

EPISODE 021

Crucial Components of Storytelling

See the show notes at storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-021

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

Today we start with our first bite-sized episode to talk about one specific aspect of using the power of storytelling in writing lyrics.

Let me ask you this:

When it comes to finding ideas to write about, do you know how to turn that idea into lyrics?

Do you know what components you actually need to turn that idea into an outline that will help you actually write the lines?

If you struggle with not knowing how to flesh out an idea, then this episode is for you.

We talk about the crucial components that you need to make your lyrics meaningful and to actually provide a takeaway for your listener. Those crucial components belong to the craft of storytelling. And they are amazing little helpers to help you transform your ideas into an outline for your song.

Does that sound like something you need to know more about?

Then today's bite-sized episode is exactly what you need to listen to.

TEASER



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Getting to know the Crucial Components of Storytelling

[00:01:34] Alright, let's start today's episode with an easy question: What's the last movie you saw?

Yes, I know you come here because you want to use the power of storytelling in your lyrics, but stay with me. When we want to learn about telling stories, let's look at a medium we're very familiar with.

So, what's the last movie you saw, or that was so good that it's still on your mind?

Let's take "Red Notice" as an example because it's a very popular movie. If you've chosen another movie, try to answer the following questions for the movie you've chosen.

So Red Notice was published on Netflix – it's a movie starring Dwayne Johnson, Ryan Reynolds, and Gal Gadot.

Suppose you had to summarize the movie in about three sentences, including the outcome – what would you say?

Red Notice – watch out, spoiler alert – can be summarized like this: The world's most wanted art thief and loner Nolan Booth is manipulated into working together with an FBI agent to find all three ancient eggs of Cleopatra before his rival art thief called "The Bishop" gets to them. They get the eggs, but Booth figures out too late that he's been conned by his partner, and he loses the eggs but gains a better understanding of how the impossible is made possible when working in a team.

Have you recognized any pattern to the summary I've just provided for Red Notice?

Well, let's take it apart.

Character

[00:02:59] The first element you need for a story is a character. Call that character your protagonist, your story's main character, or the main avatar of your story. But we need someone on the stage, right?

But it's not only a character we need: We not only have a male character in the movie.



Object of Desire / Want

[00:03:22] A character in a story always needs to have a goal that he pursues. And they either get it or not. We call this goal the character's WANT or object of desire.

Just imagine the movie you've picked for this example had a character in it that did not want to achieve or get anything. If there's nothing they want, there's no reason to act – well, no reason to get out of the house. Would you like to watch a movie about someone not doing anything because they don't want anything?

It wouldn't be a story, right?

Okay, but even if we have a character and a goal, what if the character accomplishes what he wants right in the first scene? I want a cup of coffee, so I go down to the coffee machine and I get it? Would that be a story?

Hardly.

So what are we missing?

Increasing Obstacles

[00:04:13] Well, the character has to overcome increasing difficulties to achieve his goal.

Hm, alright, so if I want a cup of coffee, my coffee machine might be broken. Alright, so I get in my car and on my way to Starbucks, there's a traffic jam. Bummer, but again, I'll wait and eventually I get to Starbucks and get my coffee. I had to overcome some difficulties, but nothing can stop me to get my coffee.

Still, that doesn't sound like a story worth telling.

So what else do we need to actually have a story?

Something must be at stake

[00:04:48] What about I need to get my coffee because if I don't, I'm too tired and I will suck at the presentation at the office today that will decide about the future of my career.

Then a broken coffee machine and the traffic jam that costs me even more time – that I probably don't have in the morning when I need to get to work – make it increasingly harder



for me to get that coffee and get to the presentation in time. If I get the coffee then I might be late for the presentation but at least I'm feeling energized BUT if I decide to get to the office to be on time for the presentation, I might suffer from not being able to concentrate that well. In both cases, my career is at stake.

Now it gets interesting.

But we need a little more spice to the story.

Make a Sacrifice

[00:05:38] So what about actually having to make a sacrifice. What if: on my way to the presentation, while I struggle with the question "Coffee or No-Coffee," I get distracted and hit a dog with my car.

Well, now it's not only a question about my career but also about the dog. It's my performance vs. life and death. So now my pending decision actually depends on making a sacrifice.

Do I miss the chance to get the promotion at my job and maybe even risk my job by not doing the presentation but at least I could save the dog's life OR do I hit the gas and get to the presentation and have to live with the dog's death on my conscience.

Wow, now that's even more interesting.

There's not only something at stake, but I need to make a sacrifice, too. I'm in a dilemma and have to make an Irreconcilable Goods Choice → What's good for the dog is not good for me, but what's good for my career will cost the dog his life.

So I gotta make that decision.

I decide to help the dog. I'm getting fired but by helping the dog, the dog's owner might turn out to be my future husband. Who knows? Or he owns a coffee shop and invites me to get some coffee. Irony of life, right?

External and Internal Change

[00:07:04] So my story started with being employed at the start of it and it ends with being unemployed at the end of it. But internally, I've changed from only thinking about myself to actually thinking about the well-being of other beings.



