

EPISODE 005

3 Simple Steps to finish the lyrics of a song you're stuck in.

See the show notes at www.storiesinsongs.com/005

[00:00:00] Hey and welcome back to the Stories in Songs Podcast.

This is the podcast for musicians, songwriters, and storytellers who want to change lives and create meaning through the stories they tell and the songs they sing.

Now today I want to talk with you about a problem many of us have to face at one point or another: How the heck can we finish the lyrics of a song we're struggling with? Should we just throw it out? Ignore it? Give it to someone else and admit defeat?

But hey, that song is yours. You can't give up when there's a bump in the road. After all, if that song would not be important to you, you wouldn't worry that much about finding the right words. You would just get it out there and move on.

But you want to finish the job yourself because that is your song. But how?

Maybe you've already got all the music written, including 100% of the vocal melodies, but you need help with the lyrics. And you try to find the right words that help you finish that song.

It feels like this song is haunting you. There's this unfulfilled feeling, and when you're like me, I get really frustrated with myself when I can't cross something off from my to-do list that I wanted to achieve that day or week.

I'm not someone who gives up. Because we won't get anywhere in life when we allow those struggles to hold us back.

And I don't think you are.





So let's talk about how we can stop procrastinating, and start feeling inspired and also know exactly how we can complete that song.

I will give you a 3-Step Action Plan with an exercise at the end of each step so that you find your inspiration, motivation as well as a clear picture of what you want to express in your song.

And I also have a surprise for you at the end of this podcast episode. It's like a reward for you if you manage to finish writing this song you're struggling with. And it will help you see how strong the lyrics of your songs are. So stick around to hear more about this amazing and FREE offer.

Step 1

[00:02:16] So let's start with the first step.

As always, here's a little quote I found to get us started. It's from Tim Finn, a singer, and musician from New Zealand who you might know from Split Enz, Finn Brothers, or Crowded House.

He said:

"The joy of songwriting only gets messed up if you are trying to follow up a big success, or you are trying to create a hit single, or if you have conscious thoughts of a particular outcome for the music."

Basically, this means if your motivation to work on this song does not come from your heart and soul, you won't be able to reach your own expectations. Because your mind is not free to allow your inner power to work. You're thinking about so many things that are just not that important. What's important is investing your full self into your song. Dedicating your energy into making that song the best it can be.

So to find out why we're stuck, we need to understand what keeps us from creating.

And the first thing you need to do is face the problem that you have. Admit to yourself that you're stuck. That you're resistant. Or even reluctant. Maybe you lack motivation. Maybe you're just not excited enough. Or maybe you just don't know how to make that song work. How to write the lyrics that they are poetic, but not on the nose, but also meaningful.

Steven Pressfield, author of the book 'The War of Art' says that whenever you're close to finishing a project, resistance doubles its efforts.





If something is important to you, like this song, don't feel ashamed of yourself that you haven't finished it yet. Because you can't get something done quickly that has a lot of personal meaning and value to you. It's no simple task like uploading a song and be done with it.

So remember, it's not helpful to be hard on yourself. As my mentor, Shawn Coyne, the creator of the Story Grid uses to say: "You are not the problem."

So don't beat yourself up about it. Be proud of yourself. Because you are trying to do something that is outside of your current skill level. And that is the very definition of how you can grow as a songwriter.

You're trying to take the next step. Make that song even better than all the options you've thrown out before. There's a reason why you feel like this song is too hard to finish. Because it's not only the lyrics you need to write, but it's also beating that inner resistance that is trying to hold you back from reaching a new skill level.

Understanding where you are at in your songwriting process, helps you focus where you want to go and how to get there.

So try to understand the specific problem you're facing.

Is it hard to find the rhymes? Or do you not know where to place the hook? Or struggle with finding the words that fit the mood?

So, define the specific problem you have, and then you can focus on finding a solution to that problem. Does your song need to have rhymes? If yes, what kind of rhyme structures can you use? Maybe not every last word needs to rhyme. Maybe your verses can rhyme with each other as My Chemical Romance did it in their song: *I'm not okay*.

