

EPISODE 043

What You Have to Say Matters... and How To Make it Matter to Others

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

In today's episode, I want to talk with you about you, your purpose, and why we write lyrics.

For me, when it comes to writing – no matter if it's novels or lyrics – I use my words as the means to communicate with my audience and deliver a meaningful message that has the power to make an impact on them.

And I guess, since you are here, you have the same desire. You want to be heard because you have something to say about life. And what you have to say matters.

But communicating what we have to say in a way that matters to others isn't easy. We can't be preaching to the choir. We can't take the role of a parent and say: Don't do this because it leads to ... We all know that no one listens if you preach it to them. On the other hand, if we are direct and say it bluntly, people might hear our words, but they will not care or take them seriously. We could also just write an academic paper and explain why our message is important ... But who's ever going to read that bulky volume?

That's why in today's episode, we talk about a storytelling principle that helps you deliver your message in a way that affects lives, changes minds, touches hearts, and makes an impact.

Because what it all comes down to is that we, as songwriters, lyricists, and storytellers, have an amazing power to influence people's lives and make a positive, even life-changing, contribution.

But that only works if we rely on one of the most basic and most important storytelling principles.



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What that is, well, you're about to find out.

TEASER

Treat A Song Like An Experience

[00:02:25] Before we start, let me throw this question at you:

What is it you want to achieve with your lyrics?

What experience do you want to create for your listeners?

Do you want to create an uplifting experience that makes them appreciate life or love or something particular in life? Do you want to show them that they're not alone? Do you want to give them a place to feel safe with their emotions? Or help them express something they just can't find the words for themselves?

Maybe you want to shatter how they see the world to help them change their lives for the better? And perhaps you want to wrap your lyrics into an entertaining listening experience that keeps your audience listening from the first line to the last?

All noble goals, but before you can write lyrics with that wonderful power, we should discuss one foundational storytelling principle.

If you are new to this podcast, you might wonder what storytelling has to do with writing lyrics. Maybe you don't aim for narrative songwriting. That's okay.

When we talk about storytelling, think about the craft, not a full long-form story per sé.

As writers, no matter what kind, we aim to tell stories or narratives that have the power to make a lasting impact on our audience. And that's our goal as songwriters as well. We want to hook our audience and connect with them. And the only way that's even possible is by using the craft of storytelling – because that craft doesn't only belong to the world of books and movies.

For example, that fundamental structure of story that we're talking about in today's episode works across every medium – be it an epic fantasy story, literary masterpieces, novels, jokes, or even songs!



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So what is that fundamental structure of every narrative that works called?

It's the Five Commandments of Storytelling.

And in this episode, and the ones that will follow, you learn what those five commandments of storytelling are and how they work together to create a cohesive and compelling arc to deliver a meaningful message ... which means to be able to communicate what matters to you in a way that it will matter to others too.

The origin of those five commandments can be found in psychological research and the analysis of stories that have stood the test of time. The commandments have gained popularity through extensive studies and further exploration within the Story Grid.

But again, we will talk about that storytelling principle in how it applies to writing lyrics.

If you are ready, this skill will help you communicate what matters to your audience – in a way that makes them want to listen to you.

And besides, it will also help you make your writing more effective and impactful.

Why Stories Matter

[00:05:29] Before we talk about each of those five commandments, I wanna rewind and talk with you about why it's so important to us to get heard and get our message across.

Because only if you have that inner drive to make an impact on someone's life will you actually care about HOW you can truly achieve this. And we will get to that in a minute, but since our role as the songwriter or lyricist is so important, I want to take the time and talk about why that is.

When we write lyrics, we do that because either we, as the singer or someone else, shall sing those lines to an audience. That means we want our lines communicated to an audience as a song. So the content of the lyrics is what we have to say. And if we treat our lyrics with the care they deserve, we know they are the means to impact someone's life. After all, as artists, we have something to say about life – and our lyrics are how we pass that message on to our audiences, maybe even long after we've moved on to greener pastures.

Some people say that stories in lyrics are dead.



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If that was true, why has “Welcome to the Black Parade” by My Chemical Romance become an anthem for an entire generation? A song that millions of people listen to over and over again? That song tells a fully-worked-out story that is so well-constructed.

Every time I listen to that song, I follow the song line-by-line, following the song’s character’s journey of discovering the truth about himself and finally being able to truly become the Savior of the Broken, the Beaten, and the Damned.

So why do we listen to songs over and over again?

Using the craft of Storytelling has the power to hook and engage your audience, captivate them, evoke emotions, and provide a meaningful takeaway. Storytelling is a powerful way to deliver a message people usually block out.

Because, at its core, narratives help us survive, thrive, or derive meaning in this world. That’s why we listen because they can help us.

And great songwriters understand the impact the power of storytelling has on the audience.

I mean, humans have been telling stories for thousands of years. And it’s not just because it was a cheap form of entertainment, but because stories capture the human condition. They are the easiest way to relate to others. They once helped us to survive by teaching us how to slay a mammoth or avoid the saber tooth-tiger. But now, they help us on every level with our universal human needs – no matter if it’s aimed at helping us survive, find safety, love, esteem, or even help us grow as a person.

So without story, our lives would be less rich and scarier. Stories allow us to make sense of the world and pass on wisdom. Without well-crafted and meaningful stories, the wisdom of ages will follow the footsteps of cassette tapes, CDs, and 8-track tapes.

But vinyl is a whole different story. The vinyl story still compels its customers because it captures the love and devotion people have for its richness and depth. Playing records is an experience, and vinyl gives people a unique and compelling experience. It’s the story of how you found the record, your turntable, the artwork.

So again, stories matter.

And if we have something to say that matters, we wrap it in a story. That’s how we deliver a message that people pay attention to. It’s like a form of persuasion. Persuasion works best



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when you convince the audience they've decided to change on their own. That's the power of story.

And if we want to achieve that, we have to spin a tale that people will believe. We need to make it personal and compelling by allowing the listener to use their imagination. Our imagination follows stories and puts us in the main character's shoes — their problems, ideas, and goals become ours.

And a song has a main character or protagonist too. And when we give that character a goal, the audience starts to care about them... when we address a problem, they identify with them. They connect with that character and are willing to follow them on their journey. And we watch how they face obstacles and dilemmas and grow and change.

Along the way, the listener changes too.

Because once we identify or connect with the song's character, we experience the narrative at a different, more intimate level. And we learn the core message on our own. No one needs to preach it to us. We get to the big takeaway all by ourselves.

And the beauty of storytelling is that they speak to everyone. It's a human thing. And songs that harness the power of storytelling are the ones that capture the audience's attention, engage them, connect with them, and deliver a meaningful message.

But poorly written songs don't impact us because we miss the experience.

And so, to write powerful lyrics that can change people's lives, we have to rely on the fundamental principle that makes a story work: The five Commandments of Storytelling.

The Five Commandments of Storytelling

[00:11:12] Now, to start with how we define the Five Commandments of Storytelling, let me provide you with the definition by the Story Grid.

"Every effective story has five critical components that work together to communicate a message in a way that bypasses [...] critical minds to touch [their audiences] hearts and change their worldviews.

These components are the Five Commandments of Storytelling. The Five Commandments ensure that your story resonates with your [audience] to communicate the message you want to convey. The Five Commandments



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accomplish this because they simulate psychological patterns that people use to solve problems and process change, and they follow patterns found in stories that have stood the test of time.”

As you can see from this definition, we need the 5 Commandments of Storytelling to communicate our message. Because if we have something to say that matters, and we want that it matters to other people as well, using the five commandments as a storytelling tool is the way to accomplish that.

Now, let's talk a little more about the message we want to communicate in our songs. That message is like the lesson of the song's narrative. It's the seed the listener will take away from the narrative, and it will grow in their minds until it may even change how they see the world.

But of course, we can't write the lyrics if we don't know what we have to say.

That's why we should be clear about what message we want our listeners to take away from our song. So firstly, we have to decide if we'll tell a prescriptive or cautionary tale. Shall the narrative end on a positive or negative note? Will the lyric's narrative move from a good place to a bad one or one that's even better? Or will it move from bad to worse, or bad to good?

And that valence is also included in the song itself. When you look at the music, think of it as not only playing one note but going up and down on the scale to have contrast. In lyric writing, you either wanna go up or go down from the external or internal situation of your song's character.

So there's change involved. And the lyrics' message is made up of the narrative's value shift – that change or valence shift – and the actions of our song's main character – because our character's action is the reason for that positive or negative outcome.

We will talk about that character's action when we talk more about each of those commandments. But, for now, that action refers to a character's decision after they had hit a turning point that threw them into a dilemma where they had to make a binary choice.

And again, their decision which is shown in their action, leads to an outcome that shows the change from their initial external and/or internal situation. So, either their situation changes and/or the way they see the world.



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In the upcoming episodes of the 5-Commandment series, we'll focus on pinpointing those moments that matter the most to communicate our message. And how we can evaluate the character's action to be able to decide if the lyrics carry a prescriptive or cautionary message.

Because when it comes down to it, the message is expressed through those five commandments. They help us communicate what matters to us. And to do that, we have to break down our message into those five pieces that will create the arc of our lyrics' narrative – and the change in our character's situation or worldview occurs over that arc.

And this, again, forms the message of our lyrics – or what we have to say. And it's presented in a way that will matter to others because they have experienced it with our song's character, so that takeaway through the presented outcome is much more meaningful and impactful.

Wrap up - 5 Commandments

[00:15:16] So, the five commandments of storytelling are an important concept when it comes to what you have to say. They are the foundational principle of stories or call them the five vital requirements of a narrative that works.

In short, those five commandments are:

1. The inciting incident
2. the turning point progressive complication
3. the crisis
4. the climax
5. and the resolution

And we have talked about those commandments before. But I think it's time to dive deeper and really talk about each of those in more detail since they play such an important part in communicating not only your character's external or internal journey but also communicating your message in the most effective and impactful way.

Those five commandments make all the difference. Especially when we put them into practice and incorporate them into our writing, we level up our craft right away.

They are really that important.



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Because they ensure that there's a meaningful change happening in your lyric's narrative and that can be clearly seen between your narrative's beginning and end.

And that's again, how we communicate what we have to say in a way that it starts to matter to other people too.

So I hope you can see that the Five Commandments of Storytelling aren't just a valuable tool for novelists. They are as important for lyricists because they help you write powerful lyrics. They are the key to communicating your message to your audience so that they are interested and willing to listen.

In the upcoming episodes, we'll talk about each commandment, how you can use it, and what options you have, and we'll work with many song examples that will accompany us through our five commandments study.

At the end of that five-commandment series, you'll be able to take your listeners through an amazing journey in your lyrics – a journey that will make a lasting impact on them.

So if you don't want to miss out on any upcoming episodes, subscribe to the Stories in Songs Podcast.

Thank you
Melanie

Show Notes

- The Five Commandments of Storytelling:
<https://store.storygrid.com/product/five-commandments-storytelling/>



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