So the change from beginning to end is another crucial element for a story. Because that change actually helps the audience to take away a message from that story. You do morally right, when you put the needs of others who need help ahead of your own.

Message / Takeaway

[00:07:43] Well, that's a universal truth and something everyone should live by. Therefore, it's a message worth communicating.

And just like that, we've got ourselves an interesting story.

Now let's apply those elements – we've just talked about – to our movie example.

Red Notice - Crucial Components

[00:08:00] I continue using Red Notice as an example, but feel free to answer the question for the movie you've picked.

1. Who is the main character of the story?
 - a. It's Nolan Booth, the world's most wanted art thief.
2. What does the main character want?
 - a. Nolan Booth wants to get all three of Cleopatra's eggs to prove that he's still the number one art thief in the world.
3. What was the greatest difficulty the character had to overcome to achieve that goal?
 - a. There are actually two things Booth had to overcome:
 - i. externally he had to outwit his rival and the villain in his life: The Bishop, another amazing art thief who has beat him many times
 - ii. internally, Booth had to overcome his worldview that working alone is better than having accomplices
4. What was at stake? (Values and Genre)
 - a. externally, Booth's reputation was at stake. Could he remain as the world's number 1 art thief or not?
 - b. internally, Booth could either stay naive in his thinking or embrace a more mature worldview that gives him a better attunement to the world around him
5. What sacrifice did the character have to make to achieve his goal?
 - a. Booth had to give up working alone to be able to get to the eggs.
6. How did the story change from beginning to end? (Change)
 - a. Booth got the eggs, but he had to surrender them to the Bishop.
7. How did the character change? Mindset or views? (Character Development)



- a. Booth has changed from a self-centered being who wants to be the number one to someone who can see the benefit of working with others to uncover even more potential. You can also say that he's figured out that a team is greater than the sum of its parts.
- 8. What did you take away from the story? (Controlling Idea)
 - a. We gain respect when we commit to expressing our gifts unconditionally – even if that means working in a team to unleash even greater potential.

Now let's look at our summary again:

We said:

The world's most wanted art thief and loner, Nolan Booth, is manipulated into working with an FBI agent to find all three ancient eggs of Cleopatra before his rival art thief called "The Bishop" gets to them. They get the eggs, but Booth figures out too late that he's been conned by his partner, and he loses the eggs but gains a better understanding of how the impossible is made possible when working in a team.

Now let's see if we've covered all the crucial components of a story in our summary:

1. Who is the main character of the story?
 - a. *The world's most wanted art thief and loner Nolan Booth*
2. What does the main character want?
 - a. *find all three ancient eggs of Cleopatra.*
3. What was the greatest difficulty the character had to overcome to achieve that goal?
 - a. There are actually two things Booth had to overcome:
 - i. *find all three ancient eggs of Cleopatra before his rival art thief called "The Bishop" gets to them*
 - ii. *loner Nolan Booth is manipulated into working together*
4. What was at stake? (Values and Genre)
 - a. That's not explicitly stated but we'll get a sense for it because:
 - i. he's been challenged by his rival, so the risk for his reputation is implied
5. What sacrifice did the character have to make to achieve his goal?
 - a. also implied: Booth had to give up working alone to be able to get to the eggs.
6. How did the story change from beginning to end? (Change)
 - a. *he gets the eggs and loses the eggs.*
7. How did the character change? Mindset or views? (Character Development)
 - a. *gains a better understanding of how the impossible is made possible when working in a team.*

So in our summary we've included those crucial elements of a story.



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Crucial Components of a Story

[00:12:03] Of course, there are many more components to look out for. But when we talk about the crucial components of a story where every component is a must-have or there's no story, then you gotta have those eight elements:

1. a main character
2. who wants something
3. and has to overcome obstacles
4. because there's something important at stake for him
5. And they'll have to make a sacrifice to get what they want
6. And the story must end in a different way than how it's started
7. And in the best-case-scenario, even the character changed from the beginning to the ending
8. And through that external and internal change – which refers to the character's situation and his inner values – the story delivers a meaningful message that helps the audience to survive, thrive, or derive meaning for their own lives.

These are already super insights to keep in mind.

Of course, we will talk about all these elements and many more in later episodes.

For today, it's important that the next time you write a song, you think about those crucial components of a story.

Ask yourself:

- How can you include those elements to really tell a powerful story that will provide a takeaway for your listener?
- And tell a story that not only captures their attention because there's a character who wants something but it's hard to reach the goal, but the character has to reach it, because there's something at stake and they might have to make a sacrifice.
- But tell a story that is also meaningful and has a message.

Crucial Components of Storytelling in Lyrics

[00:13:42] Now you might wonder: How can you include all those components in your lyrics? After all, lyrics are not a movie. Most of them are told in songs that are under four minutes.



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So how can we put them into the lyrics and actually tell a story?

Well, let's look at one of my favorite evergreen songs to see how it works.

