

EPISODE 027

Develop your Lyric's Verses by Using Progressive Complications – “Hero of War” by Rise Against

See the show notes at storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-027

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

Do you struggle with writing the second verse? Do you have problems developing your song's idea and creating an outline? You might have already looked at some ways of how to come up with ideas to overcome being stuck in writing the second verse.

Maybe you have tried to use Pat Pattison's concept of the three boxes, but you still feel a little stuck.

In today's episode, we talk about the song “Hero of War” by Rise Against to find out how using progressive complications can actually help you develop your idea, take it through the boxes, and write about something that will really make an impact.

Does that sound good?

Let's get started.

TEASER



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Recap: The Three Boxes & The Five Commandments of Storytelling

[00:01:19] In the last episode, we talked about the five commandments of storytelling. If you haven't listened to [episode 26](#) of the Stories in Songs podcast yet, I highly recommend you listen to that episode before you continue with this one. We'll build on what we've already learned about developing our idea by using the development engine of Pat Pattison's boxes and the Story Grid tool of the five commandments of storytelling.

Before we start diving deeper into progressive complications, let's go through the concept of the boxes and the five commandments again.

Development Engine – 3 Boxes

[00:01:51] First, let's start with the concept of the boxes.

Pat Pattison says that you need to think about a song as a stack of boxes connected to each other. And each one is getting progressively larger. They gain weight. So at the top, you have the smallest box, and at the bottom, the largest and heaviest box.

Now, what does that mean for the outline of our idea?

- the 1st box begins the flow of ideas, introducing us to the song's world
- the 2nd box continues the idea, but from a different angle, combining the weight of the first box with the weight of the second box
- the last box builds from the first two, introducing its own angle and combining its ideas with the first two, resulting in the heaviest box

The last box combines and RESOLVES all the information and delivers the point of the song. It's often the WHY of the song. It weighs the most.

And the WHY of the song is the place you want to arrive at the song's end because the WHY refers to your song's message.

Those boxes are a great starting point because they help you to avoid repetition and evolve your song's narrative.

But there's more that you can do to better outline your song's idea.



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And you can do that by using the Story Grid's five commandments of storytelling.

Five Commandments of Storytelling

[00:03:09] The five commandments provide the basic structure for our story.

These five elements are:

1. the inciting incident (either causal or coincidental),
2. progressive complications expressed through active or revelatory turning points,
3. a crisis question that requires a choice between at least two negative alternatives or at least two irreconcilable goods,
4. the choice or the decision which makes the climax
5. and the resolution.

In [episode 26](#), we go through an example showing how each of those commandments affects the next.

Do we need to state every commandment in lyrics?

[00:03:48] You might wonder if you need to explicitly include all the commandments in your lyrics.

And I tell you, in lyrics, you do not necessarily find every commandment stated explicitly. Sometimes the inciting incident is not mentioned and you just kind of get a feel of what must have happened before – that sent the character spiraling.

Often, the crisis is skipped, and we'll either see the character's decision or get the resolution. So we can assume what must have been their binary best bad choice or how they've chosen between two irreconcilable goods.

We'll talk more about examples of those kinds of songs that leave out certain commandments in later episodes.

What should not be left out is the turning point – that means the moment that changes the character's situation or how the character sees the world for better or worse. This is the most important element and the cause for change. And as we know, stories are about change.

If you wanna hear about why change is so important, listen to [episode 22](#) of the Stories in Songs Podcast.



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For now, let's concentrate on progressive complications.

And we'll do that by using a great song as an example that uses progressive complications at its best.

"Hero of War" by Rise Against

[00:05:16] "Hero of War" is a song by Rise Against from the album Appeal to Reason. It's an acoustic song Tim McIlrath had written from the perspective of a war veteran.

It's a great song to study the power of storytelling. So let's read the lyrics before we get started talking about progressive complications.

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Hero of War lyrics © Sony/atv Tunes Llc, Do It To Win Music

*He said "Son, have you seen the world?
Well, what would you say if I said that you could?
"Just carry this gun, you'll even get paid"
I said "That sounds pretty good"*

*Black leather boots
Spit-shined so bright
They cut off my hair but it looked alright
We marched and we sang
We all became friends
As we learned how to fight*

*A hero of war
Yeah, that's what I'll be
And when I come home
They'll be damn proud of me
I'll carry this flag
To the grave if I must
'Cause it's a flag that I love
And a flag that I trust*

I kicked in the door



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*I yelled my commands
The children, they cried
But I got my man
We took him away
A bag over his face
From his family and his friends*

*They took off his clothes
They pissed in his hands
I told them to stop
But then I joined in
We beat him with guns
And batons not just once
But again and again*

*A hero of war
Yeah that's what I'll be
And when I come home
They'll be damn proud of me
I'll carry this flag
To the grave if I must
'Cause it's a flag that I love
And a flag that I trust*

*She walked through bullets and haze
I asked her to stop
I begged her to stay
But she pressed on
So I lifted my gun
And I fired away*

*And the shells jumped through the smoke
And into the sand
That the blood now had soaked
She collapsed with a flag in her hand
A flag white as snow*

*A hero of war
Is that what they see
Just medals and scars
So damn proud of me*



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*And I brought home that flag
Now it gathers dust
But it's a flag that I love
It's the only flag I trust*

*He said, "Son, have you seen the world?
Well what would you say, if I said that you could?"*

The Five Commandments for “Hero of War”

[00:07:51] Now let’s quickly go through the five commandments of storytelling to sum up the song and get some practice into working with the five commandments.

