

EPISODE 002

Do you need to have a Message in your Song?

See the show notes at www.storiesinsongs.com/002

[00:00:00] Hey, this is Melanie. Welcome to the second episode of the stories in songs podcast.

Thanks so much for tuning back in.

Now since you're here I guess you want your songs to have a meaningful message for your listeners and you do not know if you're on the right track, how you can achieve it or how to tell if there's already a takeaway for your listener in the song you just wrote?

Or you might even wonder if it's really necessary to express a kind of deeper meaning in a song.

Isn't it enough to have a catchy melody and let everyone hit the dance floor?

Sometimes that's cool, but if you want your song to resonate with your listeners and to be unforgettable, you need to incorporate something that your listener can learn from or relate to.

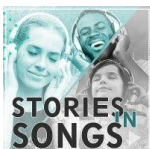
Incorporating a message in the lyrics of a song makes a huge impact on the listener because it's your opportunity to advise them of what to do or not do.

Of course not as obvious as this might sound.

You don't want to become a preacher. Sometimes you need to, but let the lyrics naturally flow around an idea and you will enforce it without pointing your finger at it.

And because of that, your song will more likely be remembered.

In this episode, I will show you a method of how to find out if your song is a cautionary tale meaning it's expressing something your listeners should avoid - like maybe you've made a bad experience that you went through and you want to tell your audience: Hey Listen. When I was in this relationship, I made this huge mistake and that's how it turned out. We broke



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up. I lost her to another guy because I was too jealous, too weak, too unsure of myself and/or didn't fight for her. So that's a story that is a cautionary tale because it ended badly and you want to warn someone of committing the same mistakes.

Or you can also tell a prescriptive tale that offers guidance to achieve something they want. So maybe you found that new girl and you became an honorable man by doing something for her without expecting something in return. And that deed turned out wonderful for the two of you. So that's something someone can do themselves to achieve similar results.

And in this episode, I'll also tell you exactly which one, cautionary or prescriptive, is the one you should aim for and why.

Something you really need to pay attention to when you tell a story in a song because it may change how people think. And if you want to turn your listeners into fans, you need to know what kind of message your audience will take out of your song. Because that's what they will remember. And if your song gets them like they feel you wrote that song just for them, they build a connection with you.

And that's what this episode is all about.

The Message of a Song

[00:03:05] But let's circle back what I actually mean by having a message in your song.

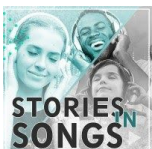
How can we define a message to have a common definition of what we mean by it?

If you're familiar with Jack Perricone and his book ›Great Songwriting Techniques‹ he defined the central idea as something »your song revolves around and assumes direction from.«

That's totally right, but in order to understand it better, let's turn to the approach that Robert McKee, a famous screenwriter, and speaker, takes on defining the controlling idea of a story because a message is not just an overall theme or an inspiring idea that your song revolves around, like Perricone suggested, but it's actually extremely clear and specific.

McKee says:

- A controlling idea must be boiled down to the fewest possible words and cannot be longer than a one-sentence statement. Okay, I guess this one is pretty clear. If you need to write more than a paragraph to explain what your song is about then the message of your song might not be clear at all.



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- Secondly, the controlling idea must describe the climactic value charge of the entire story, either positively or negatively. Each story is about something abstract like love to hate, justice to injustice, life to death or the other way around. The way your story progresses, like for example from fooling around to commitment is a positive progression. On the other hand, if it's a song about a couple breaking up, it mostly turns from positive to negative because the lovers are sad and alone again.
- And thirdly, it must be as specific as possible about the cause of the change in the value charge. So if you write about a breakup, the message of your song should include the reason why the breakup happened. It's okay if you just hint at it.

If we put that criteria: including an abstract value, a progression of a value charge as well as the reason for the change into one sentence, then you've got yourself the message of your song.

But that sounds very difficult.

[00:05:42] Let's look at an example to understand that theory better:

If you have a song that's similar to the ending of Romeo and Juliet's love story, then your message could be: »Love conquers all but death.«

So you see it's a very short statement. Only 5 words. We have the value in there which is Love and we have the cause of the change: death.

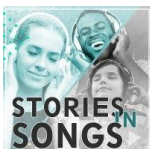
»Love conquers all but death.«

So when I'm talking about the message in a song I'm not referring to political statements or how to change the world. Of course, there are songs about that like Placebo's »Allergic (To Thoughts of Mother Earth)«, Green Day's American Idiot, Holiday or 21st Century Breakdown or the introduction of radical politics into the music by the Beatles.

