

EPISODE 033

Dynamic Characters in Narrative Songwriting

See the show notes at storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-033

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

The word “character development” or the phrase “developing characters” gets thrown around a lot. But what does it actually mean? And do we, as songwriters, really have to think about how we create our song’s character? And if so, how can we show the audience a character in the lyrics that they can invest themselves in? That is so believable that they themselves have the power to carry the message of the song?

If you ever thought that the task of character development is for writers of novels or screenplays only, this episode will surprise you.

So let’s dive in and find out more about the importance of your song’s character.

TEASER

The importance of the song’s character

[00:01:19] Whether we’re talking about standalone songs like “I’m A Believer” by the Monkees, “Stan” by Eminem, “Folsom Prison Blues” by Johnny Cash, or concept albums like “American Idiot” by Green Day or “The Black Parade” by My Chemical Romance, the best stories in songs aren’t just about exciting events: They’re about the characters in those songs.

As we know, we can outline our idea by taking it through Pat Pattison’s Development Engine and applying the five commandments of storytelling to it (something we talked about in episodes [26](#) and [27](#) of the Stories in Songs Podcast, link included in the show notes).



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Well, while we outline our idea and develop the verses by moving the idea through the three boxes to make them gain weight and meaning, we can certainly create exciting twists and turns this way. After all, the ending of the song isn't only the climax of the music, but also of the story moment being told in the lyrics' narrative.

Having a great developed narrative idea can help you write your lyrics, but good character development draws your listeners in by giving them strong characters they can identify with.

Just look at the song: **"I'd Do Anything for Love"** by Meat Loaf or **"Nothing Else Matters"** by Metallica. In both songs, you have a very sophisticated character who has matured as a person. Once, they had their flaws, were insecure, and had their doubts, but they have become so strong and so confident as a person because they KNOW that the love they believe in makes them a better person.

Here are some example lines from **"Nothing Else Matters"** by Metallica. The song's character says that he "never opened *himself* that way", or "open mind for a different view" which shows that he has changed as a person. And he is so sure that what they have is right, that no one can make him doubt. This attitude is represented by the lines: "Forever trusting who we are | And nothing else matters" or "Never cared for what they do | Never cared for what they know".

The same is true for the character in Meat Loaf's song **"I'd Do Anything for Love"**. He once was a person who "Somedays *prayed* to the God of Sex and Drums and Rock 'N Roll." But he has left those days behind him now. He doesn't want to lose her ever again, and he'd do anything for her love. This entire song is him trying to convince her of his love, and the only thing he wouldn't do is screw around ever again.

Unfortunately, not every song has compelling characters. Sometimes they just feel flat and boring. Maybe you remember Christina Aguilera's song **"Ain't No Other Man,"** which we talked about in [episode 11](#). In that song, the character refers to their past by saying: "Never thought I'd be alright | Till you came and changed my life." That line about not being alright is very unspecific. It falls flat since the rest of the song is only about meeting that guy, and we have no clue how her world really changed. We don't have much to go on about her, and that's why her character falls flat and one-dimensional. It just doesn't have the power to make us invest in anything that's going on or happening to her.

So the question is: ***How do you develop compelling characters that your audience will love?***

In short: You need to develop well-thought-out characters.



So before you start writing the lyrics for your next song, you need to ask yourself some important questions about your song's character.

Now you may be thinking.... *Ugh, does that mean I have to know every single detail about my characters, down to their favorite color and childhood hobby?*

No. Definitely not.

I'm NOT talking about those character questionnaires that ask you for random facts like your character's favorite animal, food, or hobby.

I'm talking about the deep and specific questions that reveal who your character really is. In other words, the kind of questions that actually help you develop, write, and revise your song's story moment.

So, what are these questions? How do we make sure our characters don't turn out boring?

If you've listened to my previous episodes, then you've already heard about two important aspects of character development: You need to know your character's objects of desire. That means, what do they want and what do they need? I'll include the link to those episodes in the show notes.

