EPISODE 037

Attention Grabbing Opening Lines – Part 1 – The Powerful Problem

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[00:00:00] Hi, this is Melanie from Stories in Songs - Writing the Lyrics.

Today, we start a mini-series of episodes that all deal with one question: How can we write an attention-grabbing opening line so that we can hook our listener with our first line?

And we should talk about that. Because in today's age of thousands of distractions that all compete for our audience's attention, if our song doesn't hook our listener straight away, they might not listen to it at all.

But we want to get heard, right?

Songs are a powerful way to make an impact on someone – in as little as three minutes. But in order to get our message across or what we have to say about life, we have to get people's attention right from the first line on. Otherwise, … it's like with a movie. If we miss the beginning, it's so hard to catch up on and we probably give up anyway.

So let's talk about ways to make sure our listeners actually want to listen to our lyrics … and how we can achieve that with our opening line.

Sound good? So let's get started.

TEASER

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The Purpose of a Strong Opening Line in Songs

[00:01:42] Attention spans are shorter than ever!

Distraction is our new best buddy, constantly poking us and saying: "Hey, check out this. / Look over here! / Get this! / Have you seen this? / Gosh, what happened here? / Isn't that…?"

Our buddy "D" (like Distraction) does not want us to miss out on anything. And as (s)caring as this might sound, he's actually opening the floodgates to the thousands of unimportant, mind-grabbing things that do not help us survive, thrive, or derive meaning. "D" leads us into a void of quick and endless entertainment – a state in which we don't accomplish anything. And once we get out of being driven over by millions of impressions, life has continued around us… and we weren't a part of it.

Multiple studies point to an overall decrease in the global attention span. And, of course, there's a correlation to an increase in the available material for consumption around us. And "D" knows about all of them.

Just look at how "D" already destroyed the music industry. Where have all the full-length LP records gone? In July 2020, Spotify's CEO stated that it is not enough for artists to release an album every 3-4 years. Now it's all about shorter and more frequent EPs or single releases because new music is available 24 hours a day. Because nowadays, everyone has the possibility, through modern technology and the internet, to release their music to a global audience. And "D" can't wait to show all those other songs to our audience. So our listeners don't just get overrun by the tornado of "Social Media" but also by the unstoppable flood of music and choices, and choices, and ARGHHHH, so many choices!

Those choices are why the average listener doesn't take the time to listen to an entire album. Heck, they don't even have any artist preferences anymore. Furthermore, "D" uses the powerhouses of social media platforms and their 10-15 second reels to give us more and more in less time. And now, when we look at our songs and the words we write, we need to be able to grab the attention of our audience and keep it focused on us.
That means: We have to fight that "son-of-a-post" "D" with all possible means.

How?

You better rely on the strongest power humans know and let it work for you: Storytelling. And by that, I don't mean you start with the description of the surroundings like "It was a dark and

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stormy night and the rain kept pouring… bla bla bla" NO! Instead, you throw your audience into an unfolding event.

As the amazing Sheila Davis says in her book "The Craft of Lyric Writing": "*Your lyric must quickly do two things: make contact with your listener and then make him want to hear more.*"

HOW? Well, here it is:

We want people to listen to our songs. So we need to take our toolbox and find some duck tape to shut up "D". We need to find the tools that will protect our listeners from their flashing, attention-seeking buddy "D".

We need to help them stay with our song. Because – if they take the time to listen to our music and words – we can have a positive impact on them by giving them a message that is good, beautiful, and meaningful. A message worth more than billions of funny, fluffing cat videos.

So even though there are many different ways to write the first lines of a song, there are nine different ways that work best to grab the audience's attention and kick "D" butt!

And in today's episode, we start with the first possibility to create an attention-grabbing opening line. We start with the Powerful Problem which is by far an incredibly strong way that helps you catch your audience's attention, hook them, make them relate, and keep them engaged from the first word to the last.

The Opening Line of the Powerful Problem

[00:06:00] What's the one thing people can't hear about enough?
Yes, other people's problems.

