

EPISODE 003

## How to tell a story in a song?

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**[00:00:00]** Hey, and welcome to episode #3 of the Stories in Songs Podcast.

In today's episode, I'm gonna teach you the basics about storytelling, but beyond that, I'm gonna give you three specific things that you can do in your songwriting right now to help you hook your listeners and to keep them engaged in the lyrics. I'm gonna help you finally understand what a turning point is. Something you really need to get in order for this to work. And lastly, I'm gonna offer you a method that I've been using for years now to help me learn exactly what kind of story I'm telling – is it a cautionary tale or a prescriptive one? Stick around because this is all you need to know about the basics of storytelling in songwriting – all in one episode.

So today I want to dive into the craft of how to tell a story in a song.

**[00:00:50]** And you might wonder: Why is storytelling so important for songwriting? Why do we need to tell a story or part of a story in a song at all?

The short answer: If you want to increase the sales of your next album, then this is what you should do beyond the aspect of music, composition and melody.

I've already analyzed all the 137 original love songs of the Irish band Westlife as well as all the 82 songs on the seven studio albums of Placebo. And by comparing the album sales with the result of how the songs on the album told captivating stories, I've found out that, in both cases, there's indeed a correlation between the number of sales and the quality of the storytelling in the songs.

If you're interested to see the proof for yourself, visit [storiesinsongs.com](http://storiesinsongs.com). It's right on the first page because I think it's super important to be aware of that storytelling indeed influences the success of an album or a single release.

So there's a lot of ground to cover today, but at the end of this episode, you'll have a better understanding of what the main ingredients are that you need for telling a story.



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In further episodes, we'll talk about those ingredients in detail. It's like we're in chemistry class now. There are all those exciting experiments that we can do by just putting all the chemicals that we have at our disposal into a test tube one after the other. But the result might not be what we expected. It might not turn out the way you wanted. You can burn or hurt yourself. Or nothing happens at all. There's no reaction. And only sometimes, when you're lucky, something magical might happen.

But you don't have to go through trial and error if you want to tell a story. That's why we're going to learn first what ingredients are the ones that we always need in order to tell a story, and in later episodes, we talk about how we can use all the different components of storytelling and tweak them to get a working result that will be just as magical.

So you're ready to learn more about how you can tell a powerful story in your song?  
Let's dive in!

So far we've talked about how My Chemical Romance turned so many people into fans by telling a powerful story in their amazing song ›Welcome to the Black Parade‹. If you haven't done so already, listen to episode 1. It's all about why storytelling is so important for building a connection with people and turning them into fans.

In episode 2, we talked about how important it is to include a message in a song in order to offer hope, guidance or even a warning for your listeners.

But you know what I've forgotten?

I haven't introduced myself properly to you, so I'm going to do that right now so that you know how I came to this wonderful topic I'm exploring with all my heart.

**[00:03:55]**

So, hello again. My names' Melanie.

I am from Germany, so now you know where that strange accent is coming from. Yes, I'm not perfectly fluent in English and I might mess up some words sometimes, but if I do, well, that's gonna add some more fun to the show, but I'm sure you will be able to follow me pretty well around this topic of storytelling in songwriting.

I am an author myself. I have published a thriller and one is a finished draft, and in all my stories I've written since childhood, music always played an important role and I've also included lyrics in those stories. So yes, I do love writing songs too. But most importantly I



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work as a story consultant which means I help writers learn and apply the craft of storytelling in their creative works.

I'm a Story Grid Certified Editor, trained by Shawn Coyne, the mastermind behind the Story Grid Methodology, that is all about teaching writers how to tell a story that works.

So as an editor, I wondered how the Story Grid can be applied to songwriting.

My question was: Does the craft of telling a story that works matter in songwriting? Does it influence the sales of an album or how chart-topping a single release can be?

So I am continuously analyzing the storytelling of different bands and albums like I did with Placebo and Westlife.

And in this podcast, you'll hear all about how I do it and what you as a songwriter can learn from it.

And there's so much to come because I have devoted myself to figuring out what the lyrics of a song should be like to engage the audience so that they are thrown back into their past, remember a strong feeling or even start to be caught up in a dream of hopeful fantasies that seem so real.

