

EPISODE 015

Beat the fairytale love song cliché and move over to the dark side

See the show notes at storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-015

[00:00:00] Hey, this is Melanie Naumann, and you are listening to the Stories in Songs Podcast.

Do you want to write a love song that is not about a happily ever after?

Are you fed up with fairytale love songs that always have a happy ending but you don't know how to dig a hole for your song's main character and let them suffer?

Love is not all about butterflies.

Sometimes love hurts.

Sometimes being in love sucks.

And you get stuck in life hoping for something that might never happen.

And that's exactly what this podcast episode is about.

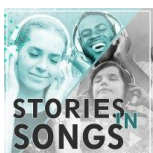
It will help you figure out how you can tell a love story moment without its happy ending ...

But still, leave your audience with a glimpse of hope.

AND it will show you how your song's main character may get stuck in life, ...

And how you can get him out of that hole again without letting him get what his heart desires.

If that sounds like something you want to try out in your own songwriting, then keep listening.



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What you'll learn in this episode

[00:01:37] We have already looked at five love songs that are all about the positive side of when we meet love for the first time.

But if we would only look at the songs with the happy ending, something would not ring true.

Life is never black and white.

As kids, we might think so because all the fairytale stories suggest an evil witch and the good and innocent girl, or the terrible dragon and the noble prince. And the good always wins against the evil. Those stories portray life as a two-sided coin, and you can either choose to live on one or the other side.

And the person who chooses the other side is your opponent.

But as we grow older, we realize that people do not act because of pure good or pure evil motifs. There's actually so much in between that we do not know about. Many things influence us, and much more happens to us that shapes our experience that the world of black and white fades into all those shades of grey.

So when we listen to a love song that ends happily, we want to believe that this is the way it should turn out. We believe the song's main character more when they had to go through hardship to find love and connection.

But we encounter doubt if everything reminds us of a fairytale that we have grown to believe they are only good for bedtime stories to tell our kids of a world that is much easier to understand than the one we live in.

And to create an equilibrium, there can't only be stories with happy endings. More often than that stories end with an ironic ending. That means a character might get what they want but not what they need or vice versa.

We can't have everything in life.

At one point or another, we have to decide what's more important to us.

And that decides who we become and what'll we'll get.

You can't be a great husband and father and please your boss by working all week overtime. Doesn't work.



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You can't expect an expensive car to make people admire you, although it elevates your social status.
Doesn't work.

You can't expect that love lasts eternally if you don't put in the work.

That's why we got stories as well as songs that remind us that life does not always turn out the way we'd like.

Sometimes songs or stories need to tell a cautionary tale to make us aware of what might happen if we fall into the same pattern or do similar unwise things like the character presented in those songs or stories.

We need to hear cautionary tales to appreciate the other side of the coin. If everything were peachy, the world would seem very dull colored.

That's why today and for the upcoming two episodes, we talk about our Lovers' Meet Scene in another way. We will look at how that moment can go completely wrong, and we'll talk about all the problems and troubles meeting the One might bring into one's life.

Sometimes that special moment can even end in tragedy.

Let's start looking at our first song example and find out what caused the downbeat ending and how the songwriters pulled it off.

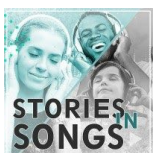
Are you ready?

Perfect, let's start with this episode's song analysis.

"Heartache on the Dance Floor" by Jon Pardi

[00:04:59] The song we are going to analyze is "Heartache on the Dance Floor" by Jon Pardi.

The song was co-written and recorded by American country music artist Jon Pardi as well as Bart Butler and Brice Long. It was released to radio on May 1, 2017, as the third single from Pardi's second studio album "California Sunrise".



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"Heartache on the Dance Floor" was certified Platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), denoting sales of over one million units in the country.

So that's pretty amazing, right?

By the way, watch the video because they focused on the storytelling aspect as well to tell in motion pictures what the song is about.

Now, let's get to the lyrics to find out why the song was such a big hit.

