



Song Dynamics: Are You Creating a Roller Coaster Or a Freight Train?



by Alex Forbes for CreativeSongwriter.com

“Suck ‘em In, Build ‘em Up, Pay em Off!”

In my years as a professional songwriter, I’ve noticed that it’s almost always the most dynamic, thrill-ride-type songs that become the most successful. Why? I think it’s because all of us, even listeners who’ve “heard it all before,” want to be moved, emotionally, spiritually and physically. We want to be transformed for the better, preferably in the next 3 minutes. And our bodies, minds and hearts respond most strongly to well crafted lead-ups and payoffs, dramatic highs and lows, and unexpected twists and turns.

Sure, a little bit of predictability is fine — in fact it’s rather comforting — but to be effective a great song has to deliver some real punch, too. If you want to create “singles” rather than “album cuts,” consciously strive to keep your listeners’ blood pumping.

So, how can you increase your song’s “thrill factor”? What follows are descriptions of several tricks of the trade that will enhance the dynamics of your song. For the sake of brevity, let’s assume you’re writing a song in the classic Verse/Chorus form. Many of these guidelines apply equally to AAA and AABA songs as well, but by definition both of these simpler forms lack the sustained adrenaline rush that a full Chorus provides. And besides, 95% of the new songs out there making a buck are written in the Verse/Chorus form.

Part I: Creating Powerful Lyrical Dynamics

The First 60 Seconds of the Ride

A skilled lyricist has dozens of tools available to magnify a song’s dynamic peaks and valleys. Starting with the first few lines of Verse 1, your purpose is to “suck ‘em in” and “build ‘em up.” I compare this to the part of the roller coaster ride where you pull away from the platform, then start inching up the first steep incline. In your song, this is where you set the scene, quickly establishing a bit of the Who, What, When, Where and Why. How can you make your listeners sit up, fasten their seat belts and hold onto their hats? Consider these elements:

- **The speaker’s point of view or perspective.** Is he or she angry, euphoric, defiant, yearning, wise? A strong point of view is much more compelling than a wishy-washy one. Therefore, dare to take a courageous stand that’s clear and palpable from the very first lines. No pussyfooting about.
- **The speaker/listener relationship.** Who’s speaking to whom? Am “I” addressing “you,” are

“we” addressing a larger “you,” or is the singer speaking in the third person about “them”? Make the strongest possible choice that suits your original spark of inspiration. Also, let us know right off the bat what it is about the nature of this particular relationship that makes it remotely interesting. What’s in it for us, as listeners?

- **The tone and mood.** Is your song’s tone formal, slangy, conversational, arty? Is the mood you’re evoking edgy, soothing, romantic, anthemic... or something else entirely? Again, don’t hold back! Wimpy is much less likely to hold anyone’s attention than bold, so take some risks.
- **Reveal who YOU are.** This is often the most challenging aspect of songwriting — that it requires that you actually delve beneath all cliches, all of your fondest influences, in fact, the rest of the known world, and “show us some leg.” The best songs lay their writers’ uhhh, hindquarters, on the line, proudly and unreservedly. Are you willing to do the same?
- **The song’s organizing principle.** Is it a story song, a “laundry list” song, a novelty song, a “state of being” song? Do your first few lines establish your song’s essential nature? Does each successive line add momentum and deepen listeners’ curiosity?
- **Your use of literary devices.** Have you used **repetition, imagery, alliteration, metaphor, wordplay, symbols, humor** and more to enhance and amplify your meaning? A great lyric doesn’t just plod along, it makes your case in the most colorful, exciting way, like a star defense lawyer presenting an opening statement to the jury. Force us to see it, feel it, taste it, touch it... you know the drill.
- **Rhythm, rhyme and meter.** Have you made the most of the rhythms and sounds inherent in our great language, using vowel and consonant, accents and metric patterns to enhance your meaning? Experiment with a variety of line lengths to force your melodies into unpredictable shapes. Definitely tend towards rhyme schemes that are NOT a-a-b-b or a-b-c-b, intentionally tossing in lines that don’t rhyme at all, or that rhyme within the line instead of just at the end. Avoid those same-old-same-old boxy, patterns that we’ve all heard way too many times.