More often than this a song has a message that can be as simple as:

- »Love fails when promises are made to win someone back but no actions are taken.«
I'll be there for you by Bon Jovi
- or even threatening like »Betray me and you will suffer the consequences.« Infra-Red by Placebo
- or beautiful as in Westlife's My Blood as they basically say: »No matter what happens to you in life, remember you're strong because you are our blood.«
- or as powerful as Eminem's song: »Lose Yourself«, which I'll talk about in a second.

Not every song speaks to us.



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Depending on the moment or the stage of life we're in, certain messages or songs will resonate more with us than others.

Maybe you know that feeling yourself that you want your audience to have. I guess it's happened to you, too, that you've heard one particular song on the radio for so many times, but never really paid attention to the lyrics. But at one time in your life, like for example when your boy- or girlfriend just broke up with you, you pay more attention to songs that are about failed relationships. Sometimes you might relate to a song because it lets you reflect why your own relationship has failed. Other times you might find hope in the message of the song, that there's someone else waiting for you.

And sometimes, the lyrics just happen to say everything that is going on with you. Right to the point.

From that moment on – if it's your band that's singing that song – your casual listener becomes an active listener.

Because you've managed to touch their heart by connecting with them through your songs. The next time the song is played, they turn up the volume because they've connected with the song before.

Your song reminds them of an emotion, a feeling or an incident in their life. And through that deep connection, they know you're the one person/band they can turn to whenever they feel troubled or whatever the feeling was that they felt when your song said what they couldn't put in words themselves. And when your album comes out, they will buy it because they feel like you are talking directly to them. Because they know that you understand them.

And that's how you build a fan base.

But how can you make your song meaningful?

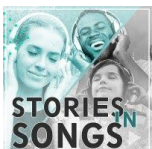
[00:09:04] But how can you include a message in a song?

What shall be the message that we're trying to communicate to our audience?

Let's start a little thought experiment.

When you want to tell a story, imagine that your character's life is put on a scale. Everything is balanced in the beginning. That's the status quo. And people love their status quo because that means they don't have to face change.

But stories are about change.



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They are about the progression from one stage in life to the next. That's what I was talking about by saying we need to include that climactic value change when we come up with the message of our song. Something with an abstract value like freedom, justice, love, life or even worldview or status is going to change for your character. Either positively or negatively.

But how do we do that?

Easy, we upset the status quo by an inciting event that upends the balanced life of the character in your song.

That means we let Karl Jung get on stage, you know the apprentice from Sigmund Freud who came up with the Chaos Theory, and we let him throw a ball of chaos into your character's life.

Something happens in his life that he or she didn't expect and throws their lives out of balance.

Harry Potter certainly didn't expect to be a wizard. Frodo thought he was safe in the shire, and Katniss didn't expect that her sister would be picked to play in the Hunger Games. Or like in other stories: someone is kidnapped, threatened, they meet someone special, a challenge arises, or many more things that throw them out of their routine.

And then the big question arises: What do they do?

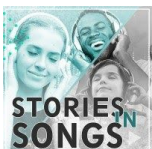
They want to get back to some kind of balance.

But on the scale, they are either dragged down by what has disrupted their normal life or, and that's possible too, the event has lifted them up and made them feel more positive (like they've just fallen in love or won the lottery).

So if something drags us down, the natural thing is trying to get back on our feet. We want to climb out of the hole we're stuck in. But if the character is not strong or wise enough, he might even fall deeper.

On the other hand, if the event that threw us off balance made us fly, we can either fall, fly higher or burn like Ikarus because we wanted too much.

So wherever the character rose or sank on that scale, it can still go further up or down. Both ways are possible. Because his new status quo will not be the position he or she's on right now. Because it's not balanced. And that's not a natural stage to be in.



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So they need to find their balance again.

And the HOW, yes, that's the key to knowing what the main idea of your story is.

And to know which way your story will lean to, you need to ask yourself, will the character in your song come out better to the way it was before or is he worse off at the end?

It's a cautionary tale when the character is worse off in the ending. It's a warning to the listener to not do what the character in the song did in that particular situation or he will find the same sad fate.

And it's a prescriptive tale when the character, even when he fell, is able to fight his way back. That's like a guide that people can use to navigate their own life. Prescriptive stories offer hope.

A positive ending doesn't mean there has to be a happy ending. Believable stories about true challenges are no fairy tales, but still, they can end with some form of a positive vibe. Be it by having learned an important lesson, gained a better understanding or done sth. good.

There's plenty of opportunities.

Let's look at some more examples of songs and find out what message they include.