Or research other songs that fall in the same category of what you want to write about and study how and where they have placed the hook.

And if you struggle to find the words for the mood that your melody expresses, think outside the box. Can you write lyrics that are contrary to the melody? Uplifting words to a darker theme of the song?

You can always innovate.

So take on a new perspective. Maybe that's how you can find your way to overcome that challenge and grow as a songwriter.





If you still have problems with writing that song because you just can't identify the specific problem, maybe it's time to dig deeper.

So, answer this question first: What is the goal that you are trying to accomplish with this song?

Maybe it's getting more fans, sell more, reach more people, create a hit single. Everything that Tim Finn mentioned in his quote. Maybe that is your motivation.

But let's go deeper than that.

[00:06:29] Now ask yourself this question: Why do you want to write songs? What does it mean to you? What is your overall purpose?

Those two questions are not the same thing. The first one was an objective. An objective can be accomplished like finishing a task. Uploading a song is a task. But a purpose is much bigger than this. You are a creative person. So your purpose is to create to be able to leave something behind in this world.

So maybe someday someone will say: "Hey, thanks. I just wanted to let you know, I really appreciate the thought and your effort you put in your songs. They are great and I will continue to listen to them even when you're gone. They mean a lot to me and give me strength. So thank you, you really made a difference and made this world a better place."

Or like Eminem phrased it in his song 'Sing for the Moment': "And maybe they'll admit it when we're gone. Just let our spirits live on, through our lyrics that you hear in our songs."

And if this is your purpose then completing the lyrics for this song isn't that overwhelming anymore? Is it?

Focusing on your purpose as a musician, songwriter, or storyteller is just another example of how changing your perspective can change your attitude. Some problems aren't as big as we make them.

So to sum up Step #1 and give you an exercise, here's what you can do:

- 1. Admit that you have a problem.
- 2. Remember you are not the problem. The problem is the problem.
- 3. Define the problem that is keeping you stuck.
- 4. If you got it defined and know its cause, you can find a solution to that specific problem. Look it up in books, google it, ask others.
- 5. Change perspective and try a different approach.
- 6. Continue with step #2 to keep working on your song.





Step 2

[00:08:30] Okay, so let's get on with Step #2.

Now we want to focus on what you're trying to say with this particular song that causes you trouble. Maybe you don't even know yet what your song is about. You may have some nice rhymes, but they don't really mean anything. They sound nice, alright, but no one is ever gonna say: Hey, those rhymes changed my life.

So let's find a way to make your song even more powerful.

The thing is you should always remember: if you want your song to resonate with your audience on a personal level, then your song needs to address a problem.

If you're song addresses a problem then your listeners can identify a lot better with the character in the song. Through that, they may sympathize or even empathize with them. They are invested in finding out how your character deals with the problem at hand that they can relate to because they are or were in the same situation.

Will your character find a solution? Will it be helpful? Or will it be his downfall?

This question is what hooks your audience.

Whenever we read a story, there's a problem that presents itself to the character. And we read that book or watch that movie to find out how it all turns out. We want closure.

So this is what you need to think of when you write a song.

So it's pretty easy to remember the first two steps of this process of how you can finish a song:

- 1. Step 1 was all about finding out what is the problem that YOU face.
- 2. Step 2 is about the problem that the character faces in your song.

So let's go a little deeper.

Did you know that if you take the time now to think about your song's theme, this can save you lots of frustration and wasted time?





It's true. And all we need to concentrate on is coming up with one sentence about what your song will be about.

One Sentence can make your troubles go away, and let inspiration come back into your life.

This second exercise is not only helpful when you are stuck, but also if you've got a song finished, but you feel like something's not quite right.

Writing songs is like going on a journey. We get out into the infinite creative space to make a discovery that makes us proud and that hopefully is also helpful to others once they discovered your song.

