

A Good Melody is Like Sex

By Michael Anderson

I was talking with Michael Laskow in the parking lot out front of the TAXI offices the other day and our conversation turned to important aspects of a good song. How simple it is, and yet how hard it is to do. It got me to thinking.

In Hollywood one of the best ways for people to break into the movie business is to be a "reader"—the person at a studio or agency who is paid to read the scripts that come in and do "coverage" on them for the boss. Essentially, a critique. Some of the best screenwriters, directors, producers, and executives learned their craft in the trenches reading good and bad scripts—and discovering for themselves what worked and didn't work.

In a sense, this is what we do at TAXI—provide coverage for industry professionals on your songs. I've been screening songs at TAXI for about four years now. When you listen to song after song, for hours, days, weeks, months, and years, you notice some interesting things.

Songs have patterns, their own internal world. In some ways writing songs is like cooking. There are a few very basic elements of a song that help to you understand that world. After a long time at Taxi I have developed my own shorthand for some of the ingredients. What follows here are very basic, down and dirty fundamentals from a grizzled veteran of not only listening—but writing songs for over 30 years.

The title. It says far more than most nonprofessional people realize. An experienced song professional can discern a song's depth by the title like a psychic reading tea leaves. What is your interest level in, for example, "I Love You", "You Broke My Heart", "Please Come Back To Me", or "Take Your Tongue Out Of My Mouth (I Was Kissing You Goodbye)"? (an actual Taxi submission title!). If you had forty songs in front of you to listen to, which would you grab first? Which one piqued your curiosity and jumped out of the pack? There are a lot of songs out there—sometimes only the title will be your song's selling point. It should say as much as possible, on every level, what your song is about. It is the Zen of your song. Is it interesting?

The lyric. Does the song clearly say what it means in a simple, easy to understand way? Could you read it to an idiot (a Taxi screener, for instance), and have them know immediately not only what you are talking about, but what exactly you are trying to say about it? It doesn't have to be simplistic—but simple is good. Is what you are saying interesting to anyone else? Does it have a story of it's own—does it actually say something? To paraphrase of an old screenwriter adage—"the king was walking with a pretty girl" is an observation, "the king was walking with a pretty girl as the queen came around the corner" is a story.

Does the lyric have a linear flow? Can your listener follow along, line by line, with a developing idea to an interesting resolution and satisfying artistic statement that speaks to the heart? Does each verse build toward and add only relevant information to the theme? (Not just say the same thing in a different way as the verse before and after it). It doesn't have to be Hemingway, in fact, it shouldn't be Hemingway, but it should strive toward haiku (or "White Christmas"). People with nothing to say often talk too much and make no sense. Songs are the same.

The melody. So simple a concept, yet so complex. As Laskow said, there are only eight notes. From Beethoven to rap, it's the same eight notes. (Not technically perhaps—but for the purpose of hyperbole). From Cole Porter to Neil Young. Robert Johnson to Charlie Parker. Billie Holiday to Yoko Ono.

Listening to a song with an unfocused melody is like being a passenger in a taxi lost in a strange city with streets that twist and turn, signs in a language you can't read, nonsensical one way streets, bad traffic, in the heat, when you are hungry. A focused, well-written melody is like catching a perfect wave surfing on a clear day, or sex when you are in love—no effort at all when it is right. You enjoy every moment of the ride.

Bottom line—can you hum your melody? Is it interesting? Does it flow? Can someone else, upon hearing your song, hum your melody back to you? How about a week later? That's a hit.

Anyway, as with everything, it gets back to the basics sometimes. I still write songs from the zone—no analysis. But before I play them for anyone else I listen to my songs like a screener. Very few get forwarded. Just like real life.

Michael Anderson is an award-winning Artist/Songwriter who wrote the #1 Country hit, "Maybe It Was Memphis," for Pam Tillis. Michael also has cuts with John Fogerty, Juice Newton, and many more. As an artist, he released two albums on A&M, and has five #1 Contemporary Christian singles. he is also a valuable member of TAXI's A&R staff. www.michaelanderson.com