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LESSON NOTES

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

Register and Line Speed Changes

This third technique applies to the overall form of the song, and is a great way to add charm to your writing in addition to having a memorable hook.

Many of Petty's songs have a rising and falling energy, where the verses start out mellow, often telling a story painting a picture, and/or setting a mood. Eventually, the energy of the song seems to pick up leading into a big chorus hook, where there aren't as many words, but more of an emphasis on repeating a certain phrase (as discussed above). This variance in line speed (i.e. the lyrical lines seem to have fewer and fewer words and more and more repetition and drawing out of the syllables from the hook), is very effective in creating the magic of a Petty song. Specifically, while Petty writes huge anthemic pop-worthy rock hits that people love, he also still gives himself plenty of time to add very charming elements of storytelling, literary nuance, and he's able to include some of the detailed lyrics that you might see in a folk song. As a result, Petty's songs are laced with very charming lyrical content that wins over his listeners and showcases his talent as a lyricist. It's like the best of both worlds, both folk and pop rock.

Meanwhile, musically, to match this effect of dwindling lyrical content, Petty's vocals often have a similar change, albeit in the opposite direction. That is to say, as he sings less and less words, his voice gets higher and higher in pitch (register change) and starts to increase more and more in energy (often adding a little vocal distortion to give him that rock edginess). This powerful combination of both line speed and register change plays a big role in the overall vibe and effect of many of Petty's songs.

For an example of the above, take a listen to *Into the Great Wide Open*. The verses paint a very vivid story of a character named Eddie who moves to LA, meets a girl, and starts to make it in the music business. As Tom tells the story, his vocals are lower in range and the lyrics are very detailed and specific about what happens to Eddie.

*Eddie waited till he finished high school
He went to Hollywood, got a tattoo
He met a girl out there with a tattoo too
The future was wide open*

*They moved into a place they both could afford
He found a night club he could work at the door*



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*She had a guitar and she taught him some chords
The sky was the limit*

However, as the song progresses into the chorus, the emphasis is no longer on learning about Eddie's LA music story. Instead, the focus shifts to a huge chorus hook, with particular emphasis on the phrase "into the great wide open". In this regard, the charm of the verse lyric sort of draws on the youthful optimism of Eddie as a literary character, while the chorus feeds into the everyman theme of optimism staring into the "great wide open". Such a cool contrast creates a play on a bigger theme presented through the parable of a character in a story. The chorus goes like this (the hook is in bold):

Into the great wide open
Under them skies of blue
Out in the great wide open
A rebel without a clue

The song *Refugee* employs a similar device. As you listen to that track notice how Petty's voice rises in pitch as the lyrics become more and more sparse as he passes, in this case, from verse to pre-chorus and then to the hook.

Verse:

*We got somethin', we both know it, we don't talk too much about it
Ain't no real big secret, all the same, somehow we get around it*

Pre-chorus:

*Listen, it don't really matter to me baby
You believe what you want to believe, you see*

Chorus Hook:

*You don't have to live like a refugee
(Don't have to live like a refugee)*

Other examples of this style of writing are apparent in *Last Dance with Mary Jane*, *Free Fallin'*, and *American Girl*. Each of these songs has a combination of extremely detailed verses, chalk full of literary nuance and storytelling; meanwhile, at the same time, each of these songs has a massive chorus hook that everyone can sing along to. The next time you sit down to write, specifically if you already have worked out a nice hook, maybe try this technique of a lower-registered vocal in the verses that gives way to a big vocal hook. As you work out your verses, feel free to use nice literary devices (metaphors, sense-bound imagery, etc) to give flavor to your song.



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Recap/Exercise:

Step 1: Write a big pop rock hook (see lesson 2 of 3)

Step 2: Write verses that contain densely packed literary detail into them (stories, metaphor, and other literary nuance) to add charm.

Step 3: structure your melody and overall song form to rise in energy and pitch as you move from verse to chorus. Similarly, as you work into the chorus be sure that you sound out the vowels and lengthen the notes (as the words get to be less and less). This will allow you to spotlight the hook and create catchy songs. Meanwhile, you will also have the charm of having folk verses that retain the character of your writing.

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Best of luck!

-Mike