Form-wise, you’ll generally start off with a single Verse, an A-Verse and a B-Verse, or a Verse followed by a Pre-Chorus. No matter which structure you choose, by less than a minute into your song listeners should know where the singer stands, what’s going on, and why they should care. People’s attention spans are notoriously short (and getting shorter!) so keep it lean and meaningful, editing out any excess verbiage.

Well-constructed Verses create what I call “the inevitability of the Chorus.” They’re brimming with tension, unanswered questions, and heightened expectations. Ideally, your listeners are invested in the outcome, sitting on the edge of their proverbial seats, yearning for the moment when you “pay ‘em off” with your Chorus.

“Ahhh, the Payoff at Last!”

A great Chorus delivers a breathtaking thrill of intense gratification. After the lead-up of a well-written Verse, the Chorus feels inevitable, yet not predictable. Weigh these elements of your Chorus, to see if it’s got the goods:

- **Clarity of your song's message.** Your moment of truth has arrived, so don't squander it. Work to discover the strongest possible way to convey your song's deepest conviction. To continue the roller coaster metaphor, make this first peak moment steep enough and dramatic enough to take their breath away.
- **The song's Hook.** Have you condensed the essence of your song into a diamond-like nugget of lyrical truth? Does it effectively provoke thought, emotion, laughter, or spiritual uplift? A great Hook unifies the mind, the body, and the heart in one really short, sharp shock of recognition. It's like universal shorthand, capturing a uniquely human experience in a few brief words.
- **The level of "stickiness."** Is your Chorus like gum on your shoe? Is the lyric singable and simple, pithy without being ponderous? Ask yourself, "Does my Chorus, and especially my Hook, contain enough substance to bear repeating?" Because a killer Chorus will be repeated endlessly through the ages!
- **Level of contrast with the Verse.** As the Country song says, "How can I miss you if you won't go away?" Bend over backwards to amplify the contrast between your songs' sections, using different rhythms and rhyme schemes, lyrical densities and line lengths, patterns and styles of repetition, types of sentences (declarative, narrative, questions, commands), etc. Otherwise your listeners will get that sinking "been there, done that" feeling.

"What Next?!" Vs. "So What?"

After this initial peak moment, the energy level will usually ease up somewhat in Verse 2, but give your listeners lots of reasons not to wander off. This is equivalent to the part of the roller coaster ride after that first big drop when you catch your breath and pick up speed for the next hill. Keep your song's momentum going strong by advancing the story, upping the ante, and otherwise deepening people's insight into the situation you're exploring. As one music business person put it, your listeners are either going to be saying, "What next?!" or "So what?" I know which one I'd prefer...

Whether or not to write a Bridge, which will traditionally appear after your second Chorus, is a common dilemma. The purpose of a Bridge, lyrically, is to provide one last zinger — a final insight, twist, revelation, or perhaps another memorable sub-hook. So if you're going to go for it, create a very different pattern and shape from what came before. If you feel you've already said all there is to say, try taking a snippet of your earlier lyric and repeating it as a chant, breaking down the instrumentation that surrounds it, or letting the singer cut loose on it.

Whatever you do, the Bridge needs to provide enough contrast to the second Chorus to maximize the impact of the Out-Chorus when it comes back in. It's that part of the roller coaster ride where you suddenly go upside down, or take an unexpected sharp left, just before you go flying over the last few hills and come flying in to a stop.

Part II: Creating Melodic Dynamics

Building a Marriage That Cannot Be Torn Asunder

If the purpose of your song is to sear a fresh idea indelibly into the hearts and souls of your listeners,

a killer melody has the power to really make it stick. Whereas your lyrical lines hit people above the neck, the right lyric married up with the right melody hits 'em more in the gut. It's this one-two punch that gives songwriting the potential to move people to laugh, cry, dance, act and feel.

For my money, the best melodies, like the best lyrics, are the most manipulative ones — and I mean that in the most positive sense of the word. A successful melody unfolds like a great short story, packing a lot of action into a brief span of time, and delivering a valuable realization by the end. So the question becomes this: how can you “suck 'em in, build 'em up and pay 'em off” most effectively with your melody, alone and as it works in combination with your lyric.