Some writers have no trouble answering these questions about what their character wants and needs, but for most of us, it's not always that easy. Can you identify with any of these statements?

- You know what your character wants, but you don't know why they want it.
- You know there's some kind of universal message you want to explore with your lyrics, but you don't know how to combine that idea with your song's character
- Or you have a lyric draft ready, but your character feels flat or boring.

Well, don't worry!

In today's episode, I'll show you how to develop a compelling character from the inside out that will stick with your audience for years to come.

But first, let's talk briefly about what character development means and why it's important.

Exciting, right? Let's get started! =)



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Developing characters vs. evolving characters.

[00:06:45] So what does character development actually mean?

In order for song lyrics to engage the audience, the songwriter or lyricist needs to pay special attention to character development.

Even if you're writing an action-packed song where the characters are robots, it's the human element that resonates with the listeners.

After all, listeners don't always rave about the story itself.... but also because of the characters they fall in love with. For my part, I love the rebellious character on Green Day's Album "American Idiot". I also love the character in Eminem's "Lose Yourself". I also love the character of the Monkee's song "I'm A Believer", or Westlife's song "My love".

And suppose your listeners love your characters or feel their pain, sorrow, or joy because those characters speak FOR them because they can express how the listeners feel themselves. In that case, the listeners are willing to follow those characters throughout the song.

To keep your audience interested, you need to know that they want to learn how your character responds to challenges – both internal and external – and what makes them change as a person, and how they change.

In the greatest standards, the character develops skills and strengths that turn them into a guide for the listeners because the listeners are able to take a prescriptive message away from the song. And that only happens through the character's actions when they realize they have to change as a person and look beyond a black-and-white worldview.

So resist the temptation to make your song's character life easy. Only the toughest challenges transform a person.

Just look at the song "Hero of War" by Rise Against that we studied in [episode 27](#). In that song, the character thought that by becoming a soldier, he could go and see the world and get paid for it. At the end of the song, he's disillusioned, and he only trusts the flag of peace. His experiences by being a soldier in action have changed him irrevocably.

So what is character development exactly?

Character development refers to two slightly different (but similar) things:

- Character development is **building a three-dimensional character** with a fully fleshed-out backstory, a unique personality, and a specific set of goals and motivations.



- Character development can also refer to the **personality development** a character undergoes through their experiences over the course of the story. This is commonly known as your character's development arc. You can also call this evolving characters instead of developing characters.

In this episode, we'll focus on the latter. We want to create a three-dimensional character and that means we will concentrate on their arc.

But first, let's understand why character development is so important to the success of your song.

Three reasons why fleshing out your characters is so darn important.

[00:10:15] Characters are the heart of a story – no matter what kind of story.

In narrative songwriting or any other lyric writing where you want to show a character's situation and how that changes him or how the character changes the situation, you have a character interacting with events. They have to respond to what's happening to them.

So a character and their narrative, or what we call in writing terms: the plot, are inseparable because a person is what they experience.

Without a clear sense of who a character is, what they value, and what they are afraid of, the audience will not be able to discern the meaning of events, and your song will not have an impact.

Like real people, fictional characters have quirks, dreams, back stories, worries, and obsessions. These traits determine how a character reacts to the things that happen to them and how they feel about them. It is essential to your song's narrative that you understand the most important aspects of your character so that you have a sense of how they may react under the pressure of the main event they encounter.

What makes a well-developed character?

[00:11:36] A well-crafted character should also be as complex as a real person. However, that doesn't mean that in order to write the lyrics for one song, you need to create their full backstory. Just make sure, you can imagine them to be like a real person.

That's the key to character development: make your characters feel like they are people you know – who just live far away. So get into the habit of thinking of them as real and you will almost always have a well-developed character.



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How does character development affect the story?

[00:12:13] So, how does character development actually affect your lyrics?

Well, the goal of your main character determines the focus of your narrative.

It doesn't matter if the stakes of your story are big or small, as long as they are of great importance to your character.

That is, your character doesn't have to save the world: maybe they are trying to save their friend from making a mistake or fighting to keep their company from being swallowed up by another company. Maybe they want to confess their love even though their love interest is about to marry someone else.

It's your job to figure out what's important to your character (ideally, it's something your listeners can relate to) and what it would look like if your character doesn't accomplish their goal. What would their failure look like? What's at stake? What can they lose?

If you want to learn more about that interplay of all those crucial elements of narrative songwriting, make sure to listen to [episode 21](#) of the Stories in Songs Podcast.

Today though, we want to focus on developing your song's character's development arc.

Different kinds of characters in songwriting

[00:13:37] As you know, characters are the core of any story, novel, movie, play, or song because they drive the narrative along and let the audience participate in what happens.

So it's important to not just take them for granted. When we write a song, it's not just about having an idea and seeing where it can take you. If you want to wield the power of storytelling to level up your lyrics and truly give them a meaningful message that lasts over decades, we need to think of the quality of the song's main character.

The quality has to do with what kind of character someone is. This doesn't refer to their temperament, such as being nice or mean, but rather their nature within the story.

To write an exciting narrative for your lyrics, you need to distinguish between two types of characters: dynamic characters and static characters.



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If you can do that, you'll succeed in breathing life into your song. Because let's face it, why do we love stories? Because we love to be taken away to precious memories, to beautiful dreams, or we look for guidance when we face a similar challenge in our lives. And sometimes, we just want to break free and experience something we never dared to feel before. And songs have the power to pick us up and take us somewhere else – even if it's just for a couple of minutes.

You may have heard the common assumption that characters must fundamentally change and develop as people over the course of a story – in other words, be dynamic – to be considered well crafted.

But the truth is that there are a lot of great characters who emerge from a long mental journey without having changed much. These are static characters, and they're a perfectly valid part of your character development repertoire.

But before we talk about static characters in one of the next episodes, let's start with dynamic characters.

Dynamic Characters in Songwriting

[00:15:40] So, what is a dynamic character?

A dynamic character changes throughout the course of the song's story. They often evolve to become a morally better person or they mature and grow up to see beyond their naive black-and-white worldview.

For example, the character in the Monkee's song "I'm A Believer" changes from someone who doubts the existence of true love to someone who believes.

Or just look at the characters from "Nothing Else Matters" and "I'd Do Anything for Love". We've talked about them at the beginning of this episode, and they've changed for the better as well. They matured.

But sometimes characters can also fall and change from a good person to a bad person, or from someone with a blind or justified belief to being disillusioned, like the character in "Hero of War" by Rise Against.

That means that a dynamic character undergoes a significant internal change over the course of the song's time span – either in their personal attitudes, beliefs, or behavior toward others. This change occurs primarily through the main problem they're facing in the song (which ideally is introduced to the audience right at the beginning of the song).



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In other words, a dynamic character is someone who learns a lesson and/or changes as a person for better or worse depending on

- what happens to them,
- how it shatters their worldview,
- how they respond when everything goes south.
- and how they are able to put the pieces back together,

Now you might say that this thought of developing a character arc might work in a novel, but how can this apply to writing lyrics?

Well, like any story, a song has a beginning, a middle, and an end. So there's plenty of opportunity to develop your verses and your character within the given constraints of the lyrics as well.

Again, the Monkees' song "I'm A Believer" has altogether around 220 words, and with even fewer words (of only the two verses and the chorus), we have a great developed character arc.

But since we are talking about lyrics, of course, we can't think in the dimensions of movies or books when we want to show how a person changes for better or worse.

To actually show your character's arc of who they once were and who they've become or are becoming, you need to refer back to the crucial components of narrative songwriting. Here's a reminder of what they are:

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

To apply those components to your lyrics outline, you need to know what's the ONE problem, challenge, or obstacle your character is facing. And how does this ONE problem, obstacle, or challenge change that person in their process of trying to deal with that ONE problem, challenge, or obstacle?



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So only focus on ONE thing. ONE thing they are dealing with and then focus on how that ONE thing changes them.

For example, in **“I’m A Believer”**, the song’s character’s ONE problem, challenge, or obstacle was that he doubted the existence of true love. And he turned into a Believer by having seen her face.

Or look at the song **“I’d Do Anything for Love”** by Meat Loaf. Here’s a lot more going on in those lyrics, but everything that is mentioned revolves around the things he would do for love, and what he wouldn’t do. It all serves his essential want. He is trying to convince her that he’s changed as a person, and he would do anything ONLY for her love. And he certainly won’t screw around anymore.

Or look at the character in Justin Bieber’s popular song **“Love Yourself”**. The song’s main character is admitting his own mistake that he had been wrong all along to have ever been with that particular girl who still lights up his phone and uses his name to get into clubs. Since she keeps bothering him, she becomes the problem he has to overcome. And in that song, we can clearly see how the character changed from someone who was so “caught up in his job” to realizing the darker truth about someone, specifically, the darker truth about that girl. He also refers to all the signs that he should have recognized: like his mama not liking her, or this girl is hating his friends, or how she tells him that his opinion is wrong. All those things led to the big revelation that she should go and love herself. You know what I mean. I really love the wordplay in that song. But again, ONE problem, and ONE particular way the character changed in relation to that ONE problem.

Another example is the song **“I’d Come For You”** by Nickelback. That song is about someone who pushed his loved one away only to realize that this was a huge mistake. And although he already made it up to her, he wants to give her something more, something she can truly believe in. So he promises her that no matter what happens, no matter if she finds herself lost and alone, the song’s character will come for her. To see the shift of the song’s character, the first verse is about the huge mistake the character made. He sings: “I can’t believe I said I’d lay our love on the ground.” In the second verse, he explains the reason why he committed that mistake. He says: “I was blindfolded, but now I’m seeing, I My mind was closing, now I’m believing.” In the bridge, the song’s character emphasizes his willingness to fight for her no matter what. So the song’s main character has come a long way from who he was and the mistakes he made, to making them up and strengthening their love by promising her that from now on, he’ll always be there for her.



Even if you look at a concept album like “**The Black Parade**” by My Chemical Romance, the album’s main character has to deal with ONE problem. On the surface, it’s his terminal illness and that he’s about to die. Below the surface, it’s about dealing with everything he’s done so far. And beyond the surface, it’s all about understanding how he can still give his life meaning so that he won’t be forgotten. But again, the core theme of life and death and morality is so strong in each of those songs. But the ONE main problem, his upcoming death, is at the heart of it all.

As a rule of thumb, if you want your audience to take away a positive message, then you should focus on showing a change from bad to good in your song’s character. Show how they have overcome false beliefs, bad attitudes or behavior, or have evolved from selfishness to caring about others. Show their newly gained confidence and their strong belief, and let them refer to the time when everything was different, and they were this whole other person. It’s your choice how much you focus on each of those stages. Just make sure we get a clear picture of who a character once was and who they’ve become.

And no matter how great your comparison is, make sure to include the turning point moment. That means the moment that threw your song’s character into a crisis where they actively had to make the choice to change. Only if we know what incident led to the character’s change they become more believable and more three-dimensional to us.

And if you want to give your audience a warning, the character changes from good to bad or from bad to worse – either in their status, their morality, or their worldview.

If you want to find out more about those three internal genres and what they mean, make sure to check out [episode 30](#) of the Stories in Songs Podcast, where we talk about the 3 Ways to Develop Your Song's Character by Looking at Internal Content Genres.

How to create a dynamic character for your next song?

[00:24:38] I hope you liked the examples we’ve discussed and that they inspire you when developing the character of your next song.

But if you need more ideas on creating dynamic characters, let’s talk about it right now.

As I mentioned at the beginning of the episode, dynamic characters are a great tool for a good story. That’s because they’re interesting. We want to know how the ONE challenge, obstacle, or the ONE problem they are dealing with, influences and shapes our song’s main character.