But being in that creative space is like a theme park with hundreds of rollercoasters rushing by. You get so many ideas and if you're lucky, you follow through on one. But more often than this, you may get distracted along the way. Or maybe you wonder if you turned your idea into the best thing it could possibly be?

Sometimes you might feel confused because you can't find out what's wrong with your song. Maybe there's something missing. But what? Maybe you've lost the spark what it is about? But how can you find it again?

And that's when frustration hits again. But remember, it's just a problem. A problem that is solvable.

So where do we start when we try to find out how to make an impact with this song? How can we write words that will take your listeners along and speak right to their hearts, unlocking memories and deep-felt emotions?

[00:11:42] Well, let's start with the idea.

What was the idea behind your song? What did you want to write about?

Maybe Eminem thought to himself when he wrote "Sing for the Moment": "That's a great idea. I'm gonna write a song about the role of rap in today's society."

Hm, okay. There are actually thousands of options to write a song about that topic. It's the first idea, but it is not a workable idea.

That means it's like you're trying to catch a bull with a lasso. In this metaphorical example, the bull is representing your song's main theme that will guide your songwriting. But if you





come up with something soooo generic and unspecific, you don't even find the herd where all the bulls are.

So what are we missing to find an idea that actually guides us to write about this topic?

Let's look at Eminem again. What if his idea actually sounded like this: "I'm gonna write a song about how much blame police and governments put on rap artists for the songs they sing, and answer it by showing them that we are actually the ones who care the most about those lost children. Because they turn to our songs if no one else is there for them. We offer hope, not destruction."

What makes the difference between those two ideas is that the second idea includes CONFLICT. It's Eminem vs. the government.

The song deals with the problem that Tyrants want to beat back revolutions by co-opting or silencing the leaders of the underclass. In this case, Eminem.

And we immediately wanna find out if one person can make a difference. And in *Sing for the Moment*, we'll get the sense that the controlling idea of the song is: 'We gain power when we expose the hypocrisy of tyrants', which Eminem clearly does. This song is a great story about society.

If you want your song to resonate with someone - which you achieve by making the song mean something to them - you need to include a problem that the character in the song faces. People relate to problems, and they wanna know how to solve them. And right with that, you can hook them.

If you include a problem, there's conflict. Because then you'll have a force of antagonism - something that stands in the way of solving that problem and that needs to be overcome.

In *Sing for the Moment*, Eminem is addressing the main problem the song deals with. He's saying:

"But everybody just feels like they can relate I guess words are a motherfucker, they can be great Or they can degrade, or even worse, they can teach hate It's like these kids hang on every single statement we make"

He understands the power of words that can be used as a weapon. And he is dealing with all those people who just want to blame rap artists for all the violence and for all the crimes committed by people who have listened to rap music. As if the kind of music you listen to makes you already a criminal. And this is insane. And Eminem's saying that in the song too:

"They say music can alter moods and talk to you





Well, can it load a gun up for you and cock it too? Well if it can, then the next time you assault a dude Just tell the judge it was my fault, and I'll get sued."

The great thing about that song is that Eminem's not arguing on the same level as the people who judge him to be a criminal. He shows that he is the one who has a broader worldview while they only see the world as black and white - meaning rap songs only teach hate. So Eminem is trying to show them what they should also take into account and which is far more valuable than any prejudiced judgment.

He's saying:

"We entertainers, of course, the shit's affecting ourselves
You ignoramus but music is a reflection of self
We just explain it, and then we get our checks in the mail
It's fucked up ain't it, how we can come from practically nothin'
To bein' able to have any fuckin' thing that we wanted
That's why we sing for these kids that don't have a thing
Except for a dream and a fuckin' rap magazine."

and later on, he continues with:

Or for anyone who's ever been through shit 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 fuckin' shit in their eyes

So he's telling them that they, the government, is the one who has given up on all the kids, a parent's nightmare as he described it in the first verse of the song because they just see them as future criminals.

But Eminem and his fellow artists see them as the kids they are who don't have anyone to turn to. So if he can make a difference in their lives and be there for them, he will continue to do so through his music. His purpose is self-transcendence. He wants to live on through his songs that shall continue to be there for those kids or for anyone who's ever been through shit in their lives.