Example 1 – ›Nothing else Matters‹ by Metallica

Nothing Else Matters © Universal Music Publishing Group

[00:13:22] Do you think there's a message in the song "Nothing else Matters" by Metallica?

Can you come up with a takeaway to what this song teaches its audience?

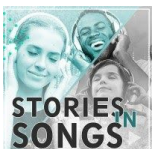
What about ›Love triumphs when you don't listen to what others say and trust your heart?‹

There you have it.

It's a simple message, but it's often forgotten when you are yourself right in the middle of the problem the song deals with BUT the song reminds you of what is truly important.

The song is a confession of love.

The couple is probably in a very committed relationship but there are opposing forces who are against the relationship.



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They say in the lyrics:

*›Never cared for what they do
Never cared for what they know‹*

›They‹ refers to what other people think.

And I think we've all been there when we thought it was important that other people do not think badly about us. But when it comes to love, the protagonist in Metallica's song is so mature and sophisticated, he knows that it doesn't matter what others think about them being together.

That's why love triumphs.

And that's the message of the song: Trust your heart and don't listen to other people's opinions if you want to hold onto your love.

That's a super-strong message for everyone who's in a relationship that is not fully accepted by their family or friends. And because we can relate to the problem the character is facing in the song, the song has become an evergreen because the message transcends time.

It's one of the best love songs without any doubt.

The good thing about a controlling theme behind a song is that you can use it for inspiration.

Why don't you write a song about how love triumphs even if other's are against it?

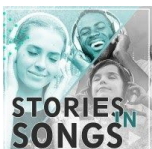
Isn't this the typical Romeo and Juliet Story?

And yet, we've heard that story so many times, and we're still drawn to it.

In Westlife's very first number one hit, which was also their first single, the first line goes like this:

*›I want to know whoever told you I was letting go of the only joy that I have ever known? Girl,
they were lying.‹*

Right in that line, we know the main character of the song is in a relationship and his partner doubts their love and what they have because of what others are saying.



There are people who taint the hope of a long-lasting relationship by discouraging the love of a couple. But the main character reminds his partner that their love is eternal. And he swears his love to her all over again. And that's also the title of the song: Swear it Again.

And ›Nothing Else Matters‹ was also Metallica's condensed main idea behind their song that they put wisely in the title of their song.

Example 2 – ›The Rose‹ by Bette Midler

The Rose © Warner Chappell Music, Inc

[00:16:18] Did you know, you can even have two central ideas or messages in your song.

We focus on one message when we talk in further episodes about how to tell a powerful story in a song, but here's an example to show you that you can even incorporate more than one message in a song:

In the song ›The Rose‹ by Bette Midler we have the following lyrics.

And please don't wonder why I am not singing the lyrics. I would do anything for you, my friend, but I won't do that. It's better for all of us.

So in ›The Rose‹ the second and third verse go like this:

*"It's the heart afraid of breaking, that never learns to dance
It's the dream afraid of waking, that never takes the chance
It's the one who won't be taken, who cannot seem to give
And the soul afraid of dying, that never learns to live."*

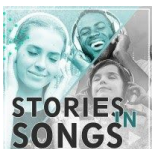
It's amazing songwriting done by Amanda McBroom. Almost the entire song is very sad, almost devastating. The message is clear: Love fails when you don't allow yourself to be vulnerable and risk something.

But what makes the song so extraordinary is the last verse:

*"Just remember in the winter, far beneath the bitter snows
Lies the seed, that with the sun's love in the spring becomes the rose."*

The message changed and left the listener with a hopeful feeling at the end of the song.

We now know: Love triumphs when you look at love as something to care for in order to enjoy its beauty.



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When I talk about how we as songwriters and storytellers can influence the emotion of our listeners, that's what I am talking about.

The song ›The Rose‹ ends with providing a sense of hope and tells its audience what to do in order to achieve the thing they want, and more so what to avoid or which behavior to stop that will only result in not finding love.

In the beginning, the message is a cautionary tale: If you are scared of committing and of the pain, love might cause when it ends, you will never be able to learn how to live because only love makes you feel alive. So a cautionary tale tells the audience what to avoid in order not to get a bad outcome.

What's beautiful in the song, is that there's a prescriptive tale in the last verse to get hope back up. So for all the lonely people out there, this song tells them that there's a seed and if they dare to hope and turn to the light, there's something amazingly beautiful awaiting them.

Example 3 – ›I'd do anything for love‹ by Meatloaf

I'd Do Anything for Love (But I Won't Do That) © Round Hill Music Big Loud Songs, Carlin America Inc

[00:18:59] Furthermore, you want the message of your song or at least something that strengthens or highlights it, to be the last emotion or image your listener takes away from your song.

