshi about his songwriting craft from CBC News (see <http://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2476875435>).