

EPISODE 031

The Wants and Needs of a Song's Character and How They Can Engage Your Listeners through Creating Conflict

See the show notes at storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-031

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

Did you know that listeners are drawn to specific topics of lyrics because they strive to get similar things in their lives as the character in the song?

When you think about your lyrics this way, it's much easier to see the kind of target audience you want as a songwriter because your future listener will enjoy investing themselves in your song's characters.

But how can you decide what your character strives for and what he wants or needs? Where to start? And how do their Wants and Needs influence each other to create a compelling narrative?

I'm glad you asked.

In today's episode, I'm happy to share with you some storytelling tips on how you can write a compelling story for your song by creating some spicy conflict.

Are you ready? Let's go.

TEASER



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What does your song's character want?

[00:01:24] In order to find out how we can create conflict, we first need to answer two essential questions. First, we have to know: What does your song's character want, and what does he need?

Before we get to the song examples, we'll do a quick recap of a character's want and need, and then we talk about how we can create conflict. Once we've covered the theory, we'll look at song examples to better understand how to apply the theory in writing lyrics.

Now, if you've seen the television series Lucifer, then you know the former King of Hell can compel almost everyone to answer his question: "What is it you desire?" That is, what do you want?

It would be great to pull this magic trick with our fictional characters, but we have to put a little more work into creating their desires.

After all, we as songwriters need to know what our song's character will be after? If the character doesn't have a goal, there's nothing that drives the plot forward. Well, there's no drive at all, and hence, no way for you to show a narrative progression between your verses, and you only end up repeating yourself.

We don't want to bore our audience, right?

So your song's main character must want something.

Now, this should be obvious. Everybody wants something, usually a lot of different things.

You might want success as a singer/songwriter. You want to play in Milton Keynes in England and be on tour across the world. Maybe you want to stick to a workout plan to get stronger, ... so many things.

The difference is, a character in a song must have only one desire for something that will drive their actions within the song.

As we've learned in [episode 29](#) of the Stories in Songs podcast, you can look at the first four levels of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs or at story content genres and their corresponding universal human values to figure out what your song's character wants.



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- In a love song, they want to love or be loved, get over someone, prove their love, or just share a kiss.
- In a song about a crime, it's all about justice and injustice. Usually, you want someone punished for a crime or if the main character is a thief, they want to get away with what they've done.
- In a performance story, the main character wants to win a big contest to earn respect.
- In a song that's about a horror story, you want to get away from the monster.

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?

Again, if you need some more help to figure out what your character wants, listen to [episode 29](#) of the stories and songs podcast. And then come back to this one because in this one, we combine wants and needs to create conflict.

What does your song's character need?

[00:04:29] After you've figured out what your song's character wants, it's time to think about what that character unconsciously needs.

You might wonder if every song's character must have an unconscious need.

It's your decision, but here's something to keep in mind:

Not every song requires a character in the lyrics that has a conscious WANT and an unconscious NEED. If you're writing an Action story where the protagonist doesn't change internally, his need will match his want – to survive the external events of what's happening around him. For example, if you look at the story of "The Martian," – that guy who is stranded on Mars is only concerned about surviving somehow. He's not worrying about changing as a person. He just wants to make it through until help arrives

But for those of you looking to write lyrics that have a narrative-driven by characters instead of plot, you need to include what your song's character wants and what he needs.

But what is a character's need?



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A character's need must change internally (beneath their surface) to get what they are actively pursuing. Until a character changes from within (think of it as their mindset), they cannot accomplish their external goal.

When we look at some great stories, this moment can look like this when a character changes their worldview to accomplish their goal. External factors often trigger that moment of internal change and growth.

- In Star Wars, Luke trusts the force and uses it to take out the Death Star
- In The Hunger Games, Katniss chooses to eat the berries instead of killing Peeta—she understands she can't win either way
- In The Lord of the Rings, Frodo accepts that he needs to journey to Mordor alone and leaves the fellowship

The internal change of a character makes a story timeless because every human being struggles with relatable internal needs in their own life, even if they are not challenged by the same external forces that motivate the characters to rise.

If you need a recap of the possibilities of what a song's character might need, check out [episode 30](#) of the Stories in Songs Podcast.

For now, just remember this: When you want to show how your song's character changes internally, you can choose from one of three options.

