

# Andrew Cavanagh's Song Writing Notes And Tips

## Basic Songwriting Tips

### Write 100 Songs

The sooner you get it into your head that you're going to have to invest a LOT of time writing songs and refining your art at writing songs the quicker you'll develop some basic competency in the craft.

Your first 100 songs are probably not going to be very good but they may be the most important songs you write because you're learning what works and what doesn't work so well.

It's okay for your first 20, 30, 50 or 100 songs to suck.

If you do have some good songs in those first 100 you write be thankful...it was almost certainly by accident, luck or by grasping one small secret of the very complex songwriting craft (or by following the directions and ideas in this report to the letter...LOL).

For a songwriter I think it's important to understand that many hit songs were written by people who never fully mastered the craft.

They wrote one or two exceptional songs but couldn't repeat that accomplishment. The long string of "one hit wonder" bands are a great example of this.

Once you realize that really mastering songwriting is a continuous wonderful journey that never ends you have a far better chance of developing the skills you need to write a good song at will and the occasional really great song.

Embrace the whole idea of constantly honing and refining your songwriting skills and you'll enjoy the process a whole lot more.

And the sooner you get past writing your first 20, 50 or 100 songs the better.

You certainly can write a great song in 15 minutes or an hour but most of the time the person who does that has invested many, many years in getting to the skill level where they could do that AND there was some good luck involved that made the song flow.

Most great songs take a whole lot more graft. You should be willing to take a week finding just the right word for a chorus or a verse...or a month or two finding a new theme for a song that's really hot.

And if you want to make this your profession you should expect to have your songwriting hat on for

most of the time regardless of what you're doing...carrying a notebook and jotting down great hooks and ideas as they come to you.

## **The “Hook” Pocket Notebook**

Usually the most important part of the song is it's overall lyrical theme or “hook”.

In this report you'll see examples of hit song after hit song where the lyrical hook carries the song and the theme of that hook makes writing lyrics much, much easier.

Here are examples:

Leningrad, The Night Chicago Died, The Devil Went Down To Georgia, Don't Pay The Ferryman, Angels, Seven Spanish Angels, Highwayman, Paperback Writer, The Gambler, Teenage Dirtbag, Angel Is The Centerfold, Kung Fu Fighting, I Kissed A Girl, Do It With Madonna, Material Girl, Remember The Days Of The Old School Yard, Livin On A Prayer, New York New York, On Broadway, Penny Lane, The Boxer, House Of The Rising Sun, Hotel California, I Will Survive, Take A Walk On The Wild Side, Hungry Heart, Allentown, Rocket Man, TNT, Walking On Sunshine, April Sun In Cuba, Hit The Road Jack.

All of these lyrical hooks help to suggest a strong theme that can carry the song and give you words, ideas and concepts that you can use to create colorful and powerful lyrics.

Every day you're exposed to professions, ideas, titles, sayings etc etc...many of which can make good or even great lyrical themse to hang a song on.

If you're constantly open and listening for these lyrical hooks and you carry a notebook you can write them down as they come to you.

## **The Lyrics Exercise Book**

Capturing lyrical hooks in a notebook is the first step. Then you put them in an exercise book with at least one page to a hook.

Then under that hook write down any line, idea, phrase, word related to that hook that you can think of.

If you think of a cool line...or any line...write it down.

You're in the creative phase when you're doing this and you're not trying to write a song yet...just gathering raw material that will make a song easier to write in the future.

Don't confuse the creative phase with the critical phase...the critical phase comes much later in the songwriting process.

Just write down everything you can think of that's related to your lyrical hook.

Story ideas, words, lines, phrases...everything.

## **Recording Music Ideas, Riffs etc.**

When you're playing around with music...playing an instrument, jamming on original stuff with a band or other musician you want to record any interesting melodies, chord progressions, riffs etc that you come up with.

The most important thing is that you record it in a way that you can reproduce it later.

For some people that means an audio recording, for some writing the music down or just writing chords and notes on how the music was played...whatever works for you.

The more raw material you have to call on when you go to write a song the more likely it is you'll write something good or something really exceptional.

## **One Songwriting Process That Works**

Over the course of a few weeks you're going to have an exercise book that has many pages...each with a potential lyrical hook and a whole pile of related phrases, words, lines etc you COULD use in a song.

Here's what you do.

When you're working on your music and you get a melody, part of a melody or a chord progression you like (or both) pick up your exercise book and look through it for a lyrical hook that might match the feel of the music.

Then start singing lines, words etc out of that page on your exercise book. Play around with the music and the words.

Don't feel bound to anything in particular...just experiment with the words and the music.

If you do this for long enough you'll soon come up with a really good line that can anchor your song. Then you can build your song around that line.

The line may be the main line ending the chorus or one of the verses or it may start a verse or chorus...it could even be the bridge or part of the bridge.

As you start adding more lines your song will take structure.

It helps to understand the basic form most hit songs take so you have an idea of what you're working towards:

verse/chorus/verse/chorus/verse/chorus  
verse/chorus/verse/chorus/bridge/verse/chorus  
verse/chorus/verse/chorus/bridge/chorus

verse/verse/verse/bridge/verse

Just because this process is so effective at writing good songs doesn't mean you should feel bound to it. The process is just a tool for you to use.

Sometimes you might start with a lyrical hook and the music comes after or the lyrics come as part of the process of writing the music or any combination.

It doesn't really matter. What we're trying to do in this process is to give you plenty of high quality raw material so it's a whole lot easier for you to write a high quality song.

## Great Song Parts

Songs in this section were chosen based on a combination of their success in the marketplace, their quality and their ability to teach you some facet of the craft of songwriting.

The version of the song chosen and the video of the song were chosen for various reasons not explained here.

Also in some cases I haven't mentioned the songwriter's name. That's not meant as a disrespect to the songwriter. This section is very much focused on giving you tools you can use in your songwriting.

And that's the biggest key here. Don't just collect the information. Use it immediately when you get an idea reading the different notes and concepts.

This is very much an action based report. You learn songwriting by DOING a lot of it.

### Lyrics

Coldplay Viva La Vida

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44xirQ55IgA>

Brilliant lyrics in this song about the king doing what he had to to survive during the French revolution.

Using a historical theme gives you a whole pile of words and themes to work with: rule the world, street sweeper, enemies, the old king is dead long live the king, castle, Jerusalem bells, Roman Cavalry choir, sword, shield, missionaries, foreign fields, shattered windows, drums, revolutionaries, head on a silver platter, puppet, Saint Peter.

This song has a great opening line:

“I used to rule the world, seas would rise when I said the word. Now in the morning I sleep alone, sweep the streets I used to own.”

The first half of the chorus is also brilliant lyrically:

“I hear Jerusalem bells are ringing. Roman Cavalry choirs are singing. Be my mirror my sword my

shield. My missionaries in a foreign field.”

Other great lines in this song:

“Listen as the crowd would sing: 'The old king is dead. Long live the king!’”

“Shattered windows and the sound of drums.”

“I discovered that my castles stand upon pillars of salt and pillars of sand.”

“Revolutionaries wait for my head on a silver plate.”

“Just a puppet on a lonely string. Oh who would ever want to be king?”

If you start with a song concept that has genuine color like this one it becomes very easy to create powerful, engaging, interesting lyrics.

Can you use history or an interesting colorful setting or location in your song?

Billy Joel Leningrad

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OcXm4DzZj94>

Brilliant song..especially since it was written before the cold war ended.

The lyrics in this song really are a stunning combination of historical facts and emotive language.

They also use the Russian setting well with a name like Viktor and words like vodka, red army, circus clown and the title of the song Leningrad (which alludes both to the location and the drawn out battle with Hitler's German troops during world war II).

“Viktor was born in the spring of 44 and never saw his father any more. A child of sacrifice. A child of war. Another son who never had a father after Leningrad.”

“Followed the rules and drank his vodka straight. The only way to live was drown the hate”

“I was born in 49 a cold war kind in McCarthy time. Stop em at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, blast those yellow reds to hell”

“cold war kids are hard to kill under their desks in an air raid drill”

Great closing line that challenges the preconceptions built up in so many years with the cold war...

“he made my daughter laugh and we embraced. We never knew what friends we had until we came to Leningrad.”

The setting and history makes this song...Leningrad, world war II, the cold war and the beginning of the end of the cold war.

Again can you use history or an interesting setting or location in your song?