Of course, Eminem's song 'Sing for the Moment' is a huge song to demonstrate a conflict a song can address. But we learn best from masterworks, and this song is truly a masterpiece.





Since we're talking about how you can finish the lyrics of the song you're stuck in, including a problem and a conflict is what can give you so many opportunities of how you want your song to progress while also making that song meaningful. As already said, people can relate to problems because everyone needs to deal with smaller or bigger problems their entire lives.

So turning to a song to help them navigate the troubles of lives is just normal. And something you need to consider in your songwriting. That's how you can make people relate to your songs, and turn them into fans.

So whenever you include an internal psychological problem, a problem with another person, a problem that arises due to society, or even has a higher level, the character in your song needs to change his approach in order to solve that problem and to overcome that conflict.

He has to question how he used to do things, understand different perspectives, and maybe even embrace another worldview to make better decisions.

He has to grow as a person, especially if you want the ending of your song to end on a positive note.

If your audience understands that the character in your song has made either the right moral decision, has overcome his black and white view of the world, or has decided to stay true to his beliefs, we'll like that character for having proven that people can change to the positive or are strong enough to not sell out.

Look at Survivor's Song 'Eye of the Tiger'.

They say: 'So many times, it happens too fast. You trade your passion for glory'.

They tell you you should be careful not to sell out. And what makes the song so great is that the character in the song stays true to his values. He keeps on fighting because he keeps on following his passion.

They sing: "It's the eye of the tiger, it's the thrill of the fight. Risin' up to the challenge of our rival."

That is the reason why they keep on fighting.

They do not trade their passion for glory. They are not selling out.

And that's also the reason why this song is the perfect song for the movie Rocky. In the movie, Rocky accepts the opportunity to fight Apollo Creed, the heavyweight champion. He





has no chance to win this fight, but he goes the distance and keeps on fighting until the last round. He stayed true to his moral code and did not sell out.

If you need your song to end negatively, then you can give your characters what they want while also making them pay the price of suffering internally - which means they won't get what they actually need.

For example, if your character wants a new high-priced car, give them a Ferrari by paying the price of selling out in what he believes in. This will give him what he wanted, but if he needed recognition, selling out to get something of material value has the opposite effect. No one is gonna admire him if he sold out. They will despise him.

So, if we stay with performance stories, let's look at Placebo's single 'Special Needs' from the album 'Sleeping With Ghosts'.

That song addresses the problem: How to deal with being left behind when a friend enters a new world without them.

- 1. The inciting incident of the story told in this song is that: One friend reaches stardom/success while the other one is left behind
- 2. The unexpected event, the turning point for the protagonist is when he understands that their friendship is over.
- 3. This realization puts him into a dilemma: Shall he lash out and force the other one back into a friendship or move on even if it's hard to be on their own.
- 4. He decides to lash out.
- 5. which leads to having to deal with the consequences of his actions: He is punished, and jealousy makes him say bitter things.

The character failed on the level of what he wanted: Success, as well as on the level of what he needed: Recognition.

Placebo's song is an example to show that you can deny your characters what they want and make them suffer internally too. This is taking the resolution of a song to the extreme.

This is also especially true for obsession love stories. The Story Grid defines the Obsession Love Story when one of the lovers has such a shallow but intoxicating passion for the other that the Life/Death value comes into play. Obsession Love Stories are cautionary. They don't progress beyond desire and usually end in tragedy. So they show neither character development nor getting what they want.





If we stay with Placebo, songs that touch on the dark side of love are, for example, *Pierrot the Clown*, *Peeping Tom*, or the single *Every you Every Me* from the album *Without You I'm Nothing*.

So to sum up the second step, here's what you need to think about:

- 1. Think about the problem you want to address in your song.
- 2. Come up with an external force of antagonism that the character has to face and that provides conflict.
- 3. Decide if you want your song to end on a positive note or negatively.
- Continue with Step 3 to find out how you can truly emphasize the problem your character is facing in the song so that your song can make an impact on your listener's life.