Okay, here we go:

[[Video]]

<https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/Cg4Eui4sGlk>

Heartache on the Dance Floor lyrics © Wordspring Music Llc, Sony/atv Countryside, Blongsongs, Songs Of Song Factory, Rancho Fiesta Publishing, Wordspring Music, Llc

*Yeah, I was just hangin' out.
Some little west coast town
Found a bar out by the sand
So I made my way in
First thing that caught my eye
Like nothin' I ever seen*

*Sunburned auburn hair
A California dream
Yeah, she was shakin' them hips.
To some old motown song
I couldn't say a thing.
So I sang along*

*She was a heartache on the dance floor.
(Heartache on the dance floor)
Yeah, she's movin' through my mind.
(Movin' through my mind)
I gotta know her name, and I got to see her again.*

*She's got me wonderin'
Yeah, I'm just wonderin'*



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*Where she at, where she at, where she at tonight?
Where she at, where she at, where she at tonight?
Ooh ooh ooh ooh ooh, yeah*

*So I just hung around
This little west coast town
I dropped by every night
I stayed till closin' time
My little mystery
That girl is killin' me.
So I put on a song
Just to sing along*

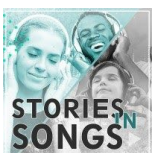
*She was a heartache on the dance floor.
(Heartache on the dance floor)
Yeah, she's movin' through my mind.
(Movin' through my mind)
I've gotta know her name and I got to see her again
She's got me wonderin', yeah I'm just wonderin'*

*Where she at, where she at, where she at tonight?
Where she at, where she at, where she at tonight?
She's got me mesmerized.
She's all I'm thinkin' 'bout
All I think about, think about, think about*

*So I'm right here, right now
Hummin' this little song
If I could say a thing
I'd want you to know*

*You were a heartache on the dance floor
(Heartache on the dance floor)
Yeah, you're movin' through my mind
(Movin' through my mind)
Ooh, I got to know your name. I got to see you again.
And if you're listenin', listenin', listenin'
Where you at, where you at, where you at tonight?*

*Where you at, where you at, where you at tonight?
Girl, I'm hangin' around this little town, yeah*



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*Where you go, baby
Where you at, where you at, where you at tonight?
Where you at, where you at, where you at tonight?
Ooh ooh ooh ooh ooh ooh*

Now that we have read through the lyrics, let's start dissecting them to study the storytelling craft in this song by using the S.O.N.G. Framework.

Ready?
Let's begin.

1. Summary (About)

[00:07:47] First, we start with summarizing the song to get a general overview of what it is about and what kind of story or story moment it includes.

Let's start with the bird's eye view of the story before taking a closer look.

What is the song generally about?

The song is about a man who met someone on a dance floor and goes to the same place repeatedly, hoping to see that girl again.

The next question is:

Do the first lines of the song set the expectations of what the song will be about? Is it a promise to what kind of story moment the audience can expect?

Here's a reminder, the first lines of the song are:

*Yeah, I was just hangin' out.
Some little west coast town
Found a bar out by the sand
So I made my way in*



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The first lines of the song do not tell us what the song will be about. The first lines of the song establish the setting as well as the main character of the song.

We find out that the main character might be traveling around a lot because he can't name what little west coast town he is in. Furthermore, he finds a bar, so we certainly know that he's not from around there.

In "Heartache on the Dance Floor" by John Pardi, we actually have to listen to the first verse to really get hooked.

The last two lines of the first verse arouse our curiosity:

*First thing that caught my eye
Like nothin' I ever seen*

Now we start wondering what it is that has caught his eye.

The great thing in the last two lines of the first verse is that they play well together with what has been established about the song's main character before.

As said, we got to know him as someone who's traveling around a lot. So we expect that he has been to many places and has already seen a lot.

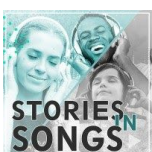
But in this bar, he finally notices something that is like nothing he has ever seen before.

So the first few lines were not in vain. They build up to the one moment that really made us interested in what's going on by introducing the main character and the setting that we need to know about to understand how extraordinary the main character's encounter in that west coast beach bar is.

Only when we look at the first verse, the first six lines, can we make assumptions about the story moment. He probably saw a girl, but we do not know for sure.

This could also be something other than a love story.

After all, not every song is introduced to us with the title. So we have to listen to the song to find out what it is about.



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So the question is: Is it okay to leave out what the song will be mainly about? I'm referring to what kind of story genre: is it about love, or life and death stakes, about a crime, monsters, whatever.

I think if you are new to storytelling in songwriting, you should focus on letting your listeners know in the first lines of your song what kind of song they can expect. Just to make sure you fulfill the promise you're giving them.

But if you have become a seasoned storyteller, you know when it is okay to break the rules/guidelines. And the songwriters for "Heartache on the Dance Floor" certainly knew how to keep the audience engaged until they revealed it's a song about love.

They knew how to use setting and character to let us unconsciously know that we will be told a story. And when we have that feeling, we are being told a story, our attention does not fade as long as the storyteller keeps the telling interesting.

And the songwriters did – by combining the setting and the character to a specific picture that we could clearly see in our mind's eye like a scene in a movie.

Since we can vividly imagine the character in action in that particular setting, we follow him along. We know he's a stranger, so we are interested in what he might stumble upon.

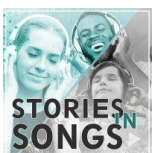
That's our expectation.

That's why the song's first lines keep us engaged.

Because we expect that something must happen to the stranger in town because that's what we're used to through all the stories we've already seen that had a similar beginning. And the songwriters used our story-trained brains to start telling their story, knowing very well that they had us hooked from the start. Even though they did not reveal it, it's going to be a love story.

After listening to the song, does the song refer to a specific moment that we expect to see in the love story?

In the second verse, the part before we listen to the chorus for the first time, the main character reveals to us the answer of what had caught his eye that was like nothing he had ever seen before. He sings:



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*Sunburned auburn hair
A California dream
Yeah, she was shakin' them hips.
To some old motown song*

Even without listening to the entire song, we now know that this song is about the Lovers' Meet Scene. The moment when they first lay eyes on each other.

And another well-done thing of the songwriters is that they put the second verse right after the first verse. So they give us all the information we need before the chorus makes us wonder again.

Because until now, only considering the first two verses without the chorus, we know a stranger came to town and that he met a beautiful girl in a bar.

So our expectations are set on a "Love-At-First-Song."

Right?

It's like Madonna's song "Crazy for You," Christina Aguilera's song: "Ain't No Other Man," or The Beatles with "I Saw Her Standing There." Another meet-cute scene is happening on the dance floor.

But life can be surprising.

And that's what the songwriters used by hitting us in the chorus with the lines that she was a "Heartache on the Dance Floor."

Heartache.

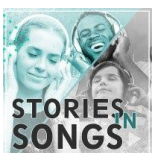
That's not a word you use if you want to tell a love story with a happy ending.

But still, we are not sure how the story of the character will turn out.

But we are intrigued.

And that's the power of great storytelling.

It keeps us engaged by revealing new information or showing the character's action that we might not have foreseen. And so we stay curious, keep listening because we want to find out more and more.



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So the next question we ask is:

Does the song use conventions of the love story genre as well?

Conventions are referring to the roles of the characters. In a story, a character can take on different roles. In a thriller story, the main character might be the hero first until they become the victim themselves, like Clarice Starling in *Silence of the Lambs*. A mentor may become a shapeshifter and betray the hero like Saruman betrays Gandalf in *The Lord of The Rings*. A love interest can turn into the villain like in *Gone Girl*.

In a love story, we have characters that can take on the role of a rival or of helpers or harmers who are either supporting the love or are against it.

Conventions can also refer to the way the story moves forward.

For example, by including

- an external need that one of the lovers has to deal with something else externally and not just wants to find love,
- there can be opposing forces to overcome,
- there might be secrets,
- rituals,
- or we go as far as letting morality weigh in.

In “Heartache on the Dance Floor,” our main character does not get any help to find this girl again. But there are also no people who are against him seeing her again. And there’s no talk of a rival.

So is there another love story convention that the songwriters included?

I think the character deals with forces opposing the lovers’ relationship, and they are outside of his control. He has to find a way to see that girl again, but he does not know how to see her again. That’s what he’s struggling with.

Now the next question is:



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Is the song's character talking about the distant past, their current state of mind, or an imagined future?

The character is talking about the past when he tells us his story of how he met that girl. The beautiful thing that I love when songwriters do this is when they do not leave the listener and the character hanging around in their past, but when they build a bridge to the here and now.

And the song does that at the end.

Jon Pardi sings:

*So I'm right here, right now
Hummin' this little song
If I could say a thing
I'd want you to know*

So he's letting us know that he's still waiting in that bar to see that girl again. The past has become the present.

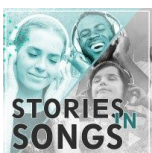
The last question of the first step of the S.O.N.G. framework is:

Are we hearing someone's inner monologue, someone narrating a story, or a conversation between two or more people?

The main character might be talking to the barkeeper or another man in that bar. After all, we know he's hanging around there a lot.

But as we can imagine, he might be telling his story over and over again all evening until he's alone around closing time with no one to talk to anymore.

That's when he shifts from not talking about her anymore but addressing her directly. He switches to "You" instead of "Her." He does that because he is trying to recapture the connection he felt with her. He wants her closer. And when you stop talking about somebody but to somebody, even if they are not there, it feels like they are closer.



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2. Observer

[00:17:41] Okay, now that we have a general overview of the story, let's talk about the song's characters.

What is the role the singer takes on in the song?

The singer is the main character of the song.

Is the singer referring to another person?

He is talking about that girl he met his first night at that little west coast town.

What does the main character in the song consciously WANT? What is his goal?

I think the answer is obvious to that question.

He even tells us what he wants:

I got to know your name. I got to see you again.

Seeing her again is all that he can think of. It has become his sole motivation. He doesn't even travel around anymore as he used to. He stayed in that little west coast town, hoping every night to get his WANT fulfilled: seeing her again.

So let's talk about his NEED with the next question.

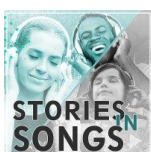
What is the main character's internal desire?

We know the main character of the song wants to see that girl again. He wants love.

But what does he need?

I think he needs a friend, and more specifically, he needs someone to tell him that he can't waste his life waiting in a beach bar in a little town for some girl to show up again. He needs to realize that the odds are against him. He needs to understand if she was from that town, he would have seen her again by now.

But she probably was just moving through.



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So that's what he should do as well.

But he's stuck in his blind belief that someday she might turn up out of the blue again.

But will he wait that long for something that might never happen?

If he starts to realize this, then he will end up disillusioned.

He needs to recognize that hope can be foolish when it keeps him from living his life. And he needs to embrace the truth that hope can be an even greater motivation when you move on with your life and be faithful that someday someplace you might find what you are looking for again.

Let's talk a little more about the narrator by answering the following question:

Do we like the main character of the song? Does he have positive character traits? Or is it someone we despise and can't consider a role model?

I would not say that I like the main character of the song.

But what I admit is that I can empathize with what he's going through.

I guess at one point or another, we have all been there.

We experienced something great, and we want it to last. We are searching for that feeling or that person. We are waiting, hoping they'll find us again if we just keep waiting.

But sometimes, we just need to move on.

Even if it hurts to let go of that dream of experiencing that amazing thing ever again that enriched our lives even just for a moment.

So yes, I can empathize and sympathize with him.
And in a way, I like him because he's just like everybody else.

I don't despise him, but I do not consider him a role model.
Not yet.

If he finds what he needs – which is knowing when it's time to move on – he can become someone to help others who might be stuck in a similar situation.



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But he's not there yet.

And we don't know if he comes out stronger at the end or devastated.

What do you think?

Maybe you could tell me and write a comment in the shown notes of this episode. I'd like to hear your thoughts if you like that character or why not.

The last question of the second step of the S.O.N.G. framework is:

What is the point of view?

Now in the last couple of episodes I've always mentioned that I refer to the book "Great Songwriting Techniques" by Jack Perricone to determine the point of view. I'd like to add that Perricone refers to Pat Pattison and his book "Writing Better Lyrics". In that one, point of view in lyric writing is much better explained. I will include a link to both books in the show notes.

In "Heartache on the Dance Floor" by Jon Pardi, we have a first-person narrator talking about the girl he met in third person until they switch over to direct address.

You should avoid a change in point of view because it may confuse your audience when they can't follow who your main character is talking to.

But if you have become better at the craft of storytelling, you know when you can use a shift in point of view to your song's advantage.

And the songwriters did not just switch from "Her" to "You."

Instead, they first pulled us into the present moment, completing the bridge from the past to the present and connecting what was with what is.

*So I'm right here, right now
Hummin' this little song*

And then they let the main character speak what is on his mind. We know he is only thinking about her, so it does not confuse us when he starts to address her directly:

*If I could say a thing
I'd want you to know*



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Switching from third person to direct address can pull the listener even closer to the story's moment. But this is something you should know when you can apply it and only use it once.

The songwriters did not switch back to "Her"; instead, the character stayed in the present moment and kept singing about the girl by addressing her directly.

Alright, now we got a bird's eye view of what the song is about, and we are aware of who is telling us the story.

3. Narration

[00:23:14] Now it's time to study the storytelling power of the lyrics.

The first question is:

What are the characters literally doing?

We had a character who came into a small west coast town and went into a bar. And he came back to that bar over and over again while waiting for somebody.

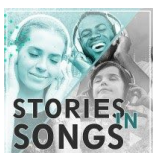
That's what's happening on the surface.

But what's going on underneath?

What is the essential action of what the character is doing in the scene? What is on his secret agenda? What are they trying to achieve?

The character is hoping that the girl will show up again because he wants her to know what he feels about her.

Now let's move on to a fundamental question:



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Is there a problem the character is facing? Does something challenge him? Or is there some kind of conflict that he has to solve? If so, what is the central conflict the main character in the song has to deal with?

Even though we are looking back at the problem, it's still on his mind. Even now.

I think the last part of the chorus sums up the character's challenge pretty good:

*She's got me wonderin'
Yeah, I'm just wonderin'
Where she at, where she at, where she at tonight?*

Wondering where that girl's at is all the main character can think about. It's probably the biggest challenge of his life. And he somehow has to find a way to see her again.

Let's continue with the next question:

Do the first lines introduce the problem the character in the song will have to deal with? And thus hook us and spark our interest?

As already said, the first lines introduce us to the setting and the character.

Here they are again:

*Yeah, I was just hangin' out.
Some little west coast town
Found a bar out by the sand
So I made my way in*

The first lines do not introduce us to a problem, at least not an obvious one.

But we can still encounter a problem that ties back to the main character waiting in that bar each night to see that girl again.

The problem is: He is not from around.

That means he does not know if that girl is from around or if she was just a stranger passing through town. He only assumes that she's like that Californian dream because of her sunburned auburn hair.



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So in a way, a problem is hinted at that only becomes more evident when we listen to the song again. But it's not hitting us in the face right away.

Still, we are hooked for reasons we've already gone through when we talked about the expectations those first lines arouse in the listener's mind.

Analyzing the scene told in the song.

[00:25:46] Alright, let's start with the Story Grid's five commandments to evaluate and analyze this story moment.

What is the inciting incident?

Remember, the inciting incident can either be a causal, an anticipated, or a coincidental event.

Here we have a song that takes its time by letting us ease into the storytelling. Nothing is happening right away, and then we jump over the inciting incident.

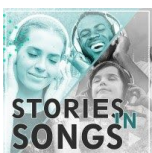
We hear about the inciting incident in the first verse of the song. And that's all part of the song's storytelling power.

As we know, the main character was just hanging around town and found a bar out by the sand. So all he probably wants to do is go and get a drink. That's his intention. And then he will likely move on the next day and continue his travels.

We don't know why he's on the road, and that explanation is not necessary. We know he's a stranger and that he's been around a lot, and that's enough for us to follow him through the door of that bar.

Remember, in a song and stories in general, only reveal what your audience needs to know to be able to follow along. Never overwhelm them with backstory if that backstory is just information and does not help move the story along.

Less is more.



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So what was the unexpected event that happens to the main character once he enters that beach bar?

He saw a beautiful girl dancing on the dance floor.

And she got him mesmerized.

She's all he can think about.

And so everything else that once was on his agenda loses its importance. Nothing is more important than that girl.

She's indeed a turning point, and she pushes him into a crisis.

What is the dilemma that the character had to face? What are his options?

There are two dilemmas the main character was in.

The first dilemma is not explicitly mentioned, but we know that he made the wrong call.

Can you guess what his first crisis was?

Yes, that night he met her, he had the chance to talk to her. He could have asked for her name, where she's from, or just make conversation.

But did he?

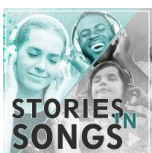
No, here's what he did:

*Yeah, she was shakin' them hips.
To some old motown song
I couldn't say a thing
So I sang along*

So all night long, he did not talk to her.

That was his fatal decision.

He didn't muster the courage to approach her.



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He decided to stay in the shadows and just sing along while she danced and he never tried to get her attention.

If he had, he would have had a chance to at least know if she was interested in him or not.

But by not knowing, he ultimately falls into the blind belief that maybe she would be interested in him as well. That's why he keeps on returning to that bar every night. He thinks there could be more between them.

But he does not know.

And if he would be honest to himself, he would realize his mistake and maybe even regret it.

But he's not there yet.

He doesn't see his own shortcomings as the reason why he's stuck now.

So the resolution of not deciding to go and talk to her is shown in this song.

It's all about how that decision has turned out for him.

He's abandoned his former life, and now he keeps hoping to see her again. He's just going to a bar every night. Now, what does that say about a person? Even when his motifs are those of a good heart, he still seems like a weak character.

Why?

Because he is not doing anything to change his situation.

He's passive.

He's not even asking anyone around if they've seen that girl or know who she is. He's just hoping for some form of luck to bring her back again.

And so we gradually encounter the second crisis he'll have to face at one point or another: Shall he keep waiting for her or move on?



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What's the decision the character makes?

When we talk about the crisis that the character is facing in the present moment and not about the one that has led him into his little tragedy, we get the feeling that he is about to come to a decision.

In the third verse, he's singing:

*So I just hung around
This little west coast town
I dropped by every night
I stayed till closin' time
My little mystery
That girl is killin' me.
So I put on a song
Just to sing along*

Although this supported the resolution of his first decision when he missed out on the chance to talk to that girl, there's something we should take into account in those lines.

He is talking in past tense.

He's saying:

*So I just hung around
This little west coast town
I dropped by every night*

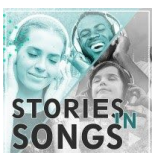
For a moment, we get the sense that maybe he has moved on. Perhaps he's not hanging around in that town anymore.

Maybe he decided to leave town and continue with his life.

But do we get the resolution of what his supposed decision led to?

How does it all turn out?

In the last verse, we are in the here and now - in the present moment.



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*So I'm right here, right now
Hummin' this little song
If I could say a thing
I'd want you to know*

And with the shift into the present moment and switching from third person to direct address, it seems like this might be his last night in that bar. By talking to her directly, even though it's just in his mind, it seems a little like saying goodbye to her.

But we don't know for sure.

Still, it's great to have that suggestion written between the lines because it leaves us with some hope that he doesn't end up devastated.

Unfortunately, this assumption is proven wrong when the character sings:

Girl, I'm hangin' around this little town, yeah

So we know he is still waiting.

Change

[00:31:36] So let's quickly look at the change that defines if the story worked.

Did the song's main character change his perception of the world around him after going through that situation?

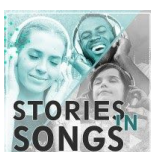
We can't say for sure because we don't know if he'll be realizing that he can't keep waiting there for something that might never happen.

He has not yet made up his mind if he should stay or if he should go.

So all we know is that he is stuck in his blind belief and his naivete to think that waiting is his only chance ever to see her again.

You see, that's why this song is a cautionary tale. Because it tells us that we waste our life away if we don't act upon the chance when it's presented to us.

We might end up like him: Waiting eternally for something that's never going to happen.



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So to wrap it up, how did the situation change for the main character in the song?

The character's external situation changed from being independent to being attached to something that he does not even have.

So that's a shift from the positive to the negative.

He did not gain anything. He just lost his independence and got stuck at a place with false hope.

Another interesting way to observe if the song is about change is to compare the first and the last sentence of the song. Can we see a difference between how the song started and how it ended?

Okay, here's how it started:

*Yeah, I was just hangin' out.
Some little west coast town
Found a bar out by the sand*

And the song ended like this:

*Girl, I'm hangin' around this little town, yeah
Where you go, baby
Where you at, where you at, where you at tonight?*

So when we compare the beginning with the ending of the song, we see that his hanging around has become permanent.

And we even know the reason for this shift of behavior – because of some girl.

And we know that he is not with her. Instead, he's left wondering where she is.

By only comparing the beginning with the ending, the song's essence is very well captured.



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Writing Techniques

[00:33:39] Lastly, let's quickly talk about some of the writing techniques used in this song.

The first question is:

Is the singer only revealing some general information, or does he go into the specifics?

Let's look at another way of how we can define: specifics.

