

EPISODE 029

Every Character in a Story WANTS something. But how do you figure out WHAT that is?

See the show notes at storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-029

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

In a story, the main character actively pursues a goal, right? I don't think you've ever gone to the movies to watch someone sitting on the couch all day and doing nothing. We watch a story to follow a certain character in their journey of how they're trying to achieve something, more precisely, a certain goal.

And when it comes to writing lyrics, your song's character also needs to WANT something. But how do you figure out what your character might be after? What is it they want?

If you have trouble finding an answer to that question, this podcast episode will give you some great insights on where you can look to easily find out some great possibilities of your character's want. And the good thing is: we are talking about possibilities that have been proven in how they hook and engage the audience since there were stories. So it can't get any better than that.

So let's find out how we can easily figure out what our song's character might want. So that we don't create a character that's sitting on the couch, never leaves his house, and does nothing. But someone who will do what's necessary to get what they want.

Sound good? So let's get started.

TEASER



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Recap: Universal Human Values

[00:01:57] If you've been following our bite-sized episodes, you're already familiar with the concept of Universal Human Values. If you haven't listened to [episode 23](#) of the Stories in Songs Podcast, where we talked about those values, no worries, let's start with what we already know about universal human values. This way, we lay the foundation for what we need to understand when we think about **WHAT** a character in a story might want.

So universal human values are the things that most people would say are necessary to survive and thrive in the world - or the things that keep us from doing so. That's how we at the Story Grid define universal human values.

And as we know, stories are about change. So those universal human values have to shift from the beginning of your song's story to its end. That means, when you're writing a love story, the universal human value is love. The counterpart of the value of love is hate. So you can put love and hate on a spectrum and include all the different steps in between that lead from one value to its counterpart – so from love to hate, we move on the spectrum from hate to repulsion to ignorance to attraction to commitment to love.

And when we say something has to change in that love story from its beginning to its ending, then the value must shift along that hate-to-love or love-to-hate spectrum. Depending on if the situation for your main character gets better concerning that value – like they're in a relationship or get married – or their love life falls apart, and they break up.

There are also many other universal human values like justice and injustice, honor and dishonor, life and death, failure and success, respect and shame, freedom and subjugation, and many more.

But how can you use them to figure out what your character consciously wants?

External Content Genre

[00:04:16] Well, as you know, most of the time, a song belongs to one external content genre. That means there's one value that not only identifies the song's story but that also belongs to a broader category – and that is the story's content genre. Look at it like this: Is your song telling a crime story? Is it a thriller or an action story? Is it a war or love story? A performance or western story?



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That's what we mean by content genre. It's like the category of a movie you're watching – and every genre can be placed on a spectrum of a universal human value that defines that kind of genre.

So again, we have love stories that are about love and hate.

We have crime stories that are about justice and injustice.

Action, Thriller, and Horror stories are about life and death.

Performance stories are about shame and respect.

You get the idea.

So whenever you want to write a new song, you probably know what kind of content genre it's gonna belong to.

- I mean, you know it when you want to write a love story, right?
- You also know it when you write a song about war – no matter how you want to present that topic.
- You also know if you want to write about a crime – a song that revolves around the question, will there be justice served?
- Or you know it when you want to write about a monster that eats people, right?

That's what we know when we start writing a song, or, at least, we'll discover it the more we think about that topic, take it through Pat Pattison's boxes, or wonder what we could include in the verses, or what message we want the audience to take away from the song.

So we have a general idea of what kind of value spectrum we'll use for our song. And when we know about what value our story will be — we'll know its content genre.

Hierarchy of Needs

[00:06:22] Now you might say: Wait, I ain't a storyteller. I have no idea about story genres.

Don't worry. I got you covered.

Have you heard of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs?



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Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a theory of motivation which states that five categories of human needs dictate an individual's behavior. Those needs are often depicted as hierarchical levels within a pyramid.

From the bottom of the hierarchy upwards, the needs are:

1. physiological needs (food and clothing),
2. safety needs (job security),
3. love and belonging needs (friendship),
4. esteem,
5. and self-actualization.

If you think about those needs on Maslow's pyramid, then you can see how those needs create our content genres.

- Action stories probe threats to our physiological needs. They are all about survival – be it because the hero is up against nature, the state, another person, or against time.
- Crime stories investigate challenges to our need for safety and security.
- Love stories get to the heart of our need for love and belonging.
- Performance stories are about our need for esteem.