Somehow, we are so invested in hearing about how other people struggle that we totally forget about our own. We want to hear about those problems, even if it's just gossip, because – at a level – we are so glad it's not our problem. At the same time, hearing about those problems lets us know that we are not alone in this world. Other people struggle as well. No one has a perfect life. Everyone goes through hardship and pain, suffers, and tries to find a way to deal with things that want to ruin our lives or attempt to give us a bad day, week, or even a year. Listening to those problems is not just the desire for a thrill where we can't get hurt ourselves. It's about relating to other people and, through that, relating to ourselves and finding the strength to face the things we rather look away from.

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It's self-therapy to listen to other people's problems. Sometimes, we can also take something meaningful away and apply it to our own life. And one of the quickest ways to learn from other people's problems is by listening to song lyrics.

By the way, addressing a problem in the opening lines is by far the most used narrative tactic to hook and engage the audience.

Just look at this example: If a song starts like "Your hair smells like midnight roses over at the Golden Bay"... well, that's great for those two lovebirds, but most of your audience won't be able to relate or even be interested in that kind of perfect love story. Perfect is, like our buddy "D" (distraction), another friend who constantly sticks the mirror in our face and tells us how great everything around us is, just not us. So, to hell with "P" and his shiny, sparkling world of everything's "OHHH SO PERFECT." We rather get down in the mud and into the real world. Hence, an opening line like "Another day at Golden Bay, another heart just thrown away." will much more likely catch our attention because we sense "PROBLEM ALERT". And we want to hear more about this. After all, we can all relate to heartache – much more than the perfect love story that almost every time hits us with another bump in the road. So bring it on: heartache.

And just like this, problems – be it heartache, pain, loss, whatever that cuts real deep and presents itself like giant insuperable obstacles – hook us because they show what real life truly is: an ongoing struggle that makes the good so much more desirable and meaningful.

To bring this argument home (that starting the lyrics with addressing a problem is a powerful way to grab someone's attention), just look at one of the most amazing TV Series theme songs of all time: "I'll Be There For You" by The Rembrandts.

> *"So no one told you life was gonna be this way*
> *Your job's a joke, you're broke*
> *Your love life's DOA*
> *It's like you're always stuck in second gear*
> *When it hasn't been your day, your week, your month*
> *Or even your year, but…"*

And then the chorus starts with the uplifting part: No matter what happens, "I'll Be There For You". That's such a positive takeaway. That's something we want to believe in. We want to have a friend like this – one we can always count on. But we will only get that far into the song because the opening line hooked us and grabbed our attention. Somehow we could relate to that first line that life turned out differently than expected. The other lines color the problem, and even though there are many possible problems mentioned, one of them will

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surely hit the present state of most of the listeners. And once again, they are even more invested in keeping listening to the song. Because, after all, (and that's the most important part when you start your song with a problem): People want to hear about how that problem is solved. And preferably, it should be solved in a way that is HELPFUL to the listener.

How to pull off the attention-grabbing opening line of the Powerful Problem.

[00:10:24] To successfully use this tool to grab your listener's attention, there are a couple of different ways you can put it to use. In general, just addressing something that is wrong concerning the character's situation or their internal state is an almost failsafe way to use this tool. But here are some more examples of what you can do when using the first-line technique of the Powerful Problem:

- Address a **negative feeling or emotion** which raises the question in the audience's mind: What happened? Why do they feel like this?
  - "At first I was <u>afraid</u>, I was <u>petrified</u>" – 'I Will Survive' by Gloria Gaynor
- Include **colors** that represent negative emotions.
  - "All the leaves are brown / And the sky is grey." –'California Dreamin' by The Mamas & The Papas
- Address something that someone was **told** or what they **believed,** and it turned out to be wrong
  - "I <u>thought </u>love was only true in fairy tales" – 'I'm A Believer' by The Monkees
  - "So no one <u>told </u>you life was gonna be this way" – 'I'll Be There for You' by The Rembrandts
- Say what someone **used to** do that they, unfortunately, can't do anymore.
  - "A long, long time ago / I can still remember how / That music used to make me smile..." – 'American Pie' by Don McLean
- Use **negations** (can't, don't, won't, doesn't, …) that show that things aren't right
  - "Loving you isn't the right thing to do" – 'Go Your Own Way (HQ)' by Fleetwood Mac
- Tell about something tha**t someone did to** the song's character.
  - "I've been <u>cheated by you</u> since I don't know when – 'Mamma Mia' by ABBA
  - "I would have given you all of my heart, but there's <u>someone who's torn it apart</u>" – 'The First Cut is The Deepest' by Sheryl Crow
- Start with a **mistake** the song's main character made.
  - "Maybe I didn't treat you Quite as good as I should" – 'Always on My Mind' by Pet Shop Boys

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- Use **words** that signal to the audience that something is wrong: death, shadow, darkness, end, used to, hurt, pain, trouble, lonely, lost, empty, would have… but / if only …,

Song Examples that have lyrics that start with a problem:

[00:14:41] Let's name some more song examples that start with a powerful problem.