Paper Lace The Night Chicago Died

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p-L0NpaErkk>

Again using historical events to bring color to a song...this time the Al Capone gang wars in Chicago.

What really makes this song engaging and gives it a more emotive ending is the framing of the story.

If it was just a story about Al Capone's gang fighting the police it might be good but there's nothing really heart wrenching there.

But the story is told from the point of view of a policeman's son who is waiting at home with his crying, praying mother to see if his father has survived the carnage.

That gives the song emotion and also engages us because we think a little of the way we saw events when we were children.

Can you add flavor to your song by framing it from an unusual, very human perspective?

Think of who is involved in the story in your song. Who might they know? Can you change the point of view to one of these people who care about the outcome to make the song more engaging or more emotional?

Good lines from this song:

“When a man named Al Capone tried to make that town his own. And he called his gang to war with the forces of the law.”

“I heard my mama cry. I heard her pray the night Chicago died.”

“And the sound of the battle rang, through the streets of the old east side. Until the last of the hoodlum gang, had surrendered up or died.”

“There was shouting in the street and the sound of running feet. And I asked someone who said, about a hundred cops are dead.”

And the fabulous last verse turns all that worry into a triumph and turns it into a feel good song:

“Then there was no sound at all but the clock upon the wall. Then the door burst open wide and my daddy walked inside. And he kissed my mama's face and he brushed her tears away.”

Eric Boggle The Green Fields Of France

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9tasbB2JIU>

The historical nature of this song, World War I, gives plenty of words and phrases to work with: Private, grave, only 19, 1916, fallen, die quick and clean, died slow, obscene, beat the drum slowly, sound the death march, play the pipes, fire rifles, lower you down, bugle, last post, wife, sweetheart, stranger, no name, red poppies, trenches, gas, barbed wire, guns, firing, graveyard, no man's land, white crosses, butchered, the war to end all wars, suffering, sorrow, glory, shame, killing, dying, all in vain

The songwriter, Eric Boggle, is an Irishman transplanted to Australia. It's a bloody miracle he can write anything!

It does help moving from Ireland to Australia. Because we're all hanging upside down here down under more blood runs to our brains improving our song writing ability.

The Proclaimers I'm On My Way

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Xmlb3ZRPuU>

Nice feel good song with a great lyrical hook:

“I'm on my way from misery to happiness today.”

The crazy accents of these guys is certain evidence that accents may actually give a distinctive sound that helps to sell a song.

George Jones He Stopped Loving Her Today

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xz2aNifcy20>

Horrible horrible mournful country song but brilliant scene lyrical setup of talking about a broken hearted guy's love for a woman at his funeral  
“found love letters by his bed dated 1962”

Key events in life like births, funerals and weddings make great setups for songs.

The Charlie Daniels Band The Devil Went Down To Georgia

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDm\\_ZHyYTrg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDm_ZHyYTrg)

The idea of using the devil in a song is a brilliant one because it gives you so many ideas, sayings and language to use in your lyrics.

Thinking of the way the devil works in myth gives you plenty of sayings and words to work with: stealing souls, making deals, sell your soul to the devil, gold, sin, hell breaking loose, dealing with the devil, the devil gets your soul, fire, evil, hiss, demons, house of the rising sun, biting dogs.

Great violin/fiddle part also works brilliantly with this song (probably the song was written around this idea of the fiddle part).

Tenacious D Greatest Song In The World (Tribute)

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcJwz7wu8\\_s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcJwz7wu8_s)

This song is a fun piece along the same lines as a demon/devil satanic meeting.

There are some very clever clichéd musical parts in this song and the lyrics are quite hilarious.

Again the theme of the song gives some great lyrical material to work with:

hitchhiking, long lonesome road, demon, eat your soul, destiny, the sun doth shine, the moon doth glow, the grass doth grow, the beast, tail, crack of his tail, be you angels, we are but men

Just one vital piece of advice I think I should share with you as an aspiring song writer.

If you're ever hitchhiking down a long and lonesome road and a shiny demon tells you to play the best song in the world or he'll eat your soul.

And if the very first song you play just happens to be the best and greatest song in the world...

**TRY TO REMEMBER THE WORDS!**

Chris De Burgh Don't Pay The Ferryman

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aMwni9RwO4g>

GREAT lyrical hook and theme for this song “Don't pay the ferryman”.

The ferry crossing and the satanic overtones of the song give plenty of lyrical material: on the run, preparing for the journey, ragged hill, boat on the river, rain, wild dog howling, voices, night, rolling mist, get on board, no turning back, rudder, hooded man, old man, lightning flashes, thunder roars, calling his name, moaning, bones, trouble ahead, voice from beyond

Robbie Williams Angels

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73KIIOBCfK0>

You can have a song based around devils, demons or even the more positive side...angels.

The theme of angels gives Robbie Williams some great ideas, words and concepts to draw from in this song:

angel, fate, old and gray, salvation, unfold their wings, love is dead, protection, love and affection, right or wrong, life won't break me, don't forsake me, weak, look above, blessed with love, breathes flesh to my bones,

What's even more interesting is the whole pile of words and concepts that could have been included in this song possibly to make it even more powerful:

sins, sinner, redemption, revelation, forgiveness, forgiven, God, healing, Gabriel, archangel, soaring, lifted on the wings of an angel, Jesus, John, Paul, Matthew, holy bible, priest, preacher, confession, St Peter, pearly gates, Eden, Adam and Eve, Moses, etc. etc.

And the possible mix of the devil/demon themes with the angel theme. There's plenty of material here for many more good songs to be written.

Interesting first line:

“I sit and wait. Does an angel contemplate my fate.”

If you were using a rhyming dictionary and you had already decided to use the word fate or wait and were looking for something to rhyme with that it would have been pretty easy to find the word “contemplate” and “wait” and “fate”.

Use your rhyming dictionary and you can get some really cool colorful words in your songs.

The Highwaymen Seven Spanish Angels

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63A\\_\\_INJecI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63A__INJecI)

Brave last stand song...always very emotive idea.

“If they take me back to Texas, they won't take me back alive.”

The western theme and the Spanish theme are always good for lyrics too.

Great twist with the man's lover deciding to throw away her life too in her own last stand.

“And she knew the gun was empty, and she knew she couldn't win, but her final prayer was answered, when the rifles fired again”

Fantastic play on words “Seven Spanish Angels took another angel home”  
Come up with just one great line like that and you can write a whole song around it.

Bobbie Gentry Ode To Billy Joe

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZt5Q-u4crc>

Amazing dinner table scene with the family talking about the suicide of Billie Joe McAllister and the slow reveal that the singer is a whole lot more involved in the incident than she should be.

“And wasn't I talking to him after church last Sunday night...I'll have another piece of apple pie...you know it don't seem right”

“He said he saw a girl that looked a lot like you on Chacklaw ridge, and she and Billy Joe was throwin something off the Tallahassee bridge”

Can you have your unusual story told by everyday people doing something everyday or tied into something every day?

Can you reveal something gradually in your lyrics so the ending lyrics come as a revelation?

The Beatles P.S. I Love You

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ejYdQoJh2o>

The idea of singing the contents of a letter (or in more modern times perhaps an email...even a message on an answering machine or a text message) could be very powerful framing for a song of your own.

Can you frame your song as if you're singing the contents of a letter, email, phone message or text message?

Tommy Tutone 867-5309

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBHJqtgo8RA>

AND

John Mellencamp R.O.C.K In The U.S.A.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MzYkjqvq-iLE>

AND

Aretha Franklin Respect

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0XAI-PFQcA>

AND

The Doors Gloria

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_McvXs9to40](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_McvXs9to40)

All these songs use either spelling a word or a number as part of their lyrical hook.

This can be a very effective way to make your main lyrical hook or your lyrics stand out from the ordinary.

Can you use spelling a word or a number as a part of your lyrics?

Letters that spell out an organization or have some other meaning can also make for interesting

lyrics.

Good examples are:

YMCA by The Village People

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CS9OO0S5w2k>

AND

ABBA S.O.S.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4JEmz4FoJE>

The Highwaymen Highwayman

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uw1bHaUk1CM>

Great song by master songwriter Jimmy Webb.

By using the professions of four men (highwayman, sailor, dam builder, starship flier) who die it gives fantastic lyrical flavor to the song.

The sense of immortality adds emotion to the song...