1. What’s the Inciting Incident?

- a. An army recruiter tells the song’s character about an opportunity to see the world.
- b. It’s a causal inciting incident, and that’s so great about this song. The song’s main character doesn’t understand what that offer actually means.

2. What’s the turning point progressive complication?

- a. After a series of escalating situations – which we’ll talk about in a minute – the turning point moment is when the song’s character kills the woman. It’s an active turning point because it’s caused by character action.

3. What’s the crisis?

- a. The crisis is not explicitly stated. But it goes along the lines of: Shall he keep putting his trust in the flag of his country that led him into destroying his own moral compass so that he can be that hero of war for everyone OR shall he tell the truth about war and change his loyalty to the white flag and its meaning? It’s an Irreconcilable Goods Choice: What’s good for him is not good for his fellow soldiers or the industry of war in general.

4. What’s his decision? What’s the climax?

- a. He puts his trust in the white flag. It’s the only flag he trusts.

5. What’s the resolution of the song’s story?

- a. The song’s character has matured and lost his naive worldview. He is now expressing sarcasm to the way people treat soldiers like heroes because from his perspective, he has found out that this is not true.

So you can see how the song “Hero of War” uses the five commandments of storytelling. It’s a song that’s externally about war, but the song’s point is the development of the character



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and how they once saw the world and how their worldview changed. And the reason their worldview changed is by what they've had to go through.

All those complications that got progressively worse added up to the turning point.

But what were those complications?

Progressive Complications in “Hero of War”

[00:10:12] Let's go through them one by one.

So the **first complication** is that “they cut off his hair.”

If you want to write a song that makes use of progressive complications, then you gotta start with something small. Something that doesn't seem so tragic. Well, okay, they cut off his hair. You can live with that. The hair will grow back. No worries. It's not really a life-changing event. So cutting off his hair is a minor complication, right?

But in the context of the song, it's the first cut when they strip him of his own identity.

So what's the **next complication**?

It's when the song's character becomes friends with his fellow soldiers.

You might wonder: That's a complication? Isn't that something positive?

Yes, you're absolutely right. A complication, in Story Grid terms, is any obstacle or opportunity that the main character encounters while in pursuit of his object of desire, or as we have defined it: What a character consciously wants.

Yes, we mostly associate the word “complication” with a negative turn of events, but in storytelling, it applies to both negative and positive situations. So characters are faced with challenges or tests (negative), but they also receive tools and information they need (positive) to get the thing they're after.

So having friends is something great, or so it seems. But that also creates dependence, loyalty, and trust ... and sometimes it means following what they do so that you are not the black sheep.



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Soon enough, we'll see how having friends can actually make the character's situation worse.

The **third complication** happens after the first chorus.

Now our song's character is in action, and he does what he was trained to do: kicking in doors and yelling his commands. And what does that lead to? What's the reaction of others to him kicking in doors and yelling? Yes, the children are crying. Children are scared of what he has become.

So you can clearly see that cutting off his hair and then fitting into the mold with all of his friends to become one obedient soldier has already turned him into someone else – someone kids are afraid of. So his situation has turned worse even though the song's main character still does not see the true nature of what the inciting incident meant – what the army recruiter truly threw him into.

The **fourth complication** is even worse because, again, we call those complications progressive complications because as the situations get more and more complicated, the stakes rise as well.

So now they put a bag over a man's head and pull him away from his family and friends. So not only are the soldiers stripped of their own identity – remember: they all have the same haircut and wear the same uniform and do all the same things – now they have also stripped away the identity of someone else. Cause what does it mean to put a bag over someone's head? Well, you take away their humanity, and they become just an object.

The **next complication** is what they do to that man.

They take off his clothes, and they piss in his hands. Those immoral actions show how those soldiers become monsters. They not only take the humanity of someone else away, but they actually become monsters themselves which makes them worse than the man with the bag over his head.

And what does our song's character do when confronted with that complication?

He tries to stop them, but since they are his friends, his fellow soldiers, he joins in because he's supposed to be loyal to the men serving under the same flag.

So again, our song's character is not only following orders of his commanders now and that without question, he also follows his fellow soldiers' actions even if he knows it's wrong.



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And the **situation gets even worse** as they not only use that other human being to demonstrate their power over him by making him suffer and turning him into a worthless object, but they also start beating him up – again and again. So now those soldiers turn from psychologically abusing monsters to physically abusing monsters.

You might wonder how the situation can get any worse from here?

Well, we're heading straight for the **turning point progressive complication** – the one moment that brings irrevocable change for better or worse.