But in order to find that out, we need to ask ourselves the following questions:

- What is the essence of a great story in a song or on an entire album?
- How do we start?
- What is our protagonist like?
- What shall he or she tell?
- How do they change?

The answer is through knowing the craft of great storytelling and using it for writing songs that work!

And in this podcast, I share with you everything I'm finding out about storytelling in songwriting.

- So by gaining a better understanding of storytelling in songwriting and why it matters, you can increase the commercial success of your next album or single.
- You will be able to improve the storytelling of an album and its songs and choose the songs that tell the most captivating stories as a single release.



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- Furthermore you will know how to influence the mood and emotions your audience feels when listening to your songs and how you can create concept albums that tell a compelling story from the beginning to the ending.

And best of all, you will turn into a great storyteller who knows how to hook and engage your audience by connecting with them not only through music but also through what you have to say.

## So what do we need in order to tell a story?

**[00:07:06]** Here is a list of the most important ingredients. And don't worry, I'll talk about each of them today too.

So in order to tell a story, we need:

1. a problem the song addresses
2. a character who has to deal with that problem
3. we need to know what's at stake if the character fails or succeeds
4. we need to have a turning point progressive complication
5. a dilemma that shows the character is in a crisis situation
6. an action that shows the answer to his dilemma
7. and a resolution of how that specific action turned out for the character. Did it help him or her reach his or her goal or not?

So let's start with the first one:

### 1. Problem

**[00:07:50]** First of all, think about what problem your song should address. Yes, a problem. Even if you want to write a song about a powerful love confession or about being true to yourself, or mainly about something completely positive, you need to include a problem.

Songs, as well as stories, need to hook their audience quickly. By referring to a specific problem you not only give your audience a sense of what your song is about but more importantly you're setting up an expectation as to how to solve that problem if your listeners ever find themselves in the same situation. And that's important if you want your listeners to connect with your songs because you want them to relate to what you sing about.



Being specific also helps to make a song be remembered. We don't want to hear generic terms that there were problems. We need to know exactly what happened.

Otherwise we might not think it's believable and therefore won't be moved by the song.

And specificity help to get to know the character in the song. And if we find the character relatable or can relate to the problem he has to deal with, we can empathize with them.

And you know what?

The more specific you are in a story, the more universal the story becomes.

Just look at the following songs:

- Meatloaf's "*I'd do anything for love*" addresses the problem of how much one is willing to do for love. And it gets very specific by saying that the character of the song would do anything for love, but he would never cheat on his beloved just to get some physical love elsewhere.
- The problem can be as big as Nickelback's "*If Everyone Cared*" which is all about how the world could be if everyone cared as much about each other as two lovers do.
- Or the problem could be as life-changing as Bon Jovi's "*I'll be there your you*" which is about how to deal with a breakup, or rather small like "*The Way You Look Tonight*" by Frank Sinatra which deals with the problem of wanting to let one moment in time last forever.

Of course, it's possible to just sing about how great it feels to be in love and come up with all those great comparisons and put many metaphors in there. But look at it this way: How great do you think something is if it's only presented to you as top-notch great, but they do not show you what it would look like without.

If we don't know both states, we have nothing to compare it with. So if you want to confess your love in a song, at least hint at it how it would be without that special person in your life. And the problem could be like Metallica did in "*Nothing Else Matters*" – people who are against the relationship. Or there's a rival or even secrets to overcome.

So no matter what you want to sing about and no matter how great it feels, try to include a specific problem of maybe what troubling event or incident has led to the action of confessing one's love in the song.



Basically you focus on how to deal with a specific problem in life and you either let your character be stuck in that problem like in *“American Pie”* where the character can’t get over the fact that the music he loved died with Buddy Holly.

Or you can make your character find a solution to that problem, either a helpful one for the listener (like in *“Nothing Else Matters”*) or make them aware of what was a bad choice as in *“River”* by Joni Mitchell.

## 2. Character

**[00:11:23]** Secondly, if you know what problem you address, think about the character in your song.

Even if you haven’t thought about storytelling in songwriting, as soon as you sing about the troubles of life, facing incredible odds or simply confessing love there’s a character in your song that the listener will consider to be a real person.

It doesn’t matter if your audience reflects that character to be you, the singer of the band or is putting himself or herself in the situation or circumstances of that person, so as to understand or empathize with their perspective, opinion, or point of view.

Having a character is essential for songwriting because a song should address a problem. And only a person can face a problem.

So who is your character? How is he or she going to deal with that problem?

How do you want to present that character to the listener?

Is it someone who’s struggling? Unsure of himself? Is he or she weak? Devastated or courageous? Ignorant or mature? Selfish? Angry? Happy? Heartbroken? Medicated? Is it someone who has to grow up and let go of their black and white view? Or is it someone who exactly knows what he or she wants and is willing to fight for it?

The way your character faces and deals with the problem presented in the song, makes a huge impact on how the listener considers the song to be helpful in a prescriptive way or rather cautionary in terms of the listener should avoid what the character did in the song in order as to not end up like him or her.



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Once again, in Meatloaf's *"I'd do anything for love"* the character is very mature. He knows what he wants and he is aware of all the bad things that could harm his relationship, especially when it comes to cheating on his partner.

On the other hand, in *"I'll be there for you"* by Bon Jovi, we have a naive and weak protagonist. He's weak because he's saying:

*"You left me drowning in my tears  
And you won't save me anymore"*

This means he needs to be saved by her. He can't do it himself. That's weak. In every great story, a character falls into a deep hole of troubles, but what makes us love those stories, is to see how they climb out of that hole - by themselves!

So in the song of Bon Jovi, his partner broke up with him and all he comes up with are promises. He's talking about the future and that he will be there for her. He thinks that he will change and make it all possible, but he doesn't understand yet, that he needs to change now in order to win her back. He's not ready yet and that's why she left. It's a sad story.

So whenever you write a song, there will be a character in the song. Be it you or a fictional character who has to deal with a problem. How he deals with that problem or if he deals at all with that problem will reveal who he is.

So before you start a song, think about the problem and the kind of character who has to face it. This can spark your imagination to see all the possibilities you have.

### 3. The goal & what's at stake?

**[00:14:40]** If you include a problem in your song, you are also setting up a goal for your character. After all, the problem needs to be resolved somehow. So your character needs to WANT something, basically: solving that problem.

If he or she does not want to achieve or reach anything and there's no problem that's setting up a WANT, then why should the listeners invest themselves in the lyrics of the song, if there's no reason to follow the character along and if there is no quest of how they try to accomplish reaching their goal.

A goal should refer to the problem presented at the beginning of the song. Confessing one's love is what a character might want. It's his or her goal. But the problem is either how he



does it, or the character's lack of courage, or even the existence of external forces like rivals or people who are against the relationship.

And whenever you have a character who WANTS something, there's not only something to gain but there should also be something to lose. So if he wants to confess his love, he could risk his friendship with the person he's in love with. That's what he could lose if his attempt backfires.

If we stay with the examples mentioned before, then the character's goal in Meatloaf's *"I'd do anything for love"* is to tell his love interest how much he loves her.

He wants to convince her of his love for her.

The problem is that she doubts him, and he has to find a way to make it clear to her.

Basically, after we're introduced to the situation they are in, she's asking him all those questions what he would do for her like:

*"Will you raise me up? Will you help me down?  
Will you get me right out of this godforsaken town?"*

Or she's also asking:

*"Will you cater to every fantasy I got?  
Will you take me places I've never known?"*

But then she explicitly lets him know her doubt because so far he's said yes to every one of her wishes with which she was testing him.

So she uses, what she thinks she knows about him, against him to push him away. She doesn't trust him yet because she's known other men like him. So she says:

*"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"*

So the male character in the song WANTS to make her see that even though he sometimes prays *"to the god of sex and drums and rock 'n' roll"*, he only loves her. That's his WANT.



In *"I'll be there for you"* by Bon Jovi, the character wants to win his beloved back who just broke up with him. He knows he's already lost what he missed in the past, but he wants to make tomorrow better. And if she doesn't give him a chance, he'll lose her entirely.

#### 4. An Unexpected Surprise

**[00:17:34]** But of course, solving a problem by reaching what you want is never how it all turns out to be. There are complications in the way that make it even harder to reach one's goal. It's like you walk to a concert and you stumble and fall. That's a complication but you can still get back on your feet and continue.