“the bastards hung me in the spring of 25, but I am still alive”

“and when the yards broke off they said that I got killed, but I am livin still”

“they buried me in that great tomb that knows no sound, but I am still around”

“or I may simply be a single drop of rain, but I will remain”

Also a great tie in at the end from the starship driver back to the highwayman.

“I was a highwayman, on the coast roads I did ride, a sword and pistol by my side”

“I was a sailor, I was born upon the tide”

“I was a dam builder, across the river deep and wide, where the water did collide”

“I fly a starship, across the universe divide”

Any ONE of these professions can be (and has been) the title of hit songs.

Can you think of a story to write your song about based around a profession?

Can you tie the end of your song back into the beginning of your song (framing the song)?

The Beatles Paperback Writer

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pwap79uy1G8>

Another song about someone wanting to break into a profession:

“I need a job and I want to be a paperback writer.”

Like most songs where you include a profession the theme gives plenty of lyrical material for the song.

When you're thinking of professions there are a whole pile that could make amazing songs in themselves or become part of a powerful song.

For example a vampire hunter, a ditch digger, corporate CEO, truck driver, lifeguard, policeman, private investigator, lawyer, prisoner, bookstore clerk, jeweler, safe cracker, shoplifter, drug dealer, gambler, card sharp, juggler, clown, stunt rider, stunt man, bus driver, bricklayer, foreman, airline pilot, helicopter pilot, jet pilot, soldier, marine, sailor, jail warden, wrestler, boxer, snake handler, horseman, teacher, preacher, mechanic, engineer, lineman, psychiatrist, computer nerd, beggar, con man, hustler, street peddler, busker, flower girl

Play with words and find a sexy lyrical hook that describes a profession and you're 75% of the way to writing a good song.

Johnny Cash Folsom Prison Blues

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=twxR8L-rw3Y>

Great combination of a classic country/blues "train" song with the story from a guy in prison for murder.

Setting the song in a prison gives plenty of color to add to lyrics as does the train tie in...

"When I was just a small boy, my mother told me son, always be a good boy, don't you ever play with guns. But I shot a man in Reno, just to watch him die. When I hear that whistle blowing, I hang my head and cry."

Great use of the prisoners mindset (not just as a prisoner but also the cultural background he's from)...

"I bet there's rich folks eating in a fancy dining car, they're probably drinking coffee and smokin big cigars"

Also putting lyrics that would otherwise be mournful to an upbeat tempo can often work really well giving a song flavor without making it painful to listen to.

Lynne Hamilton On the Inside

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xX8MmykJgvQ>

Winner of a nationwide songwriting contest for a show called prisoner about a women's prison.

This ballad has some very nice lyrics with a nice tie in with the roses...

"He used to give me roses. I wish he could again. But that was on the outside and things were different then."

"On the inside the roses grow, they don't mind the stony ground. But the roses here are prisoners too when morning comes around."

Bette Midler The Rose

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTuyZl84rgo>

One secret to writing lyrics this clean is to start with a really cool line for the END of each verse then work backwards. Once you've nailed one or two verses this way it gets a whole lot easier to write the other verses any way you want by using the other verses as a rhythmic model.

The two key lines ending verses in this song are:

"I say love it is a flower and you its only seed"

"it's the soul afraid of dying that never learns to live"

Each of those lines could lead to ideas for writing the previous lines in the verse. If you nailed either of those ending lines then your chances of writing a good song like this are very high.

One secret is to capture really cool lines when you think of them...even when they don't seem to be related to anything...then you can go back to them and see if you can find a good lyrical hook to go

with a line.

Katy Perry Hot N Cold

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yY3CehyfUko>

The lyrics in the chorus of this song are a good example of using opposites for effect:

“You're hot then you're cold

“You're yes then you're no

“You're in then you're out

“You're up then you're down

“You're wrong when it's right

“It's black and it's white

“We fight, we break up. We kiss we make up.”

Opposites in lyrics often sound good to the ear and engage the mind.

Can you use opposites in your lyrics for effect?

Kenny Rogers The Gambler

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kn481KcivMo>

Another “train” song that ties in the train rhythm and train lyrics to the major theme of the song..the card playing gambler.

Again the choice of profession gives you most of the key words you can use for lyrics...

dealing, aces, sitting at the table, whiskey bottle, reading people's faces, knowing their cards, cigarettes, poker face, fold, break even

Old sayings like...

“never count your money when you're sitting at the table”

“knowing what to throw away, knowing what to keep”

“every hands a winner, every hands a loser”

Great line:

“The best you can hope for is to die in your sleep” combined later with

“somewhere in the darkness the gambler he broke even”

“but in his final words I found an ace that I could keep”

Again you could write a song around any of these 3 lines.

Glen Campbell By The Time I Get To Phoenix

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mUg5p3BncuQ>

Another song by songwriting master Jimmy Webb.

This is one of the earliest hit songs to use the idea of traveling from one place to another tied into the major theme of a song (in this case the singers break up leaving a woman).

“By the time I get to phoenix she'll be rising”

“By the time I make Albuquerque she'll be working”

“By the time I make Oklahoma she'll be sleeping. She'll turn softly and call my name out low.”

This traveling adds color to a song. Not only can you use the names of places but you can talk about what's in those places and tie them into your song too.

Elvis Presley Kentucky Rain

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SAetaE-MzDs>

Another traveling song this time with the singer chasing after a woman who has left him.

The towns and the weather add color and the state provides the title for the song (Kentucky Rain)...

“with the rain in my shoes, searching for you...in the cold Kentucky rain”

Stories of people he meets in his search make for great lyrics...

“Showed your photograph to some old gray bearded men, sitting on a bench outside a general store.”

“Finally got a ride with a preacher man who asked 'Where you bound on such a cold dark afternoon?' As we drove on through the rain, as he listened I explained and he left me with a prayer that I find you.”

Will your song work better as a traveling song? Can you turn an ordinary story into an extraordinary story by adding the dimension of travel to it?

Kris Kristofferson Me And Bobby McGee

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irU5oihACj4>

Another traveling song...often played as a train song.

The dimension of traveling across the country with someone gives plenty of ammunition for lyrics: Baton Rouge, trains, diesel, New Orleans, dirty, windshield wipers, driver, coal mines, Kentucky, California, sun, cold, Salinas, freedom

Bob Dylan Like A Rolling Stone

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TH6-bQYuiU>

The organ sound (with the Leslie speaker) in this song was played by a guitar player who could barely play the organ but really wanted to get in on the recording.

Many of Bob Dylan's lyrics are so “out there” and often so brilliant it can be hard to learn much from them except that there are simply a few freaks in the song writing world who will always be better than you no matter how hard you work.

Many of Bob Dylan's songs get by on the brilliance of the lyrics so it's certainly worth studying his work.

The major concept of this song...someone getting what's coming to them...is certainly a concept you could use in your own song. It helps if you explain in your lyrics WHY they deserve what's now coming to them.

Tom Jones Delilah

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZavA2j44XQ>

A revenge song and a tragic song. The story runs well from setting up the scene in the first verse right to waiting for them to “come and break down the door” in the last chorus.

The Spanish theme of the music and  $\frac{3}{4}$  time adds flavor.

Good lines:

“I saw the flickering shadows of love on her blind.”

“She stood there laughing. I felt the knife in my hand and she laughed no more.”

Albert Hammond Down By The River

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZE3xS\\_Q0VDM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZE3xS_Q0VDM)

This very early environmental protest song is very well written.

The lyrical hook of the song “down by the river” is repeated at the end of every line and over and over in the chorus...and it sounds completely natural. Brilliant songwriting.

Why is it so important to repeat your main lyrical hook? The reason is simple.

When people go to find and buy your song it helps a lot if they know it's name!

This could have been a depressing song but it's written and played up tempo with a bouncy latin feel and the chorus is really catchy which helps make it a fun song to listen to.

The lyrics have some real bite:

“Silver fish lay on its side, it was washed up by the morning tide. I wonder how it died...down by the river?”

“Why do willows weep said he? Because they're dying gradually from the waste at the factories down by the river.”

“In time the river banks will die, the reeds will wilt and the ducks won't fly. There'll be a tear in the otter's eye...down by the river.”

“The banks will soon be black and dead and where the otter raised his head, there'll be a clear white scum instead....down by the river.”