1. You can focus on your song's character's behavior and choices driven by their moral compass and strength of will. It's all about that person's character and the spectrum between selfishness and putting the needs of others ahead of self.
2. You can also show a change in the character's thoughts or the way they understand the world and circumstances. This is all about a character's thoughts. The values are on a spectrum between Understanding and Lack of Understanding, which encompasses their Belief, Sophistication, and Knowledge, and figuring out what's meaningful.
3. And lastly, you can also create a change in a character's fortune. Those stories are all about showing how a character can deal with misfortune that is independent of their character or thought. Will they succeed or fail?

Usually, what your song's character thinks he wants isn't what he really needs in order to feel complete or fulfilled.



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Your character's subconscious need is usually nothing more than realizing some kind of truth. Often this truth is something that your character has been running toward or away from for a long time. When your character finally faces this truth, his perspective (either of himself or the world around him) will be transformed, leaving him more capable of dealing with the remaining external problems.

If you need some inspiration, check out some of these universal needs:

- Faith (in oneself, in others, in the world, in God)
- Acceptance (of self, of circumstances, of reality)
- Fear (overcoming it, conquering it, finding courage)
- Forgiveness (of self or others)
- Trust (in oneself, in others, in the unknown)
- Selflessness (including altruism, heroism, and overcoming greed)
- Responsibility (including duty, standing up for a cause, and accepting one's destiny)
- Redemption (including atonement, accepting blame, remorse, and salvation)
- Meaning (of life or actions)

What your protagonist needs is directly related to your story's internal genre. For example, in a Worldview-Maturation story, the character generally needs to accept that the world isn't as black-and-white as they originally thought. In a Status-Sentimental story, the protagonist generally needs to accept that their definition of success doesn't match their inner moral compass.

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

- What is actually keeping your character from feeling happy or fulfilled? What is he lacking mentally, emotionally, or spiritually?
- What does your character need to learn or realize to disprove their misconception about themselves or the world?
- Does your character need to learn this lesson to achieve what they want?
- How will your character learn this lesson?
- What message do you want your song to have?

Again, if you wonder if you really need to include an internal change of your song's character, here's what Shawn Coyne, the creator of the Story Grid, said about this:

"If your story doesn't change your lead character irrevocably from beginning to end, no one will really care about it. It may entertain them but will have little effect on them. It will be forgotten. We want characters in stories that take on the myriad of challenges of changing their lives and somehow make it through, with invaluable experience."



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Wants, Needs, and Conflict

[00:11:02] Now that you know what your character wants and needs – again, check out episodes 29 and 30 of the Stories in Songs podcast if you still have trouble with those two things – now it's time to let wants and needs clash.

After all, stories must have conflict.

Why?

Just imagine, if we all lived a life with no struggle and nothing standing between us and our goals, then our stories would reflect that if we even had them. Characters would just get what they are after with nothing standing in their way.

And if our lives were like that, those stories would work for us.

But given how life truly is, those stories with no struggles won't even be stories; at best, they will be accounts of events.

Stories speak to us because when we try to achieve anything more significant than making a cup of coffee, we usually have to overcome some difficulty. And when it comes to stories and also songs, we want the main character to struggle, just as we do, only more so. We want to see them deal with incredible odds, solve problems, and overcome challenges.

Those stories provide hope that we can also face our own problems in life.

So how do you come up with conflict?

Yes, you let a character's want and need collide.

But how do you pull that off?

Conflicting Conscious and Unconscious Desires

[00:12:29] A character may be unaware that they need something that conflicts with what they want. They start to try to get what they consciously want, but along the way, they end up trying to satisfy what they unconsciously need.



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One of the best examples to show you what I mean is when we look at the character of Walter White from Breaking Bad, played by Bryan Cranston.

Walter learns that he has brain cancer, with only a short time left to live. So as a father and husband, he wants to provide for his family so that they can get by after he's gone. His concern for his family leads to his decision to make money by cooking meth.

However, cooking meth feeds an unconscious yearning — the desire to use his skills as a master chemist. These skills have remained dormant throughout all the years he taught High School Chemistry. In creating his new persona of “Heisenberg,” he discovers his true self and expresses his skills and talents of creative problem solving, improvisation, leadership, and even battle to the fullest.

