

## Title:

Songwriting Concepts

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## Summary:

What makes a great song? It's a big question, and one that has been written about endlessly in an attempt to unravel the "formula" for creating a world dominating smash hit record. Sure, there are some basic rules and if you were to examine a handful of the most successful or popular songs of the last four decades, they do have certain things in common.

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## Article Body:

What makes a great song? It's a big question, and one that has been written about endlessly in an attempt to unravel the "formula" for creating a world dominating smash hit record. Sure, there are some basic rules and if you were to examine a handful of the most successful or popular songs of the last four decades, they do have certain things in common. Intro, verse, bridge, chorus, verse, bridge, chorus, middle 8, chorus, chorus etc springs to mind!

We can examine things like structure, melody and production very easily but for a greater understanding of the "smash", we need to look at concepts. Have you ever wondered why some songs seem to "connect" with people and others don't? When asked why people like a song, they will usually say something along the lines of "I like the tune" or "it's got a great beat". Very rarely will the average music consumer tell you they love a song because of the clever way it's been written, or because the music sounds like it was really hard to play. People simply aren't interested in that stuff. They're interested in the elusive combination of a great melody and a lyric that they can relate to, and preferably sing along to.

Of course this isn't true of all genres of music, for the purposes of this piece I'm referring mainly to pop music, as this is the domain of the hit single! Yes there are lots of brilliant, intelligent musicians and songwriters out there whose music never isn't even near the radio and probably never will be. Whilst the music industry is partly responsible for this, it doesn't change the fact that (generally speaking) if you want to have a big song, you have to be able

to connect with lots of people. And that means delivering a message that is clear, simple, catchy and easy to relate to.

This means thinking very carefully about what your song is actually about. It can be so easy to get wrapped up in the details of the music itself, such as which chords to use? How the melody should go? How should the snare drum sound?) Sometimes the central concept of the song can often end up as an afterthought.

As a producer and songwriter I get to hear a lot of demos from new artists, some of whom are quick to tell me very confidently which of their songs are the singles, or "radio friendly". More often than not, the song they point out is the one they've laboured over the most, or the song with the lyrics about their ex girlfriend / boyfriend. Sometimes this can mean their lyrics that are so personal to them that they're in danger of not meaning anything to anyone else! So it helps a lot if you are able to step back from your work and ask yourself - if I had never heard this song, what would I think about it? Do I know what it's about? More importantly, do I care what it's about?

Let's look at a couple of recent examples of the smash hit song. Love him or hate him, James Blunt's "You're Beautiful" was undeniably one of the big pop songs of 2005, launching a multi-million selling worldwide career for the artist. Cynics will point out that there was a major label and some powerful marketing behind him, which is also true, but they were marketing something that was already going to be relatively easy to sell, because of the simplicity of the concept, the music and the lyrics. I don't think it's too unreasonable to suggest that without this song, the level of his success wouldn't have been as great, and it certainly wouldn't have happened as quickly.

The sentiment behind Blunt's song is extremely simple. Perhaps this is why people connected with it? It's essentially a "grass is greener" song, where the main character is imagining a relationship with a stranger he's just encountered. It's also very memorable, even from a first listen. You may not know all the words to the verses straight away, but the chorus is instant. There is never a moment where you're not sure what the lyrics are because "you can't hear them properly".

Now imagine the same music, but with cryptic, clever lyrics that only you understand. Does the song still have the same ability to connect with a large audience? Or just to you? ( This can lead us into a whole other area - who are you writing music for, but that's another topic in itself! ) Now try it the other way around ; take the lyrics and sing them with a new melody over some complex chords in a clever time signature - is it still a hit? it's very

unlikely!

In 2007, Rihanna's "Umbrella" had a similar impact on the world of pop. The song is built on an infectious beat and very few chords, and again there is a strong concept behind this song. If you look at the lyrics it's more than just another "I love you baby" type thing, but it also has the a very simple main hook, which hits you the first time you get to what I call the "pay off", the "ella - ella - ella - eh - eh - eh" bit, an infuriatingly catchy modern pop moment!

Would the song stand up without this hook / gimmick? Yes I think it would, because the gimmick sounds like an addition to the concept, not the concept itself. In other words "Umbrella" is already strong without it, but as a pop record this hook puts into a whole other league.

What I'm getting at here is the importance of considering exactly what it is you're saying in your songs. It's not usually enough just to have a great beat or a great riff, try and think of these things as the starting point!

It's also important not to confuse "simple" ideas with "dumb" ideas. Writing complicated pop lyrics is relatively easy compared with writing good simple pop lyrics, and great lyricists will write on several levels providing you with deeper meanings if you want to look for them. This is a skill that is harder than it sounds and can take a long time to develop.

Early Motown records are a good example of this sort of thing, where the writers provided a catchy "surface" meaning that sounded like great pop music, but underneath there was often another motivation (sometimes with social or political overtones) Smokey Robinson and Marvin Gaye were among those who dabbled with this sort of writing, and were responsible for creating some staple pop hits that were accessible to everyone, but often had a second "layer" of meaning.

So you don't have to "dumb down" your masterpiece to get your message across, just try disguising it a bit, you'll be adding depth to your work and you'll be in good company!

Of course the most important part in focusing on the concept of your song is having a concept to begin with. What do people want to hear about? Themes of love and loss are the most popular, anecdotes about feeding your cat will not grab people's attention the same way. If you spend a bit of time considering what you're actually saying, and how people will interpret your "message", you should be able to give your work a better chance of connecting with your audience.

Instead of spending three hours on the snare drum, spend three hours on making

your central idea something people can relate to, as generally people don't listen to songs because of how the drums sound! And you never know, you may even be giving yourself a greater chance at that world dominating chart-topping success in the process.....