Notice how the setting...the river...also gives great words and phrases to use for the song: out of town, pitched a tent, fire, wine, jeans on the riverbank, come on in the water's fine, morning light, silver fish, morning tide, weeping willows, river bank, reeds, ducks, otters, scum

Can you use a setting in your song that gives you material and colorful words to work with?

Linda Ronstadt Blue Bayou

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=udS-54aFPHI>

Classic Roy Orbison song of longing to be somewhere else or be with someone you love or both (very common emotions).

The bayou theme gives plenty of material for the song:

fishing boats, afloat, sails, folks are fine, sunrise, silver moon, evening tide, happier times, sleep all day, catfish, play, sleepy, friends

The theme of trying to get back somewhere also creates some nice lines:

“Saving nickels, saving dimes. Working till the sun don't shine. Looking forward to happier times on Blue Bayou.”

Also notice how the lyrical hook...Blue Bayou is repeated at the end of most verses and repeated through the chorus.

Wheatus Teenage Dirt Bag

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jJWQkVgDs4>

Brilliant, brilliant song title and a nice, fun and intentionally stupid story song about adolescent infatuation/lust (or God knows how to describe it).

With a title like Teenage Dirt Bag you're half way home...it's impossible to forget a title like that.

Appeals to classic adolescent feelings...

“She doesn't know who I am, she doesn't give a damn about me”.

Can you create a title that is so out there it gets attention all by itself?

J. Geils Band Angel Is The Centerfold

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IzCUjtjA5ps>

Brilliant feel good rock song that starts with a great concept...a guy seeing his pure teenage sweetheart as a centerfold in a “girlie magazine”.

The music is classic feel good rock with the “na na na na” theme running repeatedly through the song with that same riff being repeated in different ways including with a keyboard solo at the start and a very neat guitar riff in the middle of the song.

If you start with a concept like this and a great lyrical hook “my angel is the centerfold” it makes it very easy to write the rest of the lyrics for your song.

Some nice lines:

“She was pure like snowflakes no one could ever stain. The memory of my angel could never cause me pain.” Sets up the song nicely.

And the chorus is simple but good repeating the hook nicely:

“My blood runs cold. My memory has just been sold. My angel is the centerfold. Angel is the centerfold.”

The tie in between “the memory of my angel could never cause me pain” and “my memory has just been sold” is a whole lot more eloquent than you would expect from a feel good song like this but could have been achieved simply by deciding to put the word “memory” or the idea of school hood memories in the chorus to tie in with the verse.

There are also some nice lyrics caught from the whole school romance idea:

“My homeroom angel”

“Slipped me notes under the desk, while I was thinking about her dress”

“Those soft and fuzzy sweaters”

Can you think of a song concept that is so strong it carries the whole song?

Just being open to the idea of concepts like this will make you alert when they come along. For example this idea could have sprung into your mind walking into a news store seeing a playboy (or someone looking at a playboy magazine) and thinking about a girl you went to high school with at the same time.

Then thinking “What if?”

That question “What if?” combined with just a little imagination and the ordinary things you do in your every day life can help you come up with some amazing song ideas.

It's also another reminder that you should be carrying a notebook with you wherever you go so you can write down these ideas as they come to you because they can disappear very quickly.

If you don't have a notebook and a great idea comes to you go to the nearest shop or store counter you see and ask them nicely if you could please have a pen and a piece of paper.

If you're in a bar you can use a coaster...you just have to ask the bar staff for the loan of a pen.

Write the ideas down when they come to you then expand on them in your songwriting exercise books.

Elton John Candle In The Wind (1997)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOPKcKbjlKg>

Probably the best selling single in history combining a topical theme...the sad passing of Lady Diana...with an already popular tune (with rewritten lyrics) and the donation of proceeds going to a worthy cause.

Carl Douglas Kung Fu Fighting

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhUkGIsKvn0>

Anything that's topical and cool is likely to make a good lyrical hook for a song.

When this song was released martial arts, kung fu and Bruce Lee movies were just becoming REALLY popular.

The theme of the song also gives some good lyrical material:

kung fu fighting, fast as lightning, frightening, fought with expert timing, Chin, Chung, get it on, swinging hand, sudden motion.

There are always topical themes. We live in the age of Twitter, Facebook, phone texting, personal computers, laptops, juice bars etc etc. If you're aware of new trends you may be able to write a song about them.

Can you write a topical song...a song about a new trend?

Katy Perry I Kissed A Girl

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3fBdgZUtpBg>

This song is an interesting theme because it seems to challenge social norms and it seems to be really out there...always helpful for a song theme.

The reality is probably different.

Lesbianism was becoming trendy when this song was released so the theme was a topical one.

On top of that as much as 40% or more women have had some kind of same sex experience so there's a large group of the female population who might find the theme appealing.

And of course a good percentage of guys are turned on by the whole girl kissing girl scene.

So a strong song theme and a nice lyrical hook:

"I kissed a girl and I liked it!"

The Androids Do It With Madonna

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GemwsucYb9A>

The melody of this song is not really catchy but there's one line that makes the song work:

"I'd rather do it with Madonna."

It's like Teenage Dirtbag...once you hear that lyric you're not going to forget it.

The them..."doing it with Madonna" also gives plenty of material in the comparison game: Christina Aguilera, flirting with the camera, little girl, Pink, still a baby, attitude, young lady, Britney, always hanging with her mum, Kylie, hot.

Madonna Material Girl

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6\\_yqWqjh24](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6_yqWqjh24)

Nice title and song concept...the girl who loves money and is only interested in rich men.

The theme gives you some great words to work with:

credit, cold hard cash, interest, save your pennies for a rainy day, rich

Some nice lines:

"the boy with the cold hard cash is always mister right"

"only boys who save their pennies make my rainy day"

Can you think of a certain kind of person with a certain mindset who might make a great theme for a song?

Meat Loaf Two Out Of Three Ain't Bad

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p\\_Tf2lQvDz0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_Tf2lQvDz0)

The lyrics in the second verse are good:

“You'll never find your gold on a sandy beach. You'll never drill for oil on a city street. I know you're looking for a ruby in a mountain of rocks, but there ain't no Coup de Ville hiding at the bottom of a Cracker Jack box.”

Also nice framing where the story in the last verse reveals why this guy is such an arse and leads nicely into the chorus.

Like many songs the lyrics in the chorus verge on being kind of stupid:

“I want you. I need you. But there ain't no way I'm ever gonna love you. Now don't be sad 'cause two out of three ain't bad.”

But they still work in a cold-hearted way.

It's a reminder that when you're writing a song don't be critical of what you're writing. The initial writing is the creative phase. Don't let the critical phase (which comes later) interrupt the creative phase.

Just write what comes to you and worry later whether it's stupid or makes any sense.

Cat Stevens Father And Son

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q29YR5-t3gg&feature=related>

Classic song about the rebellious adolescent angst that pits a father against his son.

Lines like:

“you will still be here tomorrow but your dreams may not.”

“How can I try to explain when I do he turns away again”

“From the moment I could talk I was ordered to listen”

“All the times that I've cried keeping all the things I knew inside”

“It's them they know not me”

Interesting vocal style for this song with Stevens singing low in the “father” verses then high and very emotive in the “son” verses.

Can you tap into classic emotions people feel in different stages of their lives...rebellious disenchanted youth, disillusioned middle age or regretful old age?

How did you feel...what experiences did you have in any of those phases? What about people you know? Do you know of their experiences?

Harry Chapin Cats In The Cradle

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=un2EfjEJAOA>

Again tapping into a classic emotion...a parent's regret at not having a deep, fulfilling relationship with his child and his longing for that relationship. It also taps into the feelings most people have that their relationships with their own parents and children could be better.

The song loops nicely with the father never having enough time for his son to the son not having enough time for his father.

If a child grows up in your song you have great opportunities to use the different symbols of growing up as lyrics:

“He learned to walk while I was away. He was talking before I knew it”

“thanks for the ball dad, come on let's play. Can you teach me to throw”

“what I'd really like Dad is to borrow the car keys”

“my new job's a hassle and the kids have the flu”

Songs about parenting can be very popular and emotive...we all love our children and we've all been children.

Elvis Presley My Boy

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOLH63c7SG0>

Fantastic and very simple song again a parenting song...a father who loves his son so much he stays with his wife even though their relationship is bad.