1. "As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death / I take a look at my life and realize there's not much left..." – 'Gangsta's Paradise' by Coolio feat. L.V.
2. "I hurt myself today / To see if I still feel / I focus on the pain / The only thing that's real..." – 'Hurt' by Nine Inch Nails
3. "When I find myself in times of trouble" – 'Let it Be' by the Beatles
4. "Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away" – 'Yesterday' by The Beatles
5. "I walk a lonely road, the only one that I have ever known" – 'Boulevard Of Broken Dreams' by Green Day
6. "Just before our love got lost" – 'A Case of You' by Joni Mitchell
7. "I used to think that I could not go on" – 'I Believe I Can Fly' by R. Kelly
8. "Another turning point, a fork stuck in the road" – 'Good Riddance / Time of Your Life' by Green Day
9. "Coming up beyond belief On this coronary thief" – 'Special K' by Placebo
10. "I want to know who ever told you I was letting go?" – 'Swear It Again' by Westlife
11. "Shadows fill an empty heart As love is fading" – 'What About Now' by Daughtry
12. "Strumming my pain with his fingers" – 'Killing Me Softly With His Song' by Fugees
13. "For all the times that you rain on my parade" – 'Love Yourself' by Justin Bieber
14. "If I should stay, I would only be in your way" – 'I will always love you' by Whitney Houston
15. "Today is gonna be the day that they're gonna throw it back to you" – 'Wonderwall' by Oasis
16. "I want to run, I want to hide, I want to tear down these walls that hold me inside" – 'Where the streets have no name' by U2
17. "My heart is low" – 'A Womans heart' by Elanor McEvoy & Mary Black
18. "I'm staring out into the night, trying to hide the pain" – 'Home' by Daughtry
19. "There ain't no gold in this river That I've been washin' my hands in forever" – 'Easy On Me' by Adele
20. "I see a red door and I want it painted black." – 'Paint It Black' by Rolling Stones

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The Powerful Problem - Wrapup

[00:23:45] People love to hear about other people's problems. That's like a magnet to get their attention. So if you start your lyrics by addressing the problem, make sure to solve that problem in a helpful way in order to provide a positive takeaway for your audience.

You can use the powerful problem as an attention-grabbing opening line by

- Address a **negative feeling or emotion** which raises the question in the audience's mind: What happened? Why do they feel like this?
- Include **colors** that represent negative emotions.
- Address something that someone was **told** or what they **believed,** and it turned out to be wrong
- Say what someone **used to** do that they, unfortunately, can't do anymore.
- Use **negations** (can't, don't, won't, doesn't, …) that show that things aren't right
- Tell about something tha**t someone did to** the song's character.
- Start with a **mistake** the song's main character made.
- Use **words** that signal to the audience that something is wrong: death, shadow, darkness, end, used to, hurt, pain, trouble, lonely, lost, empty, would have… but / if only …,

And now, you can go and start writing your own lyric that starts with a powerful problem.

If you still wonder why a problem is so powerful – not only as an opening line – but also how it can help you to figure out what's relevant in your lyrics – listen to the previous episode of the Stories in Songs Podcast. In it, we talk about how a specific problem helps you to know which lyric lines and ideas to keep or throw out. That's episode 36 of the Stories in Songs Podcast.

Lastly, if you liked this episode, please leave a rating and review. This helps me spread the word about the power of storytelling in lyric writing and helps me figure out what to create for you to help you write amazing lyrics.

With that said, see you next week.

Bye, bye Melanie

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Show Notes

- I'll Be There for You lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group
- Knowing Which Lyric Lines & Ideas To Keep Or Throw Out – How To Answer The Question Of Relevancy: https://storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-036

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