Step 3

[00:22:44] Okay, so let's get to Step 3 which is all about creating a one-sentence statement that will serve as inspiration and guidance for writing the lyrics of your song.

So far, we've talked about understanding why you're stuck writing this song, and also about how you can actually come up with a controlling idea or theme for your song that will guide you through writing the lyrics.

The last step in this process of finishing a song you're stuck in is putting the character in your song into a dilemma.

As my friend Courtney Harrell uses to say: Good stories are about ONE BIG CRISIS. And this is also true if your song is just a chapter taken out of a possibly bigger story.

I'd like to quote Courtney here again, because I could not say it any better myself: "Whether you write comedy or drama, the best stories feature a protagonist who, from the beginning, faces a strong moral choice and struggles with relatable human flaws. Stories that work play one argument out."

And this argument is created by having a Central Dilemma in your story.

A dilemma, also the crisis or when your character is standing at the crossroads, is when the path they wanted to follow to reach their goal is not a one-way route anymore. They now have to choose whether they will turn left or right. They only have two possibilities and no matter what they choose, they'll lose something in the process.





Either they face a Best Bad Choice in which neither option is acceptable or preferable. Or they face an irreconcilable goods question of two choices that are either good for the character in the song but bad for someone else, or vice versa.

The good thing is if you think about a crisis moment for the character in your song, you can build a story around that character whose inner strength will be tested by having to make this extreme choice.

Of course, you don't have to make your song revolve around that dilemma entirely. There are songs that do this like Westlife's single 'If I let you Go' that deals exactly with the crisis of confessing one's love and risking their friendship or not?

This last step was originally introduced to novel writers by my friend Courtney Harrell published on the Story Grid website. I think it's super-valuable advice for every storyteller, no matter if it's novels, screenplays, or even songs. That's why I am relating to her advice now while showing you examples that are specific to songs.

And for anyone who wants to check out Courtney's work, her website is thedarkrainbow.com. She's an amazing writer. In her stories, she truly focuses on helping her readers find meaning in their lives and staying true to who they are. I think that is so valuable, and it also supports what is so important to keep in mind for every artist. Through your creative work, you want to reach out to others and offer them guidance, hope, or just being there for him. And stories told in songs, movies, or books have the power to do just that.

Okay, so we said Step #3 is coming up with a crisis situation that has no ideal option for your character. It's so important to consider because asking yourself where your character is stuck in, will help you get unstuck in your songwriting.

Courtney has come up with one sentence that will give you clarity about what you want to write about, help you understand your character, and create a foundation that will not only guide you through your song, but also your listeners.

In this sentence, there are three fundamental elements that we've already prepared for in the last step. We need a challenged Protagonist, an overwhelming force of Antagonism and the one big Crisis that will cause conflict in your story.

The template for this sentence is as follows:

A SOMEBODY / who must do SOMETHING they really don't want to do / or else this other really bad SOMETHING will happen.





Okay, here are three song examples that show this crisis situation. And here's a reminder first: Please consider, you don't have to put that crisis explicitly into your song. But make sure, there's a crisis hinted at.

In Eye of the Tiger by Survivor the central dilemma was the following one-sentence: A talented street fighter must become the eye of the tiger or he won't survive, lose his dreams, or sell out to trade in his passion for glory.

If we switch back to Eminem's song *Sing for the Moment* the sentence for that song is:

A rap artist must face the potential danger of words and songs that can lead to crimes or the hypocrisy of the government will destroy rap music that also does so much good to so many kids and people who have suffered a lot.

Or in Meatloaf's song I'd Do Anything for Love we have a sophisticated protagonist who must find out the darkest fear of the one he loves or he will lose her forever.

This central crisis is the very foundation behind the idea of the song that shows who your protagonist is, and what kind of conflict the force of antagonism is creating while the character has to deal with a problem.