But at one point in the story something happens that throws the character off his set path to reach his goal. It's not only coming as a surprise to him, but it's completely unexpected.

So after you got back on your feet and continue walking to the venue, you see that your favorite band is there and they take pictures with their fans. But at the same time, you see how a grandma is knocked down by a robber and screams because she obviously needs help. So what do you do now?

So this unexpected moment is the most important ingredient you need for telling a story. This is the one that decides if you have a story or if you don't.

Stories are about change.

The ending of the story should be different from the beginning, and furthermore, the character should have changed in the process of trying to reach his goal as well.

The reason why the character changed was by facing a dilemma.

And this unexpected surprise, that I am talking about, is the catalyst for making change happen. It's the one that puts the character in a dilemma when he gets to a crossroads moment. Reaching his goal is no one-way path anymore.

He/She can't follow her plan without making a decision first. Like what do you do: Run to help grannie or get a photo with your favorite band?

The unexpected surprise throws something into the character's consideration that clearly shows no matter what path he chooses, there's no ideal option.

In Meatloaf's *"I'd do anything for love"* the unexpected event was the realization that he can't live without her. He's singing:



*"I know you can save me, no-one else can save me now but you"*

This is a revelation for him. And this revelation gives him a purpose. He was aware of how their relationship was, but through recognizing how much she means to him, his goal gets clearer. He needs to confess his love for her. At first, he just wanted to be with her. But now he wants to keep having her in his life.

So you see, the unexpected surprise contributes to the goal and it can make it stronger.

In *"I'll be there for you"* by Bon Jovi the problem was that she was leaving. The lyrics are:

*"I guess this time you're really leaving  
I heard your suitcase say goodbye"*

The turning point for the character was that he came to the understanding that he messed up.

*"I wasn't there when you were happy  
And I wasn't there when you were down  
Didn't mean to miss your birthday baby  
I wish I'd seen you blow those candles out."*

Recognizing his mistakes is the first step to redeem himself. And it's the first step to change his ways.

And so you see, if something happens in the character's life that's either a direct revelation to him that makes him think about what he did wrong, that will promote change.

The unexpected surprise can also come in the form of another character's action.

In the song *"When you're looking like that"* by Westlife, the main character broke up with a girl. But he meets her in a club again and she's dressed smoking-hot which brings him to realize what he gave up.

*"She's a 5 foot 10 in catsuit and Bambi eyes  
Everybody's who's staring wouldn't believe that this girl was mine"*

It's her action that throws him into a dilemma.



## 5. The dilemma & the crisis situation

**[00:21:32]** Whenever something unexpected happens which directly relates to the problem the song deals with, your character has to decide between a best bad choice or an irreconcilable goods option.

Now let me explain what that means.

That means, he either has to choose the lesser of two evils OR there are two positive options and he can't have both. Or only one is good for him but bad for someone else, or vice versa.

For example, if you choose to get your photo taken with your favorite band, that's good for you. But bad for grannie if there's no one around to help her. If you choose to help her, that's good for her and partly for you, because you did what's morally right, but at the same time, it's bad for you, because you've missed out on meeting the band.

If the character is presented with a choice, you highlight once again what's at stake in your story. What can the character lose and/or gain? They must make a choice. Otherwise, they will not reach their goal. So to say, getting from A to B is not possible without making a decision first.

So when you are on your path to the concert, and granny gets pushed over and robbed, you're in the dilemma of having to make a decision. Even ignoring granny and just following your path is a choice because there was another path. You were at a crossroads.

In Meatloaf's "*I'd do anything for love*" the turning point was him realizing that only she can save him. So what are his options this revelation throws into his way of life?

Well, he can either choose to ignore that revelation which means he can go on praying to the gods of sex and rock and roll but he loses her by probably screwing around again OR he can fight for this one woman and renounce the temptation of every other woman and gain a more intimate relationship with his beloved. It's an irreconcilable goods choice. He just can't have both.

In "*I'll be there for you*" by Bon Jovi, the option is either finding someone else and probably lose that person again because he won't change his ways OR admitting his mistakes and learn from them in order to one day prove to her that he's truly become a better person.