I guess you're very familiar with the song "I'm A Believer" by the Monkees.

By the way, you can watch a free three-part video series on my website storiesinsongs.com. In those three videos, we talk about the main reasons why no one's listening to your songs. We also talk about 5 ways to sharpen your lyrics by also talking about the Monkees song "I'm A Believer", and then we look at a song I've written to apply what we've learnt.

That video series is free. Just sign up for my mailing list, and you can watch those three videos.

"I'm A Believer" by The Monkees

[00:14:42] So let's get back to "I'm A Believer" by the Monkees to see if and how they've applied the crucial components of storytelling.

Let me read the verses and the chorus to you first. They are under copyright by Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, Universal Music Publishing Group.

I'm A Believer lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, Universal Music Publishing Group

*I thought love was only true in fairy tales
 Meant for someone else but not for me
 Love was out to get me
 That's the way it seemed
 Disappointment haunted all of my dreams*

*Then I saw her face. Now I'm a believer.
 Not a trace of doubt in my mind
 I'm in love
 I'm a believer. I couldn't leave her if I tried.*

*I thought love was more or less a giving thing.
 Seems the more I gave, the less I got
 What's the use in tryin'
 All you get is pain?
 When I needed sunshine, I got rain.*



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*Then I saw her face. Now I'm a believer.
Not a trace of doubt in my mind
I'm in love
I'm a believer. I couldn't leave her if I tried.*

Now let's see if we can find the crucial components of storytelling in those two verses and the repeated chorus. Altogether, not more than 130 words.

1. Who is the main character of the story?

- The singer takes on the role of the main character because he's using First Person Narrative by using the pronouns "I" and "Her".

2. What does the main character want?

- He wants love, even though he always ends up disappointed.

3. What was the greatest difficulty the character had to overcome to achieve that goal?

- There are actually two things the song's character had to overcome considering his understanding of love:
 - First, love seemed to be the villain that was "out to get" him.
 - The disappointment almost made him give up on love:

What's the use in tryin'

All you get is pain?

When I needed sunshine, I got rain.

4. What was at stake?

- The character's ability to love and commit is at stake. Will he be able to get back on the wagon after so much disappointment?

5. What sacrifice did the character have to make to achieve his goal?

- The character's sacrifice is actually how he keeps trying to find love. He sacrifices his well-being to find love. He is disappointed, doubts love, gives so much, but still, instead of sunshine, he gets rain. He does all of those things, and his happiness suffers nonetheless.

6. How did the story change from beginning to end? (Change)

- He thought love was only true in fairy tales until he saw her face. He has finally found someone to be with. No more disappointment nor rain.

7. How did the character change? Mindset or views? (Character Development)

- He's changed from doubting the existence of fairytale love to being a believer in that kind of love.

8. What message can we take away from the story? (Controlling Idea)

- Do not lose your faith in love because love might still be waiting for you.



Wow, the song “I’m A Believer” delivers on all the crucial components of storytelling. It’s a great story and a positive takeaway for the listener. Love might be waiting for us even if we have to go through many hardships. That’s so meaningful. And that deep and very important message is wrapped in such a fun song to listen to.

Now let’s look at how they’ve done it.

The first verse is all about the song’s character state of mind. It tells us that he thinks that love is the villain that is out to get him, and he ends up disappointed all the time.

- So it tells us who the character is and what he wants.
- It also tells us what he’s up against – the obstacle he’s facing.

The second verse shows us how the character is trying to find love, but it gets so bad that he thinks of giving up completely.

- So the second verse tells us more about the character’s situation. We get a sense of what’s at stake because he’s close to giving up. And we witness how he sacrifices his mental wellbeing again and again in his effort to find love.

The chorus adds great contrast to the verses. The chorus states how his life has changed. It includes the turning point moment of his life – which was meeting her – and how his love life and his internal worldview have changed for the better.

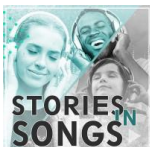
Taking the verses and the chorus together, we get the message of the song. It all contributes to telling the audience they should never stop believing in love because it can happen anytime.

Crucial Elements of Storytelling

[00:19:33] So when you think about writing your lyrics, try to include those crucial components of storytelling. They are amazingly helpful to outline and flesh out the idea you want to write about.

Let me name them again for you:

1. You need a main character
2. who wants something
3. and has to overcome obstacles
4. because there’s something important at stake for him
5. And they’ll have to make a sacrifice to get what they want
6. And the story must end in a different way than how it’s started



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7. And in the best-case-scenario, even the character changed from the beginning to the ending
8. And through that external and internal change – which refers to the character's situation and his internal values – the story delivers a meaningful message that helps the audience to survive, thrive, or derive meaning for their own lives.

Tune in to our next episode when we talk about why change is so important for a story that works.

You'll find out how you can show the difference between beginning and ending.

And you'll discover how you can show that your plot progresses.

Before you leave, make sure to check out my three-part video series on storypower.storiesinsongs.com.

You can find the link in the show notes.

See you



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