For the sake of simplicity, let's imagine that you already have a near-completed lyric in a Verse/Chorus form, and are experimenting with finding the best melody for it. The first step is to dive deeply into your lyric, letting it permeate your innards. Then turn on your recording device, quick!

- **Let the lyric tell you what it wants.** Is it begging to be a soaring ballad, an edgy rock track, or maybe a groove-oriented dance or R&B song? Every spark of inspiration has, at its core, a strong identity, and our job as songwriters is to honor and serve that unique expression.
- **Speak the lyrics out loud.** I know it feels silly, but this is a great way to notice where the natural accents, pauses and internal rhythms occur. Try underlining words, circling rhymes, and putting accents on the page to indicate strong accents or rhythmic patterns. Indicate which lines might bear repeating.
- **Which do you write first, the Chorus or the Verse?** Either... just start somewhere! The key to writing better melodies is writing lots of melodies, and the more risks you take, the more likely you are to hit upon a melody that marries up perfectly with your lyric. So try 100 ideas on for size, knowing that soon you'll narrow it down to the best ones. Trust that you'll have an
- **Establish “home base” right off the bat.** Use your first few notes to carve out some melodic territory, i.e. what key you're in, and what scales or families of notes you're choosing from. Let the lyrics point you in the right direction, but don't be afraid to play against expectations by putting a “happy” lyrical line against the notes of a minor chord, for example.
- **Play with contrasting melodic shapes.** Many of us get one great melodic or rhythmical idea, then repeat it *ad nauseum* for the entire 3 minutes of our song. Instead, mix it up, using longer and shorter phrases, more complex and simpler passages, wordier and sparser patterns. Also, don't start every single line of every section either before, on or after the downbeat. Notice that most hits vary this type of patterning over the course of the song.
- **Experiment with new methods of melody-writing.** Many of us automatically pick up a guitar or sit down at a keyboard to write, but the trick is to not fall into your usual melodic or chordal ruts, or historically well-worn patterns. Bust out of your comfort zone by writing *a capella*, limiting yourself to a single finger, and/or co-writing with someone who has different strengths. Or pick up a new instrument! (Kazoo, anyone?)

In terms of thematic development, the moment you string a few notes together you'll usually be off

and running. Once you've found a melody that suits the meaning and rhythmic/rhyme schemes of your first few lines, the question becomes this: How can you keep the ride exciting, unpredictable and yet still accessible? How can you build on what you've started, eventually bringing your song to a climactic, emotional payoff?

The trick is to use enough repetition to make your melody catchy, while adding enough "new information" to keep it from becoming boring. If there's too much new information, listeners will just tune out, overwhelmed. So it becomes a balancing act, and your instincts really come into play. The mind and the body both love repetitive patterns, so it's a matter of making up a stimulating variety of patterns, and arranging them in the most satisfying order.

Also, contrast is key. As with your lyrical sections, make each melodic section distinct, or people will feel that they're treading water. Here are some ways to juice up your melody:

- **Seek out the best melodic marriage for each line.** Don't settle for a melody that simply "reads" your lyric as if it's a grocery list. Instead, use your melody to wring meaning out of every syllable, every silence, every rhythmic nuance in each line. What unexplored opportunities is your lyric giving you? Don't settle for the first melody that pops out of your mouth... unless it's absolutely knocking your socks off.
- **Decide what's most important, and emphasize it.** Use every trick in the book to drive home your main points. Make your best line or your Hook stand out by using a killer high note, a rhythmic jolt, a surge of repetition, an unexpected melodic twist, or all of the above!
- **Create drama using tension, release and resolution.** Once you've established your musical "home base," use your Verse melody, and the Pre-Chorus if you have one, to ratchet up the tension, which you'll finally release in your Chorus. Don't give away the store too soon.
- **Use melodic range for effect.** For example, place your Verse melody lower in the singer's register, with closer intervals, saving the "money note" for the Chorus. On a similar note (as it were), vary the melodic intervals you use. For example, your Verses might use closer intervals, whereas your Chorus might take bolder, larger leaps up or down.
- **Vary your note lengths and rests.** Don't get into a rut of making each syllable last 1 beat, for example. And give listeners ample time to absorb new melodic information by inserting a "pause that refreshes." These are also great spots to insert instrumental riffs and hooks. As you did with your lyric, