

EPISODE 044

Throwing Someone's Life Out Of Balance – Waypoint #1: The Inciting Incident

See the show notes at storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-044

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

You know, I always consider what happens in a powerful lyric like a journey.

It's basically about watching a character move from one point in their life to another.

They are in a certain external or internal situation, and they wanna get from where they are to a better place.

Maybe they feel really low and wanna feel better.

Maybe they've just met someone and want more.

Maybe they're in pain, and want to get rid of it.

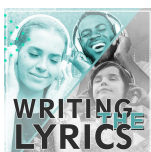
Or maybe they simply strive towards more pleasure.

So there's always this little journey that the song's main character goes on.

But before anyone moves in life and takes action, most of the time though, something must happen beforehand.

Something causes the character in the song to start their quest – no matter if it's big or small.

And that's what today's episode is all about.



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It's about that incident that makes them see that they gotta pursue what they want so that they can get rid of an imbalance.

It's like they feel that something is off and they're pulled towards something better — externally or internally.

And you know... we talked about communicating what matters to us in a way so that it matters to others as well.

And what we talk about today... that's the first thing we need.

It's the first waypoint on our character's journey from getting where they are to where they wanna go.

So, if you want to find out how to write lyrics with a meaningful message, then stay tuned.

This is for you.

TEASER

5 Commandments

[00:01:37] If you've listened to the last episode, you've heard me talking about the 5 commandments of storytelling.

And I know: *Hey, we wanna write lyrics.*

I don't just wanna write country songs and be a storyteller.

I totally get you.

But this concept — those 5 commandments of storytelling — they impact the power of the lyrics much more than anyone could probably guess.

So stay with me here, okay?

I admit, five commandments of storytelling sounds very strict.



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So let's just call them our five waypoints to take our audience with us onto our song's main character's journey.

And there should be a journey – big or small – in your lyrics.

Because only if the lyrics progress and move from one place to another ... especially when it comes to your song's main character's external or internal situation ... only then can the audience witness a change.

That's either a shift in their external circumstances.

Or they transform as a person – for better or worse.

And only when we have that shift can the song deliver a message.

Without that change ... everything would stay the same.

It would be as the song started ... and that's boring.

There's no meaningful message that we can take away from lyrics that don't progress.

That's why we have those 5 waypoints.

Because they help us create that change so that we can communicate what matters to us in a way so that it matters to our audience as well.

Okay, that's why those waypoints are so important.

Definition of the Inciting Incident

[00:03:54] Alright, so let's continue with the first one.

It's the Inciting Incident.

This is the event that kicks off the journey of your song's main character.

It's the thing that puts the events of the lyric's narrative

into motion



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While drawing your audience into the flow of the narrative.

Basically, what that inciting incident is... it's like a ball of chaos that spins into your song's main character's life and throws it completely out of whack.

Suddenly, they see pain... or they see something they lack.

Or they see how their life could be better.

So that creates a goal state for them, right?

They suddenly see what they could have.

And they wanna get it.

Because if they don't, this thing... that thing that threw their life out of balance...

It's uncomfortable.

They wanna move away from it.

They wanna either ignore it... or just head straight towards what they want.

Otherwise... it's like there's this enormous problem and it weighs down on them.

But here's the thing... that problem... they don't even recognize it's true nature.

They think if they just do this or that, they have it solved.

But they don't know what's behind that problem.

That ball of chaos ... you know... that spun into their life.

That's made up of two forces.

It's creation and destruction in one.

It's a paradox, right?

But here's the thing...



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It's up to the song's main character to metabolize that potential.

They can either use it for destruction or creation.

It depends on how they identify its true nature.

For example, let's look at the song "I Will Survive" by Gloria Gaynor.

I've talked about this one before, but the lyrics are a masterpiece so that's why it's worth studying them.

So in "I Will Survive", the inciting incident is the breakup of the relationship, right?

Suddenly the need for love and human connection has been taken away from our song's main character.

And that's a problem, right?

They lost something.

And worse than this... they now feel afraid and petrified... because they somehow have to deal with that new situation of experiencing heartbreak.

So that breakup is the inciting incident.

And it's that ball of chaos that spun into the character's life.

And chaos is made up of the force of destruction and creation.

But is destruction bad and creation good?

Can we really say that one is better than the other?

Well, let's look at what the character in "I Will Survive" does to deal with that problem.

At first, she almost falls apart, right?

And we know... if she would have continued down that path, it would have ended in her own destruction.



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And that would have been bad, yes.

And the song wouldn't be empowering at all, but really depressing.

So what happened instead?

The character in the song made a choice.

She grew stronger.

She chose to re-create herself and become a better version of herself.

But she also chose destruction.

Because as that man shows up again with that sad look upon his face, she threw him out.

So she destroyed the relationship she could have had again with that man.

But she also knows... if she wouldn't have gotten rid of him... another relationship with him would have destroyed her.

So she chose herself.

And burning the bridges with him.

And that's something inspiring and empowering for anyone who ever might be in a similar situation.