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If you've written novels as well, I'd just like to point out something you should pay attention to. When you write a long-form story like a screenplay or a novel or even a concept album, your story's main character should always be dynamic and evolving. However, you don't have to make the changes super obvious for your audience to recognize them straight away. Over the course of your narrative journey, these changes should happen subtly and naturally.

BUT when it comes to writing the lyrics for one particular song, you just don't have the time or space or even the patience of your audience to only show a teeny tiny change of the character's thought, character, or fortune.

In lyrics, we need to be able to recognize the character's change clearly, and we should also know the reason for it related to the ONE problem, challenge, or obstacle they are or were facing. If you don't show a clear progression of the song's character, your audience might miss it. If you don't know how obvious you should go about it, look back at the song examples we've mentioned in this episode and look for

- what problem the character faced
- how much the character changed,
- how clearly the change is communicated,
- where in the lyrics the change is shown,
- and what the reason for the change was.

You find the full list of the songs mentioned in the show notes.

So before we end today's episode, let's talk about some more ways to write dynamic characters:

1. Find one specific character trait that you want to show how it changes. Is the character rude or friendly, shy or cocky, enthusiastic or bored, innocent or experienced? Even better, highlight your character's weakness and think about how they have overcome their greatest flaw over the course of the lyrics.
2. Blame your character for their predicament. Because, yes, it's okay for the character to blame themselves for their dilemma. Sure, it's easier to write a character who, through no fault of their own, becomes the victim of cruel circumstances beyond their control. Poor thing. But it's more exciting and interesting when the characters themselves are to blame, or at least complicit, in the conflicts they have to deal with. Only through this unpleasant self-involvement are they able to learn lessons from their actions. And those who learn things also evolve.
3. And lastly, here's a tip if you have a character in your lyrics who's stubborn or bullheaded and just refuses to change. Then you need to push them harder. You need to force them to change. That means you have to ramp up the ONE conflict, challenges, and problems and include progressive complications that clearly and dramatically escalate to a turning point moment so that the character cannot bend



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any further. Rather, they break at their breaking point so they can reassemble the shards of who they are. In Story Grid, we talk about the glasses through which your character sees her world literally having to be shattered. Only then can the character see their world more clearly and better adapt to their circumstances and change.

"Dynamic Characters" – Assignment

[00:28:44] Now you know that having a character that changes or evolves makes a dynamic character in your lyrics. They can either change for the better, like in “I’d Do Anything for Love” by Meat Loaf or “Love Yourself” by Justin Bieber, OR their worldview is shattered to such an extent that they are left completely disillusioned like in “Hero of War” by Rage Against.

To apply what we’ve learned in this episode, In particular, I want you to think about:

- Who was your character once, and how have they changed?
- What crossroad moment forced them to change or made them change their worldview?
- How is your character responsible for the dilemma they are facing?
- How is their change related to the ONE problem, challenge, or obstacle they have to deal with?

Thanks so much for listening to the Stories in Songs podcast. If you want to support me, please leave a star rating or review to help me spread the concept of the power of storytelling in songwriting.

Join me next time when I tell you all about the concert of My Chemical Romance that I’ve been to in Prague, and what that taught me about [How You Can Crush It As A Support Act - The Do’s and Don’t’s!](#)

Until then, bis bald und auf Wiedersehen.
Melanie

Show Notes

- I’d Do Anything for Love (But I Won’t Do That) lyrics © Edward B Marks Music Company, Marks Edward B. Music Corp., Edward B. Marks Music Co.



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- I'd Come for You lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group, Warner Chappell Music, Inc
- Love Yourself lyrics © Universal Music Corp., Bieber Time Publishing, Hipgnosis Songs Fund Limited
- "Ain't No Other Man" by Christina Aguilera - Three Lyric Writing Mistakes That Could Cost You Your Audience's Engagement
<https://storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-011>
- Crucial Components of Narrative Songwriting
<https://storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-021/>
- 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/>
- 3 Ways to Develop your Song's Character by Looking at Internal Content Genres
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