So even if you are not familiar with story genres, just remember Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. It will help you find the universal human value that is at the core of what you want to write about. Just ask yourself: Will your song's story be about:

- physiological needs to survive
- safety
- love and belonging
- esteem
- or self-actualization.

What does your character WANT?

[00:08:13] But what does all this talk about Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, universal human values, and story content genre have to do with what the character in your song's story wants?

Well, everything.



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Isn't it true that a character in a love story wants to be loved or be with someone? Isn't it all about wanting to meet someone special, or share a first kiss, or be told how much someone loves you? Or do they try to win someone back? Or get over someone? Aren't all of those things possibilities for what a character might want in a love story?

So we know love stories are about the values of love and hate. So we can also say that maybe someone wants someone else to stop being in love with them. Or they actually start out hating someone and wanting to get away from that person.

But as you can see, love stories refer to Maslow's 3rd level of needs: love and belonging that includes sexual intimacy, family, and friendship. So a character might want something along those lines. So looking at genre, values, or the hierarchy of needs level is a great starting point for figuring out what a character might want.

Now you might say, well, love stories in songs are easy. After all, there are so many love stories, and they're all about wanting love or making out or trying to get over someone.

Correct, but for example, there are not that many love songs that have a character who wants to prove his love. And I'm not talking about the confession of love here. I talk about that moment where one lover sacrifices for the other without any expectation of receiving something in return.

That's true proof of love.

The most famous song is probably "I'm gonna be (500 Miles)" by The Proclaimers and one of my all-time favorites: "I'd Come For You" by Nickelback.

But let's look at another story content genre to find other things a character might want. Cause as I said, a story's content genre is a great way to find out what your song's character might want.

Physiological Needs – Action Stories

[00:10:22] So let's start with action stories. Action stories are about the universal human value of life and death. On Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, they are at the very bottom. Those physiological needs concern our survival like food, water, shelter, or sleep.

You can't have anything else in life if your survival is threatened. So a character in that kind of story wants to survive, but you can get more specific:

- Do they want to find food or water?



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- Do they want to survive an illness?
- Is there a villain that they want to defeat?
- Do they want to save someone?
- Do they struggle with drugs and try to get clean?
- Or is any other addiction threatening their survival?
- Just look at any action story you like. What's the main character after? If you know what goal they pursue, write a song about it.

Safety Needs – Crime, War, Thriller, Horror, Western

[00:11:22] Now let's move up one level on Maslow's Hierarchy of Need. Now it's all about safety. Safety refers to the security of body, employment, resources, property, and family.

So what kind of genres and values fit into this level of safety need?

There are thriller and horror stories. Both of those genres still revolve around the values of life and death, but only because the security of the body is threatened either by a human monster like a psychopathic killer who makes their crimes personal against the story's main character OR the character's safety is actually threatened by a real monster, either it's uncanny, supernatural, or some kind of spirit that takes possession.

Another genre that fits into this category is: crime. Crime stories are about justice and injustice. We want to live in a safe environment where we as people, our family, and our property are protected by law.

But you can also make it worse. In war stories, our health, our family, our resources, our property, our employment, everything is at stake and could be taken away from us or destroyed. War threatens our need for safety a lot.

Finally, there are western stories. It's all about securing your life and your beliefs. Are you actually free or being subjugated.

So considering all of those options – thriller, horror, crime, war, and western – your song's character might want something along the line of safety and security – either security of body, employment, resources, property, family, life, and belief.

- So they might want to get justice for a crime committed.
- Maybe they want to convict someone?
- Maybe they want to keep what's theirs?



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- Maybe they want to keep their family or loved ones safe from a certain threat that threatens their safety?
- Maybe they want to stop a war? Or a crime?
- Maybe they try to commit a crime?
- Maybe they want to fight for freedom?
- Maybe they want to set a wrong right?
- Maybe they want to save time, money, or energy?
- Again, just watch your favorite crime shows, thriller movies, westerns, horror, or war stories, and you'll find lots of ideas about what a character wants. And not only look at what the main character wants but also what does the villain want. What do they want?

Love and Belonging - Love Story

[00:14:08] So the third level of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is Love and Belonging. We've already talked about this, so let's skip it.

Just a note: Love stories can also be about friendship or love for your family. So you can always explore ideas around those topics too.

Esteem – Performance and Society Stories

[00:00:00] Now the fourth level of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is esteem. This is all about third-party validation and self-respect. We have two external content genres that fit into this category.

We have performance stories. Performance stories are about shame and respect. It's all about fulfilling one's potential. And we have society stories that revolve around the values of power and impotence.

