

9 Steps to Build a Memorable Song

Make 'em
Strong and Sticky

Stephen Robert Cass

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It takes ...

9 Steps to Build a Memorable Song



Make 'em Strong and Sticky

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Learn the craft so the craft can serve your inspiration.

There's nothing more frustrating than having great ideas but not knowing how to hone them and place them in a form that communicates your story. No matter if you're writing a worship song, story song, or love song, how can you be sure that the song you write is a strong one? One that's guaranteed to stick in the memory of your listener? How can you get the listener to concentrate on the idea you're laying down?

Hint: It's not about you, it's about your listener.

Read the following 9 steps and build a strong and sticky song.

You can build a great song using these steps in order, but don't let this list limit your creativity.

Do it your way. Now, go change the world with your songs!



Make 'em Strong and Sticky

The Power of One Idea

Gather ideas from a Bible verse, subject, story, thought, or situation you want to present.

Prepare by doing a word cloud (a bunch of thoughts on paper. No prose or rhyme. You're not thinking of writing pretty words or organizing them. Just write full thoughts or fragments as they come to you).

Have an object writing session (10 minutes. Write all things sensory on the topic. How does it make you feel? Are there any smells or taste involved? Are there any elements of touch? Or sounds?).

Distill it down to one idea and build on that. You might call it the kernel. From here on, build ONLY on the one idea, the kernel. When the Beatles wrote *I Want to Hold Your Hand*, they had a single idea. They didn't write, "and then I want to go see a movie and then I want to go out to dinner and then I want to meet all your friends." Nope. They wrote every line of that song about that single idea, which became the title and the main lyrical hook.

They not only had a single idea (I want to hold your hand), they also had a single emotion:

The way you make me feel when you say yes!

... or a single set of related emotions. Use the kernel idea and emotions together. You can use this emotion or emotions as a guide to develop the rest of the lyric.

***Be sure you have a strong thought,
complete with the associated emotion or emotions.***

Keep it simple!

Create a Memorable Title

Often this kernel that we nurture becomes the title. The title is the product. The idea is to create a title that unmistakably tells the listener this is what your song is about. More often than not, it's an advertisement of the hook you intend to deliver.


Be sure that your title delivers a clear meaning, something that's a clear summary of the lyric. The title should provide an afterimage with the listener.

Take the title *Crazy*. On the surface, this word evokes afterimages in all sorts of directions, so the meaning isn't clear. One-word titles that leave the listener unsure isn't the strongest way to go about it, but there are always exceptions! There are at least two examples of popular songs with the title *Crazy* (Gnarls Barkley and Willie Nelson).

It worked in these two cases because the writers spent a great amount of time clarifying what they meant by *Crazy*.

Wait to deliver the title, the hook, to make it memorable.

Make it really pay off for the listener.



Introduce the Schema

If you came into the middle of my conversation and heard, "yeah, it was a blast. Everyone there was wearing an eye patch." You'd go, "huh??"

But if you heard me say, "yeah, it was a blast at that pirate party. Everyone there was wearing an eye patch", then you'd understand. But that's what we often do to the reader and listener. We don't give all the information of who, what, when, where, and why, and then expect them to understand what we're trying to get across.

Set up your story in the right way for the listener so you don't trip them up and make them ask what you're talking about. Make it easy for them.

Now that you've set up the story, give the lyric a strong start. Not only set up the scene for the listener, give them word pictures right away to get the listener involved in your story.

Decide on characters

Decide the perspective, point of view, or snapshot of the scene you want to describe. You can advance your story using several scene snapshots (see *Build a Framework* below).

- Protagonist
- Antagonist
- Narrator
- Listener (always involve the listener somehow!!)

Who's singing your song? Make that plain in your lyric.

On a cold winter's morning
On a boat bound for somewhere
I met up with a taxman
We were both a little seasick

Stephen Robert Cass

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No Story, No Song

Don't be boring! Tell us a story. Not every song is a story song, but every song is inspired by a story or an event. Is the event the Greatest Story Ever Told? Is it about love lost? A person you just met? Explain.

We humans are hard-wired story tellers. That's how we communicate. So, make every word count towards telling your story or giving an analogy of what your story is about. Even if your song is only full of emotion statements, move your emotion story forward to a satisfying conclusion.

Think about how you feel when someone is telling you a story. Even if the story is about themselves, you're pulled in as they paint a picture of the emotions they're feeling. You begin to think how you'd feel under the same circumstance. They're hooking you in with the emotions of their adventure. Inviting you in to the story to feel their emotions. And to feel their conflicts and resolutions.

Sure, you can write a story about you. Or Jesus. But the listener will connect with and react to the common emotions you convey with your idea or story.

Don't bore us, get to the chorus!

Use Imagery

For example, the nails driven through the hands and feet of Jesus caused unimaginable pain to Him. The word 'unimaginable' is a word I'm using to describe a common image that I'm forming – and you're forming – in our mind's eye about that gruesome detail.

That common image is one that we're sharing right now. If I give you any further description about that, it's my words and thoughts as I empathize with Jesus about His journey through the pain and to show you how I'll describe the scene.

Your job as a writer is to help manage the listener through the emotions and images, using:

- Empathy
- Show, don't tell

Weave the kernel emotion, or emotions, throughout the story or the song. Use metaphors and similes to take us on your journey.