“For your mother and me love has finally died, this is no happy home, but God knows how I've tried”

Note the picture of a father baring his soul to his son while the boy sleeps. Setting a scene like this can make your lyrics far more powerful and make writing those lyrics much easier.

“Sleep on you haven't heard a word perhaps it's just as well. Why spoil your little dreams why put you through the hell.”

Can you set your song in some kind of emotive scene?

Also writing a song that involves a child or children gives you a whole pile of interesting words and phrases you can use.

“Life is no FAIRY TALE” for example.

Cat Stevens Remember The Days Of The Old School Yard

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFwDEqLQ0bA>

Nice catchy “brass” intro to this song.

A wonderfully nostalgic song again using many of the words that come to hand when you write a song about children.

Laughter, school yard, imagination, love, cry, simplicity, warm toast, first love, smiling faces, dreams, kings, queens, learn

Nostalgia can be a very powerful driver of a song. We all like to remember the great times we had in our past and the great times in our childhood usually shine the brightest.

Can you use nostalgia or a time in your childhood or someone else's childhood as a story in your

song or a part of your song?

This is a case where looking back can move your song writing forward.

Bryan Adams Summer Of 69

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9f06QZCVUHg>

I was very disappointed when I first discovered this song...Summer of 69...had nothing to do with sex!

This song has a driving beat, great rock guitar and solid rock vocals...classic 80s rock just like so many other songs of the era and many songs being released today...almost nothing to make it unique.

What made the song a hit was its lyrics.

Again this classic rock song draws on nostalgia and this time the lyrics that come up when you think of a teenage childhood (although my teenage years were never as glamorous as Bryan Adams'...I remember most of the time being awkward and confused).

The teenage years give him some great words to work into the lyrics:  
my first real six string, five and dime, guys from school, got married, drive-in, your mama's porch,  
young and restless

Adams even has the temerity to say

“And if I had the choice, yeh I'd always wanna be there. Those were the best days of my life.”

Let's face it anyone who's life is so sad that their teenage years actually were the best days of their life is a very, very sad figure. But we LOVE the idea that some part of our life in the past was just perfect and wonderful and passionate and beautiful...even if that's clearly a fantasy.

That's what the great nostalgia song is all about.

Also note that in most nostalgia songs in the last verse we go back to the present and look at the whole situation with new eyes.

In some cases we come to the conclusion that things are better now...in some we wish we could do things differently or go back.

But that final verse is often the one that closes out the song and delivers some kind of message.

Janis Ian At Seventeen

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efHOIT1ROk8>

This is the reverse nostalgia song...remembering the genuine pain of teenage youth.

Talking about high school and a young woman's struggle to become a woman gives some great material for lyrics:

at seventeen, learning, truth, love, beauty queen, high school, clear skin, smiles, marry young, valentine, Friday night, youth, beautiful, ravaged face, social graces, desperate, invent lovers,

phone, stay at home, dance with me, brown eyed girl, hand me downs, rich relations, home town queen, small town, pain, names called, never chosen, basketball, ugly duckling

Again using a theme...high school...is great fodder for songwriting.

Can you use reverse nostalgia in your song...pointing out things weren't so great in the past?

Bon Jovi Livin On A Prayer

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUSDS9pkA2Y>

Another song with the classic 80s rock driving beat, great rock guitar and solid rock vocals...again nothing to really set it apart from other songs from the era except for the lyrics.

There are some really nice lines in this song:

“Tommy used to work on the docks. Union's been on strike, he's down on his luck, It's tough...so tough”

“Gina dreams of running away. She cries in the night, Tommy whispers, baby it's okay, someday”  
“You live for the fight when that's all that you got”

And the theme of the song...hope against all odds is very appealing. It's like a “brave last stand song” (see Seven Spanish Angels) but with a positive twist.

We get the feeling things are somehow going to work out for Tommy and Gina.

“Take my hand and we'll make it I swear...livin on a prayer”

Can you write a song that's a story about just hanging on against all the odds? Can you give people the hope and the guts to hang on?

Bon Jovi It's My Life

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOfaYFIHt1g>

A similar anthem of hope and a celebration of life song written over a decade later.

And maybe Tommy and Gina did make it because in the lyrics of this song:

“This is for the ones who stood their ground. Like Tommy and Gina who never backed down.”

Great line:

“My heart is like an open highway. Like Frankie said 'I did it my way’”

Phrases that fit in with the celebration of life theme:

it's now or never, I just wanna live while I'm alive, it's my life, stand tall, don't bend don't break, don't back down, I'm not gonna live forever, shout out loud, hear my voice, stand your ground, make your own breaks

Can you write a “celebration of life” song...a song that's simply a celebration of living right now?

Frank Sinatra New York New York

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ro7Uz4jEfmq>

A song of hope and ambition. It's a hanging on song, celebration song and a traveling song (see By The Time I Get To Phoenix and Kentucky Rain).

Great lines include:

“These vagabond shoes are longing to stray. Right through the very heart of it New York New York.”

“I wanna wake up in a city that doesn't sleep. And find I'm king of the hill...top of the heap.”

“These little town blues are melting away.”

“If I can make it there I'll make it anywhere. It's up to you New York New York.”

George Benson On Broadway

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=voNjeUUcdSo>

Stunning lyrics in another song of hope and ambition against the odds.

The Broadway setting combined with the theme of a struggling guitarist makes for great lyrical material:

neon lights, bright lights, on Broadway, magic in the air, walking down Broadway, glitter, beautiful girls, star on Broadway

not enough to eat, nowhere, blues, ain't got a dime, shoe shine, I won't last too long, catch the Greyhound bus for home, they're dead wrong, I can play my guitar, I won't quit, I want to be a star

Gilbert O'Sullivan Alone Again Naturally

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D\\_P-v1BVQn8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_P-v1BVQn8)

This seems like a sweet poppy song until you get to the last verse which has some astonishing bite to it. The earlier, less strong verses seem to make the last verse all the more powerful.

“I remember I cried when my father died never wishing to hide the tears.

“And at 65 years old, my mother God rest her soul, couldn't understand why the only man she had ever loved had been taken, leaving her to start, with a heart so badly broken”

Interesting note: when he wrote this O'Sullivan's father was very much alive and still living happily with his mother.

The stories in songs can sound 100% personal and real and still be fiction. Songs are about expressing emotions and stories...even fictional ones...can be great vehicles for those emotions.

Ask yourself “What's the worst thing that could happen in my life? What's the worst thing that could happen to the people in my life? What's the most amazing thing that could happen? What might have happened if God had thrown the dice differently?”

You can come up with some great emotion packed stories that way.

Tom Jones Green Green Grass Of Home

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSajFnkUxQY>

Another song that catches you with it's last verse. For most of the song Jones is singing about the green green grass of his home, an old oak tree, his mother, father and the beautiful Mary.

But it gets a whole lot more serious in that last verse:

“Then I awake and look around me, at four gray walls that surround me and I realize that yes I was only dreaming. For there's a guard and there's a sad old padre - arm in arm we'll walk at daybreak and then I'll touch the green, green grass of home.”

You may be able to save a song that's a bit too sweet by adding a powerful last verse.

Where Do You Go To My Lovely?

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BRDaeLs69i4>

I can't even pronounce half the lyrics in this song but they are, quite frankly, kick arse...playing on the lifestyle of a beautiful woman living life with the glamorous “jet set.”

Another song with a brilliant revealing ending:

“I remember the back streets of Naples. Two children begging in rags both touched with a burning ambition to shake off their lowly brown tags, yes they try.

“So look into my face Marie-Claire and remember just who you are. Then go and forget me forever but I know you still bear the scars, deep inside.”

The ending is even more brilliant because it's set up with the chorus so well:

“Where do you go to my lovely when you're alone in your bed. Tell me the thoughts that surround you. I want to look inside your head.”

Can you write a song about someone who has an unusual lifestyle rich with colorful words and phrases, place names etc you can use?

Shawn Mullins Lullaby

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=85qgzoBBOGI>

Some beautiful, engaging lyrics in this song about a woman in Los Angeles. Another song that's a combination of an unusual setting with a person with an unusual lifestyle (mainly due to her upbringing).

The Los Angeles theme gives some great material to work with:

stars, children of the stars, Hollywood hills, boulevard, parties, Dennis Hopper, Bob Seeger, Sonny and Cher, bar on Fairfax, town of angels, everyone's got a plan, Nashville with a tan

Great lines include the fabulous opening verse:

“She grew up with the children of the stars in the Hollywood hills and the boulevard.