So what are some possible options for what a character wants concerning the need for third-party validation and self-respect?

Your song's character might want to:

- train for a big performance opportunity
- show everyone what they can do
- challenge the powers that are
- release their inner gift
- live up to their full potential



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- prove themselves
- challenge somebody else
- shift power
- maybe they're trying to outwit a higher institution
- maybe they want to start a revolution
- or they want a coach to teach them something
- Maybe they want to avoid a certain challenge?

Again, you see, there are so many possibilities once you know the level of need in Maslow's Hierarchy of Need. And when you know the genre or the value at stake, you get an even better sense of what your character might want. And if you're still struggling, you can always turn to books or movies or TV series and find out what those main characters want.

Now, why is it so important to know what your character wants?

[00:15:36] For one, there wouldn't be a story or any interest from the audience to look at that character's life. It's boring.

And in real life, everybody wants something. So, it's only natural that your audience will invest themselves in a character who's pursuing someone or something—even if we don't like or agree with what they're going after.

Now, once you know your story's external content genre, the value at stake, or the level on Maslow's Hierarchy of need, you already have some great insight into what your character might be after, in general.

But there are also smaller character goals that can make a great song. You can think of those smaller goals as one task or step on their way to achieving their main goal.

Here are some questions to help you uncover your character's goal:

- How is your character dissatisfied with their life at the very beginning of the song?
- What does your character believe will bring him happiness or satisfaction?
- Why doesn't he have this yet? Or, if he does have it already, why isn't he happy?
- How will your character's goal change once their life is thrown out of balance by the Inciting Incident that drags him into the main conflict of the story?
- What micro-goals will help my character achieve his over-arching goal?



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You can draw from those ideas and come up with different kinds of songs – depending on what you want to focus on in your character’s journey to get what they want.

Don’t forget: Why do they want it?

[00:17:10] No matter what you come up with – some great idea of what your character wants – always remember your character also needs a reason WHY they pursue that specific goal. Why is your protagonist pursuing this particular goal at this particular time in his or her life? What’s motivating them?

Motivations are intrinsic needs that arise when something is lacking in life. More than likely, your protagonist is pursuing what they want because he is incomplete in some way on the inside. He is convinced that by achieving his goal, he will finally be happy or fulfilled, or that everything will be right in the world. So, you can also ask—what’s the underlying emotional reason my character is pursuing this goal?

Either they are trying to restore some balance, or they think achieving this goal with somehow help them on one of those levels of need.

So it’s important that your character has a reason.

Your protagonist’s motivation is the engine that will drive your entire story forward. And once you understand what’s motivating your character, it becomes much easier to write believable behaviors and actions. If their motivations aren’t strong enough, you’ll end up with a song where things just happen to your character rather than show a character in your song that has the capability to make choices and does so in an active way.

Here are some questions to help you uncover your character’s motivation:

- Why does your character want what he wants?
- What makes his goal important at this time in your character’s life?
- Does your character’s motivation give the story a sense of urgency?
- What does this goal subconsciously represent to your character?
- What’s the underlying, emotional reason your character is pursuing this goal?

And again, as you might remember, it’s not about just wanting a cup of coffee – at least, as long as that cup of coffee is not about surviving.

You always need to consider all the crucial components of storytelling.

Let me name them again for you:



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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
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 worldview – the story delivers a meaningful message that helps the audience to survive, thrive, or derive meaning for their own lives.

I hope you're inspired by what your song's character might want, and maybe you already have an idea of how to build a narrative around that idea.

If you're looking for a way to turn your idea into an outline, check out episodes 25 to 27 of the Stories in Songs podcast. They help you to develop your idea into an outline.

If you liked the show, please leave a rating or review.
Thanks a lot.

Next time, we'll talk about three different ways of how you can develop your song's character. So stay tuned.

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

Show Notes

- A Songwriter's Six Best Friends - ADVANCED: The Story Grid Diorama Model
<https://storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-025/>
- Development Engine: Pattinson's 3 Boxes - ADVANCED: 5 Commandments of Storytelling <https://storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-026/>
- Develop your Lyric's Verses by Using Progressive Complications
<https://storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-027/>
- Finding Topics to Write about by Looking at Universal Human Values:
<https://storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-023/>



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- Crafting Your Story Spine Using Literal and Essential Wants & Needs: <https://storygrid.com/literal-and-essential/>
- Objects of Desire, Objects of Conflict: <https://storygrid.com/objects-of-desire/>



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