So if you want to provide guidance, help or give hope, tell them how they can achieve what they want. It doesn't need to be an entire explanation. A single hint is all it takes.

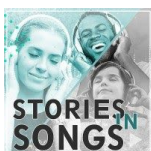
Like in Meatloaf famous ›I'd do anything for love‹.

The message is: »Love triumphs if you are able to understand what's good for love and what destroys it.«

And the song gets very specific.

There's also a counterpart, another person singing at the end of the song. It's the main character's love interest. She shows her distrust as she tells him:

*"I know the territory, I've been around
It'll all turn to dust and we'll all fall down
Sooner or later you'll be screwing around"*



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Her doubt highlights that his words ›I'd do anything for love‹ can also mean something completely different. While we know the character in the song talks about how he would do everything for the love of this one special woman, the woman knows him and tells him, he will cheat on her because he would do anything to get some physical love.

But once again, the message of the song is complete by hearing the character's resistance to what she's suggesting:

*"I would do
Anything for love
But I won't do that"*

And this is beautiful songwriting.

There was a mystery to the song because the audience was left wondering what is the one thing that the main character would not do for love: And it's revealed at the ending of the song: He won't cheat on her.

So the message gets even stronger because we know the main character would specifically do anything only for that one person he loves. Not for anyone else.

Example 4 – Placebo

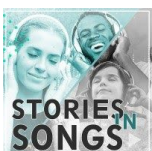
[00:21:01] Even when we stray away from love songs, there's still plenty of opportunities to include a message when you tell a story in a song.

For example, let's look at Placebo. Many of their songs on their first albums revolved around the controlling idea of staying true to yourself. Just look at Come Home, 36 Degrees, or Nancy Boy. They are all about how your life gains meaning if you stay true to who you are even in a world that is multi-layered and imperfect.

Or there's Green Day, as already mentioned, who rebel and want to be the Minority. There's My Chemical Romance who invites everyone to join the Black Parade to become the saviors of the beaten and the damned. There's the Lion King's Hakuna Matata philosophy or Eminem's ›Sing for the Moment‹.

Especially with My Chemical Romance or Eminem, having messages in a song not only turns listeners into fans but you can even save lives through your songs.

Here's what Eminem said in his song: Sing for the Moment:



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Oh, and for avoiding curse words, I replace those words with the ones I know from the comic book series 'I hate fairyland' by Scottie Young.

*»Or for anyone who's ever been through (shish) in they lives
›Til they sit and they cry at night, wishing they die
›Til they throw on a rap record, and they sit and they vibe
We're nothing to you, but we're the (fluffing shish) in their eyes«*

Lose Yourself © Kobalt Music Publishing Ltd.

This is how far music and songs can go.

Even if you're just a fan of a boyband, they still mean the world to you because you can relate to what they sing about in their songs. They make you feel like there's someone out there who understands you. There's comfort in that thought. Hope. Even joy and partying together.

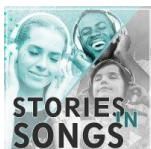
And that's the whole point of including something meaningful, something worth getting out there in your song. Because you can help someone by listening to your songs. You can provide guidance. Self-Help, joy, or even tell them what not to do in order to avoid certain bad consequences.

[00:23:24] Prescriptive tales are the ones we love the most because they make us feel stronger, better and understanding. Yes, we also need cautionary tales in our lives in order to survive and be aware of certain mistakes we shouldn't do, but even when you look at all the movies produced or novels written, the most successful ones end more positive than negative.

And there's so much more to say about the main idea of a song. The message, as you like. Like where do you place it? How obvious or hidden can it be to still be recognized, accepted and understood? What ways are there to come up with ideas? How can you enforce it? How should your character be like? How can he change? And many more questions.

And in this podcast, we'll focus a lot more on how you can upend the life of the character in your song, what complications he or she got to face and how to tell a captivating story that supports the message you want your audience to take away from your song.

And I promise I'll cover all of this in this podcast. But before we go deeper into the different methods of how you can enforce the message in your song without being on the nose, we'll focus first on the craft of telling a story itself.



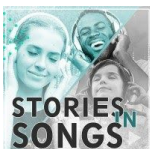
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If you've enjoyed the show and are as psyched as I am about telling amazing and powerful stories in songs, hit subscribe and I'm looking forward to having you in my next episode which will be all about how to tell a story in a song so that you know how to capture the attention of your audience.

Check out the show notes on storiesinsongs.com

Cu next time,
Melanie



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