In general, when we think about general information vs. specific information, we pay attention to distinct descriptions, putting pictures into words, coming up with some unique phrases, or, of course, giving away some specific detail that describes the characters and their settings in a way that we don't need many words to be able to picture them.

"Heartache on the Dance Floor" does include specificity.

For example, it's never said that the main character is a stranger. Stating: "I'm not from around here" would be just revealing some general information. It does not have the power to evoke a picture in the audience's head because it is very static. It's just stating a fact.

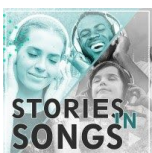
But when the songwriters find another way to show that he's a stranger, the lyrics become more engaging:

*Yeah, I was just hangin' out.
Some little west coast town
Found a bar out by the sand
So I made my way in*

In this case, we are shown that the main character is not from around there. For him, it's just some little west coast town. And he's passing through. He finds a bar out by the sand. He does not know that place.

Here's what you need to watch out for: Specificity would also be naming the town, the bar, and the beach. Or giving them uniquely identifiable features.

BUT for the purpose of introducing the main character to the listener, diving too deep into specificity would take away our assumption that this guy is a stranger. So for him, it's a bar out by the sand. That's specific enough.



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General information would provide context on a surface level while being specific implies things that spark our imagination.

And this song is very specific because there are so many action descriptions that create a movie in our heads. We literally follow the main character along. Follow him into that bar, sing along to the song with him, wait for the girl over and over again. All those actions help to create specificity.

Another question about the writing technique considering the storytelling aspect is:

Is the song evoking specific pictures in the audience’s mind by using imagery?

We’ve already talked a lot about how the writing principle of “Show, don’t Tell” was applied in this song.

But if I just had to name the one imagery that is the strongest, I’d say it’s the title of the song that gets repeated throughout the chorus.

“She was a heartache on the dance floor.”

That phrase is specific. But it also creates a ton of images in the audience’s mind that is paired with emotions and talks to your senses. So just calling her a heartache on the dance floor implies her beauty, how unreachable she seems, the inner fight of the main character, the way she dances ... and even more.

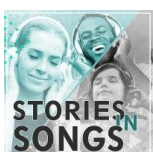
So you don’t have to disguise a poem in the form of lyrics. You don’t need to rephrase every line to the point that it’s a metaphor for something else.

Sometimes less is more.

And for “Heartache on the Dance Floor,” the amount of poetic imagery was enough.

4. Gist

[00:37:15] Alright, let’s move on with the big takeaway of the song.



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Looking back at the problem the character had to deal with in this song, did he solve it?

The problem that we defined for the character was that he had no clue where that girl might be. And even at the end of the song, he hasn't found an answer.

Now, where does this lack of an answer leave us?

What is the message of the song? What can the audience take away from it?

The song "Heartache on the Dance Floor" by Jon Pardi is a cautionary tale.

It tells its audience that you can get stuck in an eternal loop if you get caught up in a false belief. If you miss out on taking your chance when it's right in front of your eyes, you might never get that chance again.

And you might lose yourself or at least a part of who you were.

So the message is: Love fails if you let it slip by not being mature enough to recognize when it presents itself.

So the outcome of this song is a double negative.

The character's personal development has suffered because he continues to blindly believe that she'll be back.

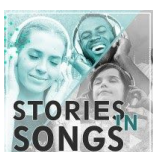
And his external situation has turned worse because he is not doing anything about his life anymore. He is not moving on - either literally or metaphorically.

So when you remember what I said at the beginning of this episode, I told you about the ironic ending. Sometimes we get what we want but not what we need or vice versa.

This song does not have an ironic ending.

Because the main character neither gets what he wants nor what he needs.

So the song has a bitter aftertaste because we continue to see the main character sitting in that bar waiting for all eternity.



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If we wanted to show at least one positive change for the character, we would not need to change the lyrics much.

All we had to do was change the lyrics in the end.

Now they go like this:

*So I'm right here, right now
Hummin' this little song
If I could say a thing
I'd want you to know*

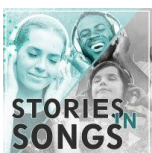
*You were a heartache on the dance floor
Yeah, you're movin' through my mind
I got to know your name. I got to see you again.
And if you're listenin', listenin', listenin'
Where you at, where you at, where you at tonight?
Girl, I'm hangin' around this little town, yeah
Where you go, baby*

This leaves us with the certainty that this guy is lost. He just keeps waiting on and on, and who knows for how long he's been waiting.