Of course, Walter can't see how he changes at first. But he comes to understand that he didn't do all those dangerous and criminal things to provide for his family, but he had actually done them for himself. So his unconscious desire became conscious.

In this way, Walter has achieved distorted self-actualization, but at the expense of love, safety, and his life.

Can you already see a huge conflict this suppressed need caused? He just needed a taste of how it feels to live up to his full potential, and he couldn't stop. Wanting to provide for his family turned him into a whole other person, a criminal. And if you've seen that popular TV series, you know how much conflict there is in each episode.

Now is there also a song we could use as an example to demonstrate how a character might actually fulfill a need while they pretend to pursue a goal?

Of course, there is.

“Eye of the Tiger” by Survivor

[00:14:44] “Eye of the Tiger” by Survivor doesn't need an introduction. I guess everyone is familiar with that song and how the lyrics go.

So in “Eye of the Tiger”, we have a main character who wants to survive and who enjoys the thrill of the fight. That's their conscious goal. That's what they want. But in doing so, they do – like Walter White – feed an unconscious yearning: they fight to keep their dreams alive and to gain respect.



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In other words, despite being a modest person, the song’s main character has not given up on achieving specific goals. They stay hungry and prepared to take on the next competitor. And since that character is fighting to survive because that’s what they want, that behavior leads to the character’s success. He gets the glory and the respect. But now, after going “the distance” and reaching “the top”, he is “not gonna stop,” aspiring to remain the best. This lifestyle is now part of his personality, being once again “just a man with a will to survive”. So in saying he just wants to fight to survive, he actually did it because he needed respect. That’s what he wanted all along. He started out wanting to survive on the street, but once he got a taste of what it feels like to succeed, he kept going still under the pretense of wanting to survive, even though he already enjoyed the respect and the success he got.

Tips for writing lyrics with Conflicting Conscious and Unconscious Desires

[00:16:16] So how can you pull it off to have a character who starts out wanting one thing but then actually satisfies their unconscious need?

I’m glad you asked.

Let’s use the Development Engine of the three boxes from Pat Pattison.

If you haven’t heard of the concept of the boxes yet, read his book “Writing Better Lyrics” or listen to [episode 26](#) of the Stories in Songs Podcast.

Here’s a quick reminder: Pat Pattison says that you need to think about a song as a stack of boxes that are 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. That means the heaviest and largest box is the WHY of the song, the place you want to arrive at. It’s the great takeaway of your song.

So when we have a character who starts out wanting one thing but then actually satisfies their unconscious need, we can use the boxes like this:

1. **Box 1:** In the first verse, we introduce our audience to our character’s world, and we include an inciting incident or refer back to something that threw their life out of balance. From that incident arose their goal. That’s what they want. That’s the same as Walter White getting informed that he has brain cancer and will die very soon. So his object of desire arises: he wants to provide for his family. Or in “Eye of the Tiger”, we get introduced to a character who is back on the street with his “will to survive”. So again, in box 1 you include what incident happened to the character and what they are trying to achieve. What is it they want?



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2. **Box 2:** In the second verse, you can further underline why the character thinks he needs to get what he consciously wants. You can use progressive complications to complicate the situation further and raise the stakes. If you're very skilled, you should hint at what the character actually needs but doesn't recognize yet that they try to satisfy their unconscious need instead of what they consciously want. So maybe include him liking the taste of what he's trying to achieve for reasons they don't understand yet.
3. **Box 3:** In the last verse or the bridge, whatever fits into your lyric structure, you can get the character to recognize their need – probably by reaching a turning point where they have to choose between what they want and what they need. They have to realize they can't have both. So all our previous verses add up to that final moment – the narrative's climax when the character has to make a choice. For example, in the context of *Breaking Bad*, it's: Lying to himself that he just wanted to provide for his family or admitting to himself and her that he actually liked to be the criminal Heisenberg?

Of course, there are other ways to take the conflict of Want and Need through the boxes. If you do, just make sure your plot progresses, and the boxes get larger and gain weight. For the chorus, you can focus on one important aspect of your character's situation. Just look at "Eye of the Tiger". That chorus focuses on rising as a person to the challenges you have to face. It fits beautifully with how the song's character grows as a person by recognizing their need and continuing their path.