Our song's character is on a mission again. And what happens?

There's this woman who comes walking towards him. There's a firefight going on, and he begs her to stop, but she presses on. So he lifts up his gun and fires at her. He kills her. He kills a woman.

Now it can't get any worse than that. He has not only become an abuser, but he's turned into a killer.

And then, as she collapses, the turning point progressive complication hits our song's character hard. She collapses with a flag in her hand – a flag that's white as snow.

So he has actually killed an innocent woman.

He can never return from this action. He can't undo that mistake. Even if you take into account all the circumstances around him and say it wasn't his fault, because there was a firefight going on and he thought his life was threatened ... he still killed someone.

And now the universal human value has changed, right? Because that's what the turning point progressive complication does. It changes the value at stake.

That means the external value at stake has not only shifted from abuser to killer or life to death but also the internal value has changed. His justified belief has turned into disillusionment.

He once had a well-developed will, positive motives, and wholehearted idealistic beliefs about serving his country, but through experiencing this loss that forced him to realize the darker truth, he loses his faith entirely in the flag he served. And now he only trusts the white flag.



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And he would not have been able to make that internal worldview shift if not for all of those progressive complications. It's like they kept poking him until he finally understood what he had gotten himself into. War is not about creating heroes. War is about breaking men and destroying humanity.

That's the message of this song and it comes across so powerful because we, as the audience, go with the character through every trial on his path to discovering the darker truth.

That's how powerful progressive complications can be.

Progressive Complications – Summary

[00:17:22] If you want to use progressive complications for the development of your verses, go ahead and do so. As you can see, thinking about how to make the situation more and more complicated for your character can be a great way to make use of Pat Pattison's Development Engine of his three boxes. And by making the situation worse, you actually add more weight to each box the further down you go.

Just remember, to really get your message across, you need to include that final progressive complication that irrevocably changes the value of the character's external and/ or internal situation.

So let's go through some more important things you should keep in mind about progressive complications.

1. In order to raise the stakes of your song's story, each complication must be greater than the one before it. Otherwise, the story will lose momentum and your audience will get bored. Remember, we don't want repetition. So the complications **MUST** progress to raise the stakes.
2. And to move your story forward, you need a series of complications that make life more and more difficult for the protagonist (in positive and negative ways). To do this, you need to make sure that each of the complications your character faces is different and unique or your listener will lose interest. So each complication **MUST** be unique.
3. And those progressive complications **MUST** escalate to a turning point, which is when the value shifts.



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So all in all, your complications must get greater, they must be unique and they must escalate to a turning point.

Progressive Complications and the 3 Boxes

[00:18:59] When you take the concept of progressive complications through the boxes, you can think about them like this:

In verse 1, you state the inciting incident and include a progressive complication that is very small. It's reversible or doesn't have any relevant consequences. That's like cutting off one's hair.

So then you want to create a complication that is still reversible but has some minor repercussions. So making friends with some fellow people has some consequences because you can't that easily turn your back on them again.

Then the complications rise from a low to a moderate level – probably in the second verse. They are still reversible, but with difficulty or greater consequences. Making children cry and taking a man away from his family is something you cannot really undo, but you can try to make up for it. You can go to them, say sorry, and help them overcome that incident.

And then the complications rise to a higher and even more escalating level. They are still reversible but only with great difficulty and severe consequences. So abusing that man by stripping away his humanity and beating him up is an action you cannot simply recover from. It sticks with the abuser and the victim through all their life, and only through a lot of treatment can you somehow learn to live with that.

And then, in the last verse, we come to the complication that you cannot undo. It's the turning point moment when what you do or someone else does to you or someone else is irreversible. Killing someone is something you cannot make unhappen – no matter how much you try.

So when taking your idea through the boxes by using progressive complications, try to make them escalate in the steps of

- NONE (reversible and/or no relevant consequence)
- LOW (reversible and/or minor consequence)
- MODERATE (Reversible but with difficulty and/or greater consequence)



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- HIGH (Reversible but only with great difficulty and severe consequence)
- TOTAL (Irreversible)

Make sure to download your cheat sheet in the show notes. It lists the five commandments of storytelling and helps you with the progressive complications.

I hope you enjoyed this episode, and it gave you another tool that you can use to develop your verses.

If you liked this episode, please leave a rating, and don't forget to hit subscribe to the Stories in Songs podcast.

I'll see you next time when we continue with another lyric study. This time, we'll look at the lyrics of the song "Shut Up and Kiss Me" by Mary Chapin Carpenter, which is all about the anticipation of the first kiss.

Macht's gut und bis bald, bye bye, Melanie

Show Notes

- The Most Important Element of a Story that Works – How to Show a Change between Beginning and Ending – <https://storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-022/>
- Development Engine: Pattinson's 3 Boxes - ADVANCED: 5 Commandments of Storytelling – <https://storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-026/>
- "Hero of War" by Rise Against – https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/_DboMAghWcA
- Progressive Complications - Article on the Story Grid Website: <https://storygrid.com/simply-irreversible-quantifying-progressive-complications/>



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