Rhyming

Using rhyme in writing helps us to remember. But the fact is writing rhyme for the sake of rhyme only works for limericks! Not songwriting (unless that's your thing). The point of communicating a song is to help the listener remember your story. Rhyming is only a tool to that end. Better to have near rhymes than hard rhymes that make little sense to your story.

So again, learn the craft so the craft can serve your inspiration. Learn the basic rhyme types.

- Identical - store and more
- Near - store and flower
- Alliterate - store and stall
- Assonant - store and thorn
- Consonant - store and stir

Humans seek connections through analogy and metaphor.

Build a Framework

Decide how to execute the Schema. Now that you've set the stage, continuing telling your story. One way to build the frame of your story is to use Storyboarding.

Storyboarding

Show the listener where you want to take them!

- Take 3x5 cards and write the sum of each line on them
 - What does the listener or narrator SEE, HEAR and FEEL with each of these? What is the angle or point of view? Who's telling the story?
 - Place the cards on the table or floor and move them around to build the story
- Review: are there any missing chunks to the story?

Picture and Caption

Another tool for the toolbox is giving the listener a picture and then giving them a caption line as a summary. For example:

Donna and I are painting pictures with the first and second lines. Next, we're summarizing what we see by adding a caption for the third line. Sort of like stating the result of the picture.

On that hill, on that tree (Picture)
You bowed your head (Picture)
Blood washed me clean! (Caption)

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Decide the Song Form

There's much history on song forms. No right or wrong answer which one you choose, there is a philosophy behind the use of the form to help select the right one to build your song.

Think of each stanza (set of lines) as a frame to communicate portions of your story. Take the Picture and Caption or Storyboarding results and begin to lay these nuggets in frames that make great sense to move the conversation forward ('Okay, I'm going to tell them this now ...').

These frames are the beginning of your song form. They're like individual picture frames, all neatly lined up to receive just the right visions. Maybe one is a different size for your vision.

Study the different song forms (AAA, AABA, VC) to learn how to use them to make your picture frames come to life. Get started with your favorite song form and visit ***The 5 Steps to Get Your Song Heard*** to get inspiration for your next song.

No matter where you pick up this information, feel free to use any form you wish! Choose one of your favorite songs as a template for how you'll create your lyric.

***Check for logic
(don't leave the listener confused)
Think about how the listener digests each line***



Make 'em Strong and Sticky

Building to a Payoff

Just as in telling any story, move the listener along the path of your idea and the associated emotions. Remember, you're telling a story, so don't say:

- Here's my story
- Here's my story
- Here's my story

Instead, how about ...

- Here's my story
- More about what happens
- And now you know the rest of the story!

Build to a climax or an emotional tipping point as you develop the story. Then introduce the payoff or the hook (usually when the chorus or refrain arrives).

Build listener expectations by setting the table, then take them to a satisfying conclusion ("the payoff").

Word Economy

Word economy might be described as an editing function. But it becomes a powerful song building tool during the writing process.

Word economy is weeding out weak words and replacing them with stronger ones. The first step is to eliminate unnecessary words. Next, pack a punch with as few words as possible. Word pressure per square inch! Replace weak verbs with stronger ones, replace weaker images and senses and similes with more powerful ones.

How would you distill the following into six or seven words?

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I had an unbelievable time driving in traffic, all the way across town so I wouldn't be late for my appointment with you today.

How about: ***Tail-light traffic won't make me late***

Always consider saying less, or saying it differently. It's hard work writing more simply and concisely. It takes talent to discover words with maximum meaning and imagery.

Write Music that Fits Your Lyric

For some folks, writing music comes before writing the lyric. I've done that before. No rules. No matter which way you choose, now comes the time for your music to fit the written word. It's time to manage the prosody of the song.

When your lyric soars, so should the melody and the music. Read more about building memorable melodies and managing prosody in ***The 5 Steps to Get Your Songs Heard.***

Manage this suite of tasks – how the emotion affects the language, how the language affects the music, how the music affects the message – throughout the framework of your song.

Keep writing and re-writing your melody and lyric until each line of the verse:

- DOES NOT confuse the listener and moves your story forward
- DOES take them on an adventure with your melody that matches the emotion of your lyric
- BUILDS to a satisfying conclusion when the chorus or hook arrives
- LIFTS to higher heights during your chorus or refrain

9 Steps to Build a Memorable Song

Thanks so much for downloading this today. Are these 9 steps everything you need to know to create great songs? Yes! Sure, there's more to it, but this is a very strong start. One that will help you create irresistible songs that are destined to turn some heads.

So many of these techniques are common to any genre of songwriting. If you simply concentrate on the power of one idea, setting the table with the right schema, and learning word economy, your songs will be above the pack.

Do you feel the call to write songs for God? Would you like to hear your songs in church? Are you struggling about what to do next? Anyone called by God to write songs can do it. Young or old, experienced or not.

Writing songs for congregational worship has special concerns within each of these 9 steps, and I explain these in my book, ***The 5 Steps to Get Your Songs Heard***. I expand on each step, as well as dig into melody construction. You'll not only work with a unique visual melody creation tool designed to help any sort of song, you'll see how special it works with worship songs. Writing songs for the church is unique. Learn how to receive royalty payments for your work.

I'm a worship leader, singing and playing in church for over 51 years. I have 73 titles published in CCLI (Solid Walnut Music), and I have a complete plan for you. Click on the box below.

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