

Clichés

by John Braheny

How often have you heard: feel the pain--by my side--set me free--lost without you --broken heart--all we've been through--hold me close--my foolish pride--all night long--give you my heart--want you, need you, love you--all my love--more than friends--never let you go--more than words can say--when you walked into the room--when you came into my life--when I first saw you--dream come true--call on me--our love is forever, and the ever popular--oh baby?

Then there are the cliché rhymes: hold (take my) your hand... understand... be your man, dance... take a chance... romance, kiss you... miss you and on and on. Of course, you've never been guilty of using any of these worn-out phrases and rhymes. But just in case you're thinking about it, I'll try to answer the questions I know you'd want to ask.

All you have to do is turn on the radio to any format and you'll hear clichés, often the same ones that are in my songs. Those songs are hits, so how can you say that clichés don't work out there in radioland?

Most of the songs you hear on radio are written by the artists who perform them. In those cases, there are few, if any, gate-keepers who are willing or able to criticize the artist's songs, particularly once the artist is successful. Also remember that a lyric is not a song is not a record and many artists are signed because they've gotten a great sound, a great look and a vocal identity and style that allows an audience to recognize them instantly. If you're a lyricist, you may hear those cliché lines and disregard the fact that other factors, including a dynamic, engaging melody and groove ideal for the style of the artist contributes to the success of the song, and great arrangement and production contributes to the success of the record. No matter what A&R reps say about the songs being the most important factor, it ain't necessarily so, though it's certainly most always true for pop ballads and country.

So it's more important to avoid clichés if I'm not an artist?

It's always important to avoid them, but if you're a writer submitting songs to artists who don't write (or who write but record "outside songs" in hopes of getting a hit whether they write it or not), you go through the gate-keepers. Your song passes the ears of publishers, producers and A&R reps who, no matter how young, have already heard thousands of songs. They've heard all the worn-out lines and predictable rhymes mentioned above and more. They know that, in order to compete with the songs submitted by the world's most successful writers, (or the songs of the artist's spouses or of other writers signed to their producer's publishing company, etc.,) your song has to be better than theirs. It has to be so unique and compelling that they would not have thought of it and

that they know it could become a hit for another artist if they don't record it themselves. Lyrics full of clichés are viewed as lyrics that anyone could write since they're ones that have already been written, since they use phrases heard over and over again.

How can I avoid using clichés?

The best way to avoid clichés is to write with as much specific detail as possible about your own personal experiences and trust that you tap universal emotions. Also, if you've heard the line before, push yourself to find a new way to say it.

What about the fact that a 13 year-old kid hasn't hear those clichés nearly as often and for nearly as many years as the gatekeepers, so they're not clichés to them at all?

True enough, but then it gets down to whether you want to look back years later and be embarrassed by even your successful songs, realizing that you missed an opportunity to have made great songs.

Can't you use clichés in a creative way?

Absolutely. How often have you heard, "break my heart"? Now tell me how often you'd heard "Unbreak My Heart," before the Diane Warren song became a major hit for Toni Braxton? She took a cliché and did something so simple and obvious that writers all over the world are kicking themselves for not thinking of it first. Your job is to think of it first.

JOHN BRAHENY was Co-founder/Director of the Los Angeles Songwriters Showcase, a national songwriters organization, from 1971 until they joined forces with National Academy of Songwriters in 1996. He wrote the best-selling Writer's Digest book, *The Craft and Business of Songwriting* (now in its third printing) and is a consultant for songwriters, performers and the music industry. He can be reached at www.johnbraheny.com. Braheny is also a member of the TAXI A&R staff.