In songs, the crisis is mostly not stated clearly in the lyrics. Some songs revolve only around the crisis question like Westlife's "*If I let you Go*" where you can recognize the dilemma right in the title of the song.

Mostly the crisis question is left out and we get a glimpse of it by seeing what the character decided to do after hitting that unexpected moment.

And another important point to add is that the option the main character chooses reveals what kind of person they are. So make sure the chosen option shows the change in the character you wanted to show in the song.

So if you choose to help granny, it shows you're putting the needs of others above your own. If you choose to get snapshots with your favorite band instead, then you're probably selfish.

In the case of Meatloaf, the crisis is: Are you selfish and weak to temptations and use women as objects for sexual pleasure, or are you mature enough to see that there can be meaning in life when you devote yourself to the one person you love.

## Is the problem resolved at the end of the song?

**[00:25:06]** To make the story in a song complete and so that listeners better understand the message of your song, include a resolution. That means:

- What are the consequences of the decision made after they faced a crisis?
- Has the protagonist gained something by fighting for what he wanted?
- Did he lose because he was a coward or made a wrong choice?
- Did he reach a better understanding even though he lost something?

In the case of our concert - photo - granny example, imagine, one of the band members had seen the incident, too. Now if you chose to ignore granny and you walk up to them, they know right away what kind of person you are and might not agree to have their pictures taken with you. Because they might go and help that old lady.

On the other hand, if you chose to help granny, the one who has seen the incident could be coming to her and your aid as well.

So the resolution of a story shows the consequences of the character's decision made in the dilemma. And they can come as an unexpected surprise as well.

And once again, the listeners can invest themselves better in a song if they are able to root for the protagonist because they want him to achieve what he wants. By giving the character



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a purpose the listener will cheer for him if he reaches his goal or be sad with him if something goes wrong, at least as long as the character was fighting for what he wanted.

Most of the time, though, songs that tell a story will either end with a cliffhanger (ends with the unexpected event) or right after the decision. But not often do we learn how the decision turned out for the character. If you want, you can include it. My theory is that sometimes the resolution is left out because if the listener put himself in the situation of the character, it might turn out different for him as for the character in the song.

So even if you've chosen to help grannie, not in every story like this will one of the band members have seen the incident. Sometimes, you just end up helping grannie and not meet your band. But maybe someone else? Every decision leads to new possibilities. It's like the butterfly effect. You'll never know what one choice was good for.

But no matter if the goal is achieved or not, there will be an emotional reaction in the listener at the end of the song. It could be excitement, intrigue, a faster beating heart, romance admiration, relief, triumph, rebelliousness, anguish, loss or even pity. It all depends on how the character faced his/her problem, chose in the dilemma and what the outcome of his/her choices are.

On the other hand, if you have a determined protagonist who knows what he wants he doesn't face a crisis question. Even if there is a turning point, a protagonist who is confident in what he wants will never doubt himself or ask someone else what to do. He knows.

In the song "*Nothing Else Matters*" by Metallica, there's no crisis question. No matter what opposing forces come his way, the main character is so mature and sophisticated, he knows that nothing else matters except his love for her.

## Wrap up

[00:28:30] Now we've talked about the most important ingredients to tell a story.

Let me repeat them quickly again before I tell you the three specific things that you can do in your songwriting right now to help you hook your listeners and to keep them engaged in the lyrics.

1. So if we want to tell a story in a song, we need a character, the protagonist.
2. The protagonist also needs to have a conscious object of desire. A goal. Something he's after. He needs a purpose.



3. A story needs conflict. It can't be a walk in the park where the character goes from A to B without any complications. He/She needs to face a problem.
4. There needs to be a turning point as well. Call it a twist or a crossroads. Something that catapults the protagonist into a dilemma, a crisis moment that forces him to make a decision.
5. There must be something at stake. Something that can be lost or gained depending on how the character chooses in his dilemma.
6. Every decision has consequences. So how do the protagonist's actions or his decision turn out? What's the resolution?

All those ingredients to tell a story can be switched up in a song due to song structure. That means you can start by introducing the problem in the first verse, foreshadow the resolution in the refrain and in the second verse you show the turning point and the crisis the protagonist had to face.

Use the third verse for highlighting the outcome or for giving a hint of how it all might have turned out for your protagonist. In that case, you use the refrain for the dilemma.

You can play around with the order of those above-mentioned parts, but try to include them all to tell a captivating story in your song.

So as I said, I'll give you three specific things that help you hook your listeners and keep them engaged in your songwriting.

So whenever you write a song, first focus on a specific problem your character deals with. His goal should be to somehow solve that problem. Sometimes the goal arises from that unexpected surprise moment that turned his world upside down.

But the main thing is, include a problem. Big or Small. Just have one. People can relate the most with problems. We invest our time in those stories because we just need to hear how it all turns out. We look to stories to learn something.

So including a problem in your song is one way of how you can hook your audience.

Secondly, if you want to keep your listeners engaged, let your character deal with that problem. Make it hard for him because there needs to be something at stake if he fails.

And thirdly, whatever you do, include that unexpected surprise moment that throws the character completely off his path to reach his goal. That makes him rethink his ways or even his goals and puts him right into a crisis when he has to make a decision first.




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This is the strongest opportunity for you to keep your audience hooked. Because they just gave up for finding out how the character decided.

## Cautionary or prescriptive tale?

**[00:31:44]** I also promised you at the beginning of this episode, that I have a tool for you that helps you understand what kind of story you're telling – is it a cautionary tale or a prescriptive one?

In order to understand this tool, you need to look at your character and at how he deals with the problem he faces.

So look at your character at the beginning of the story you tell in your song and compare it with the ending of the story. Is your character worse off than before or better? Has he made the right choice or did he refuse to deal with it? Did he mature in order to understand his failures or shortcomings? What has he lost? What has he gained?

If you see a positive transformation in your character from beginning to the ending, then you have a prescriptive tale.

If the change is negative, you'll have a cautionary tale because the character is worse off than before.

Even if the character in the song doesn't deal at all with his problem, he'll be stuck. He won't change his ways to embrace better actions. So that will be a cautionary tale as well. A warning.

## Next Episode

**[00:32:50]** Wow, that was a lot about the fundamental principles of storytelling, but I hope you have a better idea now of what ingredients we need to tell a story and why we need them.

And I guess by now, you've already figured out, that every song you write includes a character and something he deals with because the song must be about something, right?



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So telling a story or part of a story in a song is nothing new. It's been done a million times. Songwriters are storytellers. So isn't it important for songwriters, too, to learn the fundamental principles and essential storytelling skills to be able to improve how engaging their lyrics are?

I think there's a reason why concept albums, that are well done, become the most important album in a band's career. Just look at Green Day's American Idiot. It has even become a Broadway Musical.

So I believe it's time we look at the craft of how to tell captivating stories in songs. Or part of a bigger story - like a scene taken from a novel or movie.

I believe that musicians have a great responsibility for what they are communicated in their songs. Lyrics are important because they have the power to change people's life - for better or worse. They can offer guidance. And for anyone who wants to help people get out of a bad situation, offer trust, hope or comfort.

I believe that everyone has a story to tell that it is valuable for others to learn from it, get inspired by it or even be warned. Storytellers are the ones who helped humanity survive through their cautionary and prescriptive tales. Storytellers are the ones who influence us, who cut through the noise and who makes us forget certain troubles and comfort us. They are what make us human and I believe songs are the best medium to connect with people.

Stories are important. They are the only thing that gets our attention. I believe that songwriters have the power to change lives and make a positive impact through the stories they tell in their songs. I believe that if we want to make the world a better place, music can speak to the people and help them find their way.

What do you think about telling stories in songs and the importance of lyrics?

Leave your thoughts in the comments on [storiesinsongs.com/003](http://storiesinsongs.com/003)

In the next episode, we'll talk about the possibilities of how to begin telling a story in a song. I'm gonna show you three different ways of how to start the lyrics and added to this, we'll talk more about how to introduce a problem right at the beginning of the song.

So stay tuned.

Sing, Write and Tell Stories,

Melanie



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**Song references:**

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- *I'd Do Anything for Love (But I Won't Do That)* © Round Hill Music Big Loud Songs, Carlin America Inc
- *When You're Looking Like That* © Kobalt Music Publishing Ltd.



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**EPISODE 003: HOW TO TELL A STORY IN A SONG**

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