Here's another one: Nothing else Matters by Metallica:

A sophisticated protagonist who knows what he wants must open up and look at himself in another way or he will not be strong enough to ignore what others think or claim to know about him and his relationship.

Or I'm not okay by My Chemical Romance:

A character who's an outsider must tell the truth to his partner and ultimately about himself or his partner will never understand that they don't have the life she thinks they have.

But how can this specific idea about the crisis, the conflict, and your character help you with your songwriting? Why is that one sentence so powerful?

Okay, let's use Eminem's song Sing for the Moment as an example.

A rap artist must face the potential danger of words and songs that can lead to crimes or the hypocrisy of the government will destroy rap music that also does so much good to so many kids and people who have suffered a lot.

- 1. Okay, as already said, this sentence provides us with the protagonist: a rap artist
- 2. the force of antagonism: the government
- 3. and the crisis: He must face the potential danger of words and songs.



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But that one sentence also shows the internal dilemma brought up by the external goal.

Internal Dilemma = He needs to question his worldview or he won't be able to make a difference.

External Goal = Save rap music

3. The sentence can also inspire you to find out which incident has led to making your protagonist face his dilemma. And you can also include the decision he's making, as well as how that decision turns out for him. What are the consequences or what is the outcome of having made that particular decision?

In Eminem's song, the inciting event that must have led to him writing this song was the external pressure weighing on him. That means, fans turned on him and there are a lot of prosecutors who wanted to convict him.

The crisis is facing all those external antagonistic forces or trying to stay under their radar which would ultimately lead to not being able to make a difference anymore.

So the song is the decision of this dilemma. He had decided to write *Sing for the Moment* and even release it as a single to make his statement to all the prosecutors that are trying to make an example of him.

And how did this decision turn out for him? He has gained respect by not selling out and standing true to his values and what his purpose as an artist is - which leads us straight back to why storytelling in songwriting is so important. This is exactly why. Songs provide meaning and can make an impact on people's lives.

So to conclude the last Step in the process of finishing the lyrics of a song you're stuck in, I want you to come up with that once sentence for your song.

Here's the template again: A SOMEBODY / who must do SOMETHING they really don't want to do / or else this other really bad SOMETHING will happen.

And remember, if your character is not afraid to make a specific choice, then their central dilemma isn't strong enough.

Feel free to post your sentence about the crisis your character faces in your song in the comments on my website on www.storiesinsongs.com/005.





[00:32:09] Thanks for listening to this episode.

If you have a song to which the lyrics are missing, sit down, do the 3 exercises, and let me know in the comments of www.storiesinsongs.com/005 if those exercises worked for you.

And now let's talk about the little surprise I've got for you.

So you've completed that song. Amazing job. Or you got the lyrics of another song finished, but you just do not know if that song is truly powerful enough to make an impact on people's lives. Remember, the reason why we write songs is to make a positive change in people's lives and create meaning. Sometimes even safe lives.

But how can you know if your song can make a difference? Will it be a song for a first kiss? Providing comfort after having gone through a tragedy in life? A song that has the potential to be played on special occasions? Or a song that will be able to speak to a single soul out there and turn them into a fan of yours? Or even a trusted friend?

So let's find out together what you're already doing great in your songwriting, and what you can improve in the lyrics to make the storytelling in your song even stronger.

I will personally analyze the storytelling of the lyrics of one of your songs. For FREE. And tell you what works, what doesn't, and why. And of course, how to improve it.

So if you want some professional editorial feedback, this is your chance. This offer will not be around for long, so visit <u>storiesinsongs.com/onesong</u> to get your FREE song analysis.

It's storiesinsongs.com/onesong.

Okay, thank you for listening.

And I see you around next time when we talk about the six most loved moments of love stories and how you can use them to write a powerful love song.

So change lives. Create Meaning. And write powerful Songs.





Resources:

The War of Art by Steven Pressfield

Courtney Harrell: https://www.thedarkrainbow.com/

https://storygrid.com/one-sentence-can-fix-your-biggest-story-problems/

Lyrics:

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