But if we change the lyrics a little, we could have at least shown that he learned from his mistake and was able to move on:

*I'm in my car right now.
Hummin' this little song
If I could say a thing
I'd want you to know*

*You were a heartache on the dance floor
Yeah, you're movin' through my mind
I got to know your name. I gotta find you again.
And if you're listenin', listenin', listenin'
Where you at, where you at, where you at tonight?
Girl, I was hangin' around this little town, yeah
Where you go, baby*



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If we sing the song's ending like this, then the audience feels relieved that this guy could turn himself around and start living his life again. It's sort of a happy ending. He got what he needed – recognizing he was stuck – but he still did not get what he wanted – the girl.

And I just made three little changes.

I put the character into his car, which suggests he's moving again. Instead of "*I got to see you again*," I said, "*I gotta find you again*," which shows that he is no longer passive by waiting around but that he is actively searching for her. And I concluded by saying: "*Girl, I was hangin' around this little town, yeah*," making it clear that he has matured and knows now that he has to act if he wants to see that girl again.

What ending do you prefer, and why?

Check out the show notes of this episode and leave me a comment.

The last question is:

Does the title refer to the message of the song?

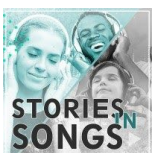
The song's title is "Heartache on the Dance Floor," and the title wraps up what the main character has encountered, and it still haunts him. So yeah, that was the turning point, the most important event in a story, that has changed his life ... in this case, unfortunately not for the better.

Song Exercise - The Lovers Meet

[00:41:48] Now we're left with the task of applying what we've learned to our songwriting.

I want you to write your original lyrics about how meeting the One left your song's character worse off than before BUT by including some little spark of hope at the end.

1. Use **past tense** to start telling the story about who your main character was before and what he was doing before he met that person they can't stop thinking about. Use past tense also to show where your character is stuck before you move to the present.



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2. Use **present tense** in the last part of your song to not only connect the past with the present but to show that your character has climbed out of the hole they were stuck in.
3. Make sure your **character is not getting what they WANT** (their love interest), **but instead get what they NEED** (mature to make a better decision about their situation in life and how they can start living it again. They need to take action.)
4. Use **first-person** (pronoun “I”) to make the listener connect with what your character had to go through.
5. Address the person they are referring to in the **third person**. If you dare, shift to direct address at the end of the song to establish a closer connection between the main character and his love interest.
6. Include all **five commandments**. Keep them in order this time.
 - a. Establish the setting and your character at the beginning of your song by slowly letting your listener ease into your story. Make sure everything you tell your audience is relevant to your story and helps to move it forward.
 - b. The turning point will be meeting that special girl or boy for the very first time. No matter your character’s decision (approach that person or not talk to them), something needs to keep them stuck and stop them from moving on.
 - c. It’s not necessary to include the crisis by showing the character weighing his/her options. But it should be clear that the character is missing out on living his life if they continue the path they’re on.
 - d. Show the character’s decision by an action they are taking that shows they are taking the first step to move on or do something about their situation.
 - e. You don’t need to include a resolution. But you can imply a hint - even if it’s just between the lines.

For further inspiration and to read over the guidelines, download the exercise PDF in the show notes of this episode.

Do the exercise because the more you study the lyrics of other songwriters, the easier it will be for you to write your own lyrics and tell captivating stories in your songs.

Sound good?

Alright, now we’ve come to the end of today’s show.

If you liked it, please leave a rating and review and let me know what you think.



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In the next episode, we will continue by analyzing the moment when the lovers first meet. We'll talk about a song by Cole Swindell that shows us that you can still end up alone even if you approach that person.

If you don't want to miss the next episode, subscribe to my podcast.

Thanks a lot and see you next time.



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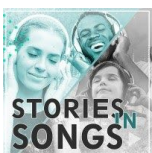
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Show notes:

Find out more about love songs in those episodes:

- How to write a powerful love song?
<https://storiesinsongs.com/transcripts/ep-006>
- How to write a heartbreaking love song to get over someone?
<https://storiesinsongs.com/transcripts/ep-007>
- Introduction to the Love Story and the Lover's Meet Scene:
<https://storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-010/>

Books: <https://storiesinsongs.com/songwriting-books>



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