“Her parents threw big parties, everyone was there. They hung out with folks like Dennis Hopper, Bob Seeger, Sonny and Cher.”

And this really cool line:  
“she's seen her share of devils in this angel town.”

Tony Orlando & Dawn Tie A Yellow Ribbon Round The Old Oak Tree

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzK\\_xznptXA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzK_xznptXA)

Nice feel good ending to this song:

“Now the whole damn bus is cheering and I can't believe I see...a hundred yellow ribbons round the old oak tree.”

This song was written near the end of the Vietnam war when families of servicemen coming home would let their returning loved ones know they were welcomed by tying a yellow ribbon somewhere on or near the home. So the song was topical when it was written.

Is there something topical people are doing now that you can include in your song?

Streets of London

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ctb-SrwL884>

People who live on the fringes often make great material for songs. What kind of people are you walking past every day without a second thought?

The Beatles Penny Lane

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_H6PdIJshCo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_H6PdIJshCo)

This is just an everyday street with everyday people in England at the time but the descriptive lyrics are filled with color.

If you describe an area where you live or frequent and the people in it can that make up part of your song?

Simon And Garfunkel The Boxer

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-hqdZ4AWSaI>

Some amazing lyrics in this song and the last verse is hard to beat:

“In the clearing stands a boxer and a fighter by his trade and he carries the reminders of every glove that laid him down or cut him till he cried out in his anger and his shame 'I am leaving, I am leaving' but the fighter still remains.”

Again writing a song about a profession...in this case a boxer...can bring color to your song and give you plenty of words, phrases and ideas to work with.

The Animals House Of The Rising Sun

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hg7jzi9JAKw>

Great setting and great theme...the hopeless washed out gambler who follows his father into a life of gambling.

Brilliant line:

“With one foot on the platform, the other foot on the train. I'm going back to New Orleans to wear that ball and chain.”

The Eagles Hotel California

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6zT3LzXzhJo>

This song about the excess and materialism the writers were experiencing in California in the seventies.

Colitas is a Spanish term for marijuana.

Gloria Gaynor I Will Survive

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZBR2G-iI3-I>

Classic disco song and a great “screw you” song too. Nice string/keyboard solo in the middle of this song.

The first line of the song is interesting:

“At first I was afraid, I was petrified.”

Afraid is a good word and petrified is a great word. If you started with a really average word like scared and you used a thesaurus looking for alternatives you could easily have found both words so using a thesaurus should definitely be part of your songwriting arsenal.

The theme of the song also suggests some great words and phrases:

afraid, petrified, you did me wrong, I grew strong, that look on your face, change the lock, leave your key, don't bother me, tried to hurt me, crumble, lay down and die, I'll stay alive, strength, fall apart, mend the pieces of my broken heart, feeling sorry for myself, cry, hold my head up high, chained up, free, I will survive, go, walk out the door, you're not welcome

Lou Reed Take A Walk On The Wild Side

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4FKts1JOaJc>

Interesting bass line with a slide that runs through this whole cult classic song.

Also amazingly “out there” lyrics for the time period really match the lyrical hook “take a walk on the wild side”.

Most notably the first verse which is a stunning piece of lyrical work:

“Holly came from Miami FLA. Hitchhiked her way across the USA. Plucked her eyebrows on the way, shaved her legs and then she was a he, she says hey babe, take a walk on the wild side.”

Can you make your first verse get attention by dragging in your listener with an amazing, mind

stopping opening story?

Bruce Springsteen Hungry Heart

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9N3o2qX6j60>

Great first verse in this song gets your attention:

“Got a wife and kids in Baltimore Jack. I went out for a ride and I never went back. Just like a river that don't know where it's going, I took a wrong turn and I just keep goin'.”

Also a fabulous feel good song with a nice cross between a doo wop feel and chord progression and the harder more crunchy rock Springsteen is now famous for. Nice piano running through the song and nice organ solo in the break.

If most of your songs are in one style of music can you write a song that is still in your style but uses the flavor of another musical style?

Springsteen originally wrote this song for the Ramones but decided to record it for himself...it was his first really huge hit song.

“Everybody's got a hungry heart” is a great lyrical hook.

Billy Joel Allentown

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K62DdoFoNeg>

Great opening line in this song sets the scene of people in a coal mining town suddenly unemployed:

“Well we're living here in Allentown and they're closing all the factories down. Out in Bethlehem they're killing time, filling out forms...standing in line.”

Joel adds the history of the town into the mix of this song giving him two main areas to draw lyrical ideas from: the experience of people in town where factories are closing down and people are becoming unemployed and the world war II background of the town.

This makes for some engaging lyrical ammunition:

closing all the factories down, killing time, filling out forms, standing in line, Jersey shore, Bethlehem, restlessness, hard to stay, waiting, Pennsylvania, teacher promised if we worked hard and behaved, graduations on the wall, graduation never helped, iron, coke, chromium steel, taken all the coal from the ground, union crawled away, hard to keep a good man down, I won't be getting up today, good shot, get as far as your old man

fathers fought the second world war, weekends in Jersey, mothers, USO, asked them to dance, slow dancing, threw an American flag in our face

Note also that he wrote the song about a specific town...Allentown. Specific place names usually make for much more effective lyrics.

Five For Fighting Superman (It's Not Easy)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84b949k8HCw>

Nice piano solo and ending to this song.

The theme of this song...a disillusioned Superman...is very clever because it combines a strong emotion common to most people (life is not easy for me...self pity) with all the lyrics, words and concepts of the iconic superhero.

So you might start with words like:

fly, flying in the clouds, bird, plane, strong enough to stop a train, my home Krypton, hero, up up and away, you can all sleep sound tonight, red cape, kryptonite

Then you think if I was a disillusioned, depressed superman how might I feel about those things.

Then you come up with GREAT lines like:

“I can't stand to fly”

“Men weren't meant to ride with clouds between their knees”

“I'm more than a bird, more than a plane, more than some pretty face beside a train”

“Find a way to lie about a home I'll never see”

“Even heroes have the right to bleed”

“Even heroes have the right to dream”

“I'm only a man in a silly red sheet diggin for kyrptonite on this one way street”

It is a bit of a come down for us to realize that the great superman is actually a bit of whimpy whinger but it does make a great song idea.

Can you take a concept and add an unusual emotive human element to twist that concept (there are a whole pile of different concepts right here in this report you could try that with).

Elton John Rocket Man

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzrKlEtxTx4>

Again tying in the idea of an unusual “profession” with very human elements and emotion.

The astronaut/space theme gives plenty of good material:

pre-flight, zero hour, high, earth, lonely in space, timeless flight, touch down, rocket, burning, Mars, cold, science

Then that is combined with the phrases associated with an everyday family man:

she packed my bags, miss my wife, not the man they think I am at home, raise your kids, just my job five days a week

Macarthur Park

This song is an abomination. No one should be stupid enough to leave a cake out in the rain then complain about it being ruined (if it was me I would never tell anyone).

I mean what the hell would you be thinking... “Hey I've finally finished backing this cake. I think I'll just put it outside for a while. It's a bit cloudy but I'm sure someone will bring it in if it rains.”

One of the dumbest songs I've ever heard in my life and Jimmy Webb can't even claim he was

taking drugs when he wrote it.

## Great Music Parts

Choir Boys Run To Paradise

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWrW3qJ2HOA>

Near yelling explosive part by multiple male singers combined with sudden electric guitar and drum contrasts with much softer music before and after parts

“Baby” “Jenny”

Also great contrast between verse intro and second verse with drums.

Deep Purple Hush

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ilz5SxrHA3E>

Na na na na na na na na na singing part with electric guitar

Fabulously feel good strong rock

Billy Joel All About Soul

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBxkHRukM6M>

Nice na na na na nas mixed in with the “It's all about soul”

Some nice although somewhat directionless lyrics thrown in:

“There are people who have lost every trace of human kindness”

“You got to be hard. As hard as the rock in that old rock and roll.”

Chocolate Starfish Mountain

Nice sing along la la la, la la la la la, la la la, la la lo section in this Australian song. Also has a wonderful feel to it and the lead singer/songwriter Adam Thompson knows how to deliver a song.

Also interesting lyrics at the start of the chorus (the musical high point of the song):

“You'd wanted me to be a mountain, I'd rather be a river. Water flow can wash a hill away.”