Conflicting Conscious Desires and Unrecognized Needs

[00:19:51] Now, when we talk about the conflict of Wants and Needs of a character, it's also possible that a character might need something that they really and absolutely don't want, not even unconsciously.

Let's start with a story example first.

In Charles Dickens's "A Christmas Carol," the main character, Ebenezer Scrooge, wants nothing more than to keep accumulating wealth. As a result, he only spends his money in the smallest amount necessary to care for the basics: food, shelter, clothing — his recognized needs. This leads him to live a solitary life, only interacting with others when absolutely necessary. Yet he needs to be more generous to others with both his wealth and, more importantly, with his time and affection.



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He doesn't recognize that need. It may or may not be something he unconsciously desires; that doesn't matter. He is doomed if he continues to single-mindedly pursue his conscious object of desire without satisfying this unrecognized need. The ghosts are there to get him to recognize that need. Once he does recognize it, he changes his ways and fulfills them admirably.

So what Ebenezer wants and needs are great opposites. Being more generous stands completely in the way of gathering more wealth. But the beauty is that by becoming more generous, he recognizes the wealth of love and belonging and the joy of doing good for others.

“Welcome to the Black Parade” by My Chemical Romance

[00:21:27] So is there a song we could use as an example that shows a character who starts out really and absolutely not wanting what they actually need?

Yes, there is a great song we could use as an example. It's one of my favorite songs of all time: “Welcome to the Black Parade” by My Chemical Romance.

If you haven't listened to this song yet, you should check it out right after this episode. This song encapsulates an entire story – an entire heroic journey of the main character – while also fitting into the larger narrative of the concept album “The Black Parade”.

Let's go through the five commandments of storytelling to figure out what that song is about. Don't worry if you don't know those five commandments. Just keep listening for now, and later check out [episode 26](#) of the Stories in Songs podcast to learn more about them. I'll include a link in the show notes.

So let's walk through the five commandments for “Welcome to the Black Parade” to find out what the song is mainly about.

1. **Inciting Incident: Causal.** The main character that we refer to as The Patient, now a grown-up, remembers the task his father had given him when he was still a boy. His father had asked him to be “The savior of the broken, the beaten and the damned.”
2. **Progressive Complication:** After his father's death, the Patient steps into the role of the savior even though he does not understand what it actually means to be that person.
Turning Point Progressive Complication: Revelatory. The peers of the patient's father are weary from battle and disappointed.



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3. **Crisis:** Irreconcilable Goods. Shall the patient keep pretending to be someone he's not, keep his status but lose the fight eventually, or shall he admit his own vulnerability, lose the role of the leader, but make way for someone who might lead them to victory?
4. **Climax:** He admits to his own lack of understanding. He says he ain't a savior, a hero, nor a man. He's still just a boy.
5. **Resolution:** By embracing his own "brokenness", the patient truly becomes "the savior of the broken, the beaten and the damned."

As you can see, the main character of that song wanted to fulfill the promise his father had asked of him. He wanted to be "The savior of the broken, the beaten, and the damned." That's his conscious want. And he didn't wanna be a boy anymore. He wanted to be strong to lead his followers on. He wanted to be "defiant till the end" as he still heard the "call to carry on". He wanted to be that savior.

So he absolutely didn't recognize his need. And even if you would have told him, he would have lashed out against it. So in that sense, the patient is like Scrooge. Both characters need something that they really and absolutely don't want, not even unconsciously.

There are so many great things to say about the song "Welcome to the Black Parade", but one of them is the change and the growth of the song's character. He wanted to be the "savior of the broken, the beaten and the damned", but as he hit his all-is-lost moment when the peers of his father are weary from battle and disappointed, he has to look very deeply at himself and at his approach. He understands then that he's not better than them. He isn't a savior. He's as broken as they are.

He sings and the lyrics are under copyright by BLOW THE DOORS OFF CHICAGO

*I won't explain or say I'm sorry
I'm unashamed, I'm gonna show my scars
Give a cheer for all the broken
Listen here, because it's who we are
I'm just a man, I'm not a hero
Just a boy who had to sing this song
I'm just a man, I'm not a hero
I don't care*

So even though he wanted to be a savior, he couldn't hold on to being that person any longer. He needed to embrace who he truly is. He had to admit that he's just as broken as his father's peers and that he's still just a boy.



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Now isn't that a great conflict for a character?