Sometimes, we need to destroy things in order to create something new.

Like the phoenix rising from the ashes, right?

So that's what the inciting incident is.

It's like the break up in Gaynor's song, it's something unexpected that spins like a ball of chaos into the song's main character's life and throws it completely out of balance.

And it shows them a pain they should move away from or a pleasure they could move towards to.



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It gives them a goal state.

Because there's this external or internal imbalance in that character's life.

And they wanna get back to how it was when that need wasn't that strong ... or present at all.

Creating Drive in the Audience

[00:08:31] And here's something pretty cool.

The inciting incident doesn't only create drive in the song's main character.

That means when they suddenly see what could be better or what they lack.

It also creates a drive in the audience.

They see the inciting incident happen to your character and they wanna stick around to find out what happens as a result of that event.

So you can also see it like this:

The inciting incident is a promise to discover how it all turns out.

And I always say, starting the song with a powerful problem is an awesome way To hook and engage your audience, and make them relate.

If you want to find out more about starting the lyric's first lines with a powerful problem., listen to episode [37 of the Stories in Songs - Writing the Lyrics Podcast](#).

Causal and Coincidental Inciting Incidents

[00:09:29] Now if you want to create an inciting incident in your lyrics, there are two types of inciting incidents.



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The first one is a **causal** inciting incident.

A causal inciting incident simply refers to an action of another character.

For instance, in the song 'Hot Legs' by Rod Stewart, he sings

"Who's that knockin' on my door?"

That's causal because another character is responsible for that action.

Another example is the line:

"I guess this time you're really leaving. I heard your suitcase say goodbye!"

That's from the song: 'I'll Be There For You' by Jon Bon Jovi

But it's also possible that the inciting incident is **coincidental**.

A coincidental inciting incident arises out of random, chaotic chance.

It's like the weather patterns, or something happens due to natural causes like someone dying of a heart attack.

So coincidental inciting incidents are not the result of anyone's actions.

For example, the song 'Werewolves of London' by Warren Zevon starts with a coincidence.

"I saw a werewolf with a Chinese menu in his hand..."

Or it's

"When the moon hits your eye like a big Pizza pie, that's Amore"

Like Dean Martin sings in his song: 'That's Amore'.

Because we can't plan to fall in love. It just happens.



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Placement of the Inciting Incident

[00:11:03] And lastly, I quickly wanna let you know where you can place this first waypoint in your lyric structure.

First off, you can start with the first waypoint of your song's main character's journey right in the first line or in the first verse.

That's an **immediate** placement.

It's a very chronological approach.

It's like in Gloria Gaynor's song "I Will Survive".

It immediately starts with the breakup.

But it's also possible that you **delay** the inciting incident.

That means the first part of the lyrics could be about how the character's situation is NOW in contrast to how it used to be.

And when you refer to how it used to be, you can include the inciting incident that set everything in motion.

So maybe you mention the inciting incident in the second verse?

In the song "Stan" by Eminem, the song starts with the chorus.

My tea's gone cold, I'm wondering why

I Got out of bed at all

So that's the beginning of the song.

It's in the middle of when things are happening.

And the inciting incident has a delayed appearance in the second verse.

It's when Stan writes another letter to Slim.



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And he says:

*Remember when we met in Denver,
you said if I'd write you
you would write back*

So that's a delayed inciting incident because we had to go through one and a half verses before we found out what happened initially.

Or look at the song "The **Foundations of Decay**" by My Chemical Romance.

In the first verse, we get introduced to the song's main character in the here and now.

They sing:

*See the man who stands upon the hill
He dreams of all the battles won*

But only when we get to the second verse, we hear about the incident that shaped his life:

He was there the day the towers fell

And lastly, it's also possible to leave out the inciting incident completely.

This is no excuse for not having one.

As the writer of the lyrics, you should know what has caused your character's situation.

But you don't necessarily have to include it.

The audience must be able to guess, though, what it could have been.

Like in the song "I'm A Believer" by the Monkees.

We don't know what happened to him again. It's not stated.



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But we can assume it was another failed relationship.

Or look at the song “**Boulevard of Broken Dreams**” by Green Day.

We don’t know why that character is out there.

But that’s where they are right now.

And everyone can put their own two cents in ... but when I had that song on repeat, it was because I was all alone on one entire continent where I didn’t know anyone.

For you, it might be different.

So sometimes the audience can fill in that inciting incident with something that happened in their own life.

Outro

[00:13:53] So that’s the inciting incident — that’s the first waypoint of our song’s main character’s journey.

It’s the event that sets everything in motion.

It creates drive in the character and in the audience.

Because when feeling that imbalance that was caused by the ball of chaos ... it’s normal that we want to correct that imbalance.

That’s what gets us moving, right?

So I hope you enjoyed this episode.

I will see you next week!



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Show Notes

- [#37 - Attention Grabbing Opening Lines - Part 1: The Powerful Problem](#)
- Hot Legs lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC
- That's Amore lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC
- I Will Survive lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group
- The Foundations of Decay lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC
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