Reminds you of the lyrics from the old Simon and Garfunkel song El Condor Pasa:

“I'd rather be a hammer than a nail”

Neither make a whole lot of sense...I'm pretty sure I'm not going to wake up tomorrow as a mountain, river, a hammer or a nail...it's much more likely I'll just wake up with a hangover or a cold...but the lyrics do sound kind of wise and cool.

AC/DC TNT

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yexl yyySpyM>

Interesting oi oi oi vocal backing in this song.

Also some nice lyrics (on the edge of being tongue in cheek as may good lyrics are):

“Ain't got no gun, ain't got no knife so don't you start no fight. Cause I'm TNT, I'm dynamite, TNT and I'll win the fight”

“I'm dirty, mean and mighty unclean. I'm a wanted man. Public enemy number one hope you understand. So lock up your daughter, lock up your wife, lock up your back door and run for your life!”

Billy Joel Until The Night

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4dOSL2mxrZA>

Joel wrote this song as a tribute to the sound of the Righteous Brothers and in particular You've Lost That Loving Feeling with it's famous bridge

“I need your love, I need your love, bring it on back etc”

This bridge from Billy Joel is possibly the best bridge I have ever heard in a popular song. Completely over long and impractical for a 3 minute song but it's still a fantastic bridge and amazing to listen to for the build up from the slow music part to the saxophone solo to the explosion of the chorus.

The bridge starts at around 3:48.

Train Drops Of Jupiter

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4xXQFnIEf\\_Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4xXQFnIEf_Q)

Great feel good na na na vocals at the end of the song with multiple instruments leading up to this with the same musical part through the song. Interesting piano at the start. Interesting vocal in the middle with mainly just piano backing.

The tie in doesn't make a whole lot of sense but the whole Jupiter theme gives a whole lot of lyrics to work with:

atmosphere, Jupiter, summer, rain, moon, spring, June, sun, milky way, fading lights, heaven, fall, shooting star, permanent star, out there, constellation, afraid to fly, land, wind, light of day, Venus

Nice line:

“There she's back from that soul vacation, tracing her way through the constellation”

Okay it doesn't make any sense but it's really cool using soul vacation and constellation and rhyming them together.

There's a lot of potential for songs in the space theme, “going boldly where no man has gone before.” The theme is rich with great words, idioms and sayings.

Vanessa Carlton A Thousand Miles

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnkvh1XOR8>

Nice piano riff in the intro which runs through the whole song beautifully being picked up by the bass guitar and piano then strings then by the piano again.

This is a wonderful example of how just one exceptionally catchy musical riff can hold and tie a whole song together like a beautiful tapestry.

Katrina And The Waves Walking On Sunshine

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eONhto0x\\_nI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eONhto0x_nI)

Classic feel good 80s rock. This song is very, very simple. Their lyrics are simple, there's one quite simple rhythm guitar theme running through the song that's also picked up with a very similar keyboard intro.

That simplicity can be power in a feel good song. The title “Walking on sunshine” combined with the simple feel good rock carries the song.

The chorus simply repeats the title over and over:

“I'm walking on sunshine...who oh. I'm walking on sunshine...who oh. I'm walking on sunshine...who oh. And don't it feel good.”

Great line also in the theme of the song:

“Every time I go for the mail box I gotta hold myself down. Cause I just can't wait till you write me you're coming around.”

Sometimes you can get so caught up trying to be clever that you forget simplicity can be very powerful when it fits with the theme of the song and this song is a great example of that.

Neil Diamond I'm A Believer

This song is like a zombie...it won't die. It's been covered over and over and over again.

Nice keyboard organ part runs through the song.

Also some of the lines are interesting:

“I thought love was only true in fairy tales”

“Love was out to get me”

“I thought love was more or less a giving thing. It seems the more I gave the less I got.”

“When I needed sunshine I got rain” is a good example of using opposites for effect in your lyrics.

Other versions of this song:

Neil Diamond

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZmdLaUP3qgs>

Smash Mouth

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B17W\\_HT3A9E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B17W_HT3A9E)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DuQMke-a7hI> (Shrek movie version)

The Beatles Something

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wBe85UKa1GQ>

Great guitar riff. Simplicity is one of the powerful lessons you can learn from many of the Beatles guitar riffs.

Also a nice emotive vocal part in the bridge...

“You're asking me will my love grow...I don't know, I don't know...”

“You stick around now it may show. I don't know, I don't know.”

The Rolling Stones Satisfaction

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulVDM0a49Lw>

Very distinctive guitar riff opens this song and runs right through several parts of it.

This is a classic song and at the time one of the best selling singles in history.

You have to keep in mind that when this song was released it was right out there.

The main lyrical hook of the song is good: "I can't get no satisfaction".

Also there are a few nice lines in the same theme:

"When that man comes on the radio. Trying to tell me more and more of some useless information, supposed to fire my imagination."

George Harrison What Is Life?

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S2oFESUMWhU>

The opening rock guitar riff to this song is really, really simple, spiced up with the bass coming in on the repeat...and it works.

The same riff is used again as a break in the middle of the song and still sounds very cool.

Simple but very effective.

Dragon April Sun In Cuba

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bHyYc2A6duo>

Very cool and punchy rhythm guitar at the start of this song is very much in the theme of late 70s Australian pub rock.

Some very successful bands came up through the pub circuit in this era including the Little River Band, AC/DC, Sherbet, Dragon, Air Supply, Australian Crawl, Men At Work and Split Enz.

April Sun In Cuba is a good title for a song and there are a few nice lyrics in the Cuban theme:

"See Castro in the alley way talkin bout missile alert. Talkin bout JFK and the way he shook him up."

Crowded House Don't Dream It's Over

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZZfuCJ970w>

Astonishing piece of music. Great guitar riff at the start of this song and the bass riff just before the first verse is also amazing.

There's an interesting story with the recording of this song. Tim Finn was disappointed with how the band was coming together in the sessions recording the album and had just finished telling the band how unhappy he was and how he doubted he'd be sticking with this line up.

Then they did the take for this song that ended up being such a huge hit.

Sometimes the feel of a song sets it apart and that is the case with this song...it's wistful feeling is hypnotic and every part of the song works from the opening riff to the vocals in the fade out.

Be aware of this because often you can stumble on a really nice feel when you're playing around

with chord progressions or jamming with another musician or with a band.

Capture those moments...those unique feels...and use them in your songs.

TIP: It helps a LOT if you get an audio recording of those unique moments. It doesn't have to be a fantastic recording...just good enough so you can reproduce the sound.

Most of the lyrics in this song don't make a whole lot of sense (they're designed to tie you up in mental knots) but there is this amazing line:

“In the paper today, tales of war and of waste but you turn right over to the TV page.”

Sometimes you can come up with stunning lyrics just by watching the absurdity of your own every day behavior.

The Proclaimers 500 Miles

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tM0sTNtWDiI>

Nice feel good skiffle sound with a hard rock edge to it.

Great pub song and more evidence that really crazy accents from your lead singers may actually help make your song more distinctive.

Guns N Roses Sweet Child Of Mine

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-AYAv0IoWI>

Classic and very simple distinctive guitar riff at the start of this song.

The vocals of the first verse (and especially the first line of the first verse) are also very melodic contrasting wonderfully with the hard rock, electric guitar/drum based rhythm.

Three Dog Night Mama Told Me Not To Come

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpsu0n64bpQ>

Very cool piano part and bass line that runs through this song.

Ray Charles Hit The Road Jack

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ST8z3cuHi5g>

Nice piano part also runs through this song.

The interplay between the male and the female vocals are also very cool and totally consistent with the theme of the song.

Steelers Wheel Stuck In The Middle With You

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gy6cqFIjQo>

Dylan-esque lyrics in this nice pop song. Very nice simple but effective bass line running through the song.

Interesting use of the cowbell in the chorus (is it a cowbell?)

Hollies The Air That I Breathe

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KMSAnZR2Q8Q>

Fabulously engaging melody in the first line of this song...

“If I could make a wish I think I'd pass. Can't think of anything I'd need.”

The chorus also has a unique feel with the multiple vocals...

“Sometimes. All I need is the air that I breathe and to love you.”

And there's a nice simple but distinctive guitar solo at the end of the first and second chorus.

In 1998 Simply Red did a wonderful cover of this song...