They want to be someone to fulfill a promise and lead a revolution – so there is so much at stake – but nothing works out as planned. And as everything seems to be lost, in the end, they have come to terms with who they truly are and admit that they are just like the people around them. They are not a hero, just a simple man.

It's like the phoenix rising from the ashes.

Tips for writing lyrics with Conflicting Conscious Desires and Unrecognized Needs

[00:26:23] So how can you pull it off to have a character who needs something that they really and absolutely don't want, not even unconsciously?

Well, let's use the three boxes again for an example of what the verse development could look like:

1. **Box 1:** You want to start your song by establishing what your character wants, why he wants it, and what's at stake. You really have to focus on what's at stake to make it clear to your audience that the character will try everything in their power to achieve his goal. Just look at "Welcome to the Black Parade", it starts with a father asking his son to become someone very powerful, important, and inspiring for many people who need that savior. So there's a huge burden established in the introduction of that song.
2. **Box 2:** In the second verse, you can show how the character honors the task they've been given. Or how they try to be what is expected of them or what they expect of themselves. They follow their want without question.
3. **Box 3:** In the last box, you have to show how your character reaches a moment when they can't go on the way they thought was right. They have reached a moment when everything seems lost and hopeless. And only by changing the way they look at themselves can they actually rise and become a wiser or more sophisticated person who is able to deal with the hardships of life. But what's important here is that they have to embrace something that is in clear contrast to what they wanted. They have to embrace what they need, and that need doesn't seem to be the way to get what they want, even though it is. They just can't see it yet. But your audience will know that they've changed to a better person by recognizing that need.

I know this might sound very abstract. But if in doubt, you can look at My Chemical Romance's song "Welcome to the Black Parade" for help. In general, this is something you should make a habit of: When you want to learn to write better lyrics, you should study masterworks – study the lyrics of successful songs. But that doesn't mean what's on top of



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the charts today or this year. A masterwork is a work that endures over time and doesn't lose its impact. It's a timeless classic. An evergreen. Because if a song makes it to keep being played over years and decades, it's something people love to hear again and again.

Everybody wants to be different, but nobody wants to change.

[00:29:06] As you know, stories are about change. And songs can really make an impact if the character's external situation changes and the way they look at the world – their inner worldview.

But changing is not easy, right?

Changing as a person requires loss and sacrifice. It's hard, and it hurts.

Everybody wants to be different, but nobody wants to change.

And this is something to keep in mind. It's easy to choose the easy way, but the easy way is not always the best.

So remember that what someone might want might not be what they actually need. And that's the source of great conflict that you can use to tell a gripping and interesting story in your lyrics.

For example,

- The main character in your song has to develop discipline or courage to prepare for a big event.
- The character might have to overcome their pride or prejudice before they can commit to the person they are attracted to.
- Maybe they have to acknowledge their shadow side before they can defeat the villain.

And characters can know these things. They want to be different. But they don't want to change. And that's where conflict is born.

So here are some questions you can ask yourself when you think about developing your character's wants and needs to create great conflict for your song's narrative. Having that, you're setting your song up to carry a great message:

- What would your character consciously want that would be relevant to your song's big takeaway?



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- What else might they want, consciously or unconsciously, that would conflict with getting what they consciously want?
- What need (whether it's something they want or not) might they recognize that would complicate getting what they want?
- What might the audience understand that the character needs, even though the character doesn't recognize the need? How would such a need complicate matters?

Take your time with those questions.

You can also use them to look at a lyric draft of what you've already written and ask yourself if including a conflict of a character's want and need would make those lyrics more compelling. Sometimes that conflict is exactly what you need to underline the message of your song.

Did you enjoy this episode?

Let me know by leaving a rating or review.

Join me next time. Then we do another lyric study as we continue studying the lyrics of songs about the first kiss. More precisely, we'll look at the lyrics of the song "You Shouldn't Kiss Me Like This" by Toby Keith.

Until then, bis bald und auf Wiedersehen.

Melanie

Show Notes

- Development Engine: Pattinson's 3 Boxes - ADVANCED: 5 Commandments of Storytelling <https://storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-026/>
- Every Character in a Story WANTS something. But how do you figure out WHAT that is? <https://storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-029/>
- 3 Ways to Develop your Song's Character by Looking at Internal Content Genres <https://storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-030/>
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