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L17VHzFJ4cc>

Nazareth Love Hurts

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2BjJbKQkgc>

The melodic wailing in the verses of this song are very distinctive (and that same melody is used in a guitar solo near the end of the song). There's also some interesting pauses in the lyrics...those lyrics are perfectly placed inside the melody which is filled with cool spaces.

The singing starts in a very high register for the singer...this pitching is usually reserved for choruses which is one thing that makes the song distinctive.

Can you pitch your verse differently (higher or lower) to make your song stand out?

Nice lines:

“love scars, love wounds and marks, any heart not tough or strong enough to take a lot of pain”

“love is like cloud., holds a lot of rain”

“love is like a flame, it burns you when it's hot”

“some fools think of happiness, blissfulness, togetherness. Some fools fool themselves I guess. They're not foolin' me”

“I know it isn't true. Love is just a lie made to make you blue.”

New Radicals You Get What You Give

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91WgM6dNLTE>

Fantastic feel gold/hold on song.

Unusual melody in the verse is very distinctive with very short sung first 3 syllables in each of the first lines.

“Wake/up/kids”

“Age/four/teen”

“So/po/lite”

The same melody is used in parts of the chorus:

“Don't/let/go”

“One/dance/left”

“Don't/give/up”

“Can't/for/get”

Hollies He Ain't Heavy He's My Brother

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1KtScrqtbc>

Great vocal harmonies in parts: “but I'm strong” “his welfare is my concern, no burden is he to bear we'll get there..for I know”

This song became a # 1 hit almost 20 years after it's original 1969 recording. In 1988 it reached the # 1 spot in the UK charts when it was re-released after being used in a Miller Lite beer commercial.

Elton John was on piano in the original recording (he was working as a session musician).

Whitney Houston I Will Always Love You

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=19rC-F1-KwM>

Great vocal performance of this cover of a Dolly Parton song.

The explosive vocals in the key change near the end of the song give amazing punch to what was a quite down key song.

Can you lift your song with a key change in the last chorus or verse?

## Songwriting Ideas Quick Checklist

# When you're writing a song don't be critical of what you're writing. The initial writing is the creative phase. Don't let the critical phase (which comes later) interrupt the creative phase.

# Can you create a title that is so out there it gets attention all by itself? (eg. Teenage Dirtbag)

# Can you think of a song concept that is so strong it carries the whole song?

# Can you write a topical song...a song about a new trend? (eg. Kung Fu Fighting)

# Can you ask yourself the question "What if?" combined with just a little imagination and the ordinary things you do in your every day life to help you come up with an amazing song idea? (eg reading a magazine....Angel Is The Centerfold).

# Ask yourself "What's the worst thing that could happen in my life? What's the worst thing that could happen to the people in my life? What's the most amazing thing that could happen? What might have happened if God had thrown the dice differently?" Can you build a fictional story for a song around that?

# Instead of trying to write a whole song can you write just ONE good line then build the song around it?

# Can you use history or an interesting setting or location in your song? Can you use a setting in your song that gives you material and colorful words to work with?

# Is there something topical people are doing now that you can include in your song? (eg. Tie A Yellow Ribbon Round The Old Oak Tree)

# Can you add flavor to your song by framing it from an unusual, very human perspective?

Think of who is involved in the story in your song. Who might they know? Can you change the point of view to one of these people who care about the outcome to make the song more engaging or more emotional?

# Can you have your unusual story told by everyday people doing something everyday or tied into something every day?

# Can you use a key life event like a birth, funeral or and wedding as a setup for your song?

# Can you tap into classic emotions people feel in different stages of their lives...rebellious disenchanted youth, disillusioned middle age or regretful old age?

How did you feel...what experiences did you have in any of those phases? What about people you know? Do you know of their experiences?

# Can you use nostalgia or a time in your childhood or someone else's childhood as a story in your song or a part of your song?

# Can you use reverse nostalgia in your song...pointing out things weren't so great in the past?

# Can you write a song about parenting...raising a child, an event with your child or being a child.

# Can you write a song that's a story about just hanging on against all the odds? Can you give people the hope and the guts to hang on?

# Can you write a "celebration of life" song...a song that's simply a celebration of living right now?

# Can you think of a certain kind of person with a certain mindset who might make a great theme for a song?

# Are you walking past people every day on the fringes of society who might make a great topic for a song?

# Can you describe an area where you live or frequent and the people in it can that make up part of your song?

# Can you write a song about someone who has an unusual lifestyle rich with colorful words and phrases, place names etc you can use?

# Can you think of a story to write your song about based around a profession?

# Can you use devils, demons, angels, super heroes or another unusual theme in your song?

# Can you use a western shoot em up theme or a Spanish theme or any other kind of unusual theme in your song?

# Will your song work better as a traveling song? Can you turn an ordinary story into an extraordinary story by adding the dimension of travel to it?

# Can you take a concept and add an unusual emotive human element to twist that concept? (eg. Superman It's Not Easy)

# Can you make your first verse get attention by dragging in your listener with an amazing, mind stopping opening story?

# If your song is a little too sweet can you save it by adding a powerful last verse?

# Can you reveal something gradually in your lyrics so the ending lyrics come as a revelation?

# Can you tie the end of your song back into the beginning of your song (framing the song)?

# Can you frame your song as if you're singing the contents of a letter, email, phone message or text message?

# Can you use spelling a word or a number as a part of your lyrics?

# Can you use opposites in your lyrics for effect?

# Use your rhyming dictionary to can get some really cool colorful words into your songs.

# Use a thesaurus to change really average words into far more sexy colorful alternatives. Sometimes just one colorful word or phrase can end up being the lyrical hook and the theme of a song.

# If most of your songs are in one style of music can you write a song that is still in your style but uses the flavor of another musical style?

# If the lyrics or theme of your song are a little mournful, confronting or black can you put them to an upbeat tempo to make the song more enjoyable to listen to?

# Can you pitch your verse differently (higher or lower) to make your song stand out?

# Can you lift your song with a key change in the last chorus or verse?

## Useful Chord Progressions For Songs

Go to:

<http://www.angelfire.com/fl4/moneychords/lesson.html> for an almost ridiculously comprehensive analysis of chord progressions in hit songs.

In C:

I – C

ii – Dm

iii – Em

IV – F

V – G

vi – Am

VIIo – Bdim

in Natural Am:

i – Am

IIo – Bdim

III – C

iv – Dm

v – Em

VI – F

VII – G

In Harmonic Am:

i – Am

IIo – Bdim

III – C

iv – Dm

V – E

VI – F

VIIo - Gdim

Folk

I – V7 (C G7)

Rock

I – IV – V7 (C F G7)

Rock Ballad

I – vi – IV – V7 (C Am F G7)

Doo wop

I – vi – IV – V (C Am F G)

Standard

I – vi – ii – V7 (C Am Dm G7)

Ragtime

I – VI7 – II7 – V7 (C A7 D7 G7)

Classic Rock

I – bVII – IV (C Bb F)

Flamenco

i – bVII – bVI – V (Am G F E)

Jazz

ii – V – I (Dm G C)

I – IV – V (C F G)

I – iii – IV – V (C Em F G)

I – V – vi – IV (C G Am F)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yk8fB4CRse4>

i – III – IV – VI (Cm E F A)

i – III – iv – VI (Cm E Fm A)

i – VI – v (Cm Ab Gm) (Am F Em)

vi – IV – I – V (Am F C G)

(C - G - Am - C - F - Ab Bb - C)

## Bridge Progressions

Commercial Bridge

I – IV – II – V (C7 F D7 G7)

variations...

v7

I7 – IV -

2-5-1 (Dm G C)

3-6-2-5-1 (Em Am Dm G C)

To change key (or for a bridge or lead in to a chorus) you can use the 2-5-1 of the key you're going into.

## What chord should you play next?

In many standard progressions this is what happens:

I goes to any chord	C – any chord
ii – V7	Dm - G7
iii – vi	Em - Am
IV – I or V7	F – C or F- G7
V7 – I	G7 - C
vi – ii	Am – Dm

I – ii – V7 – I	C – Dm – G7 - C
I – iii – vi – ii – V7 – I	C – Em – Am – Dm – G7 – C
I – IV – I	C – F – C
I – IV – V7 – I	C – F – G7 – C
I – V7 – I	C – G7 – C
I – vi – ii – V7 – I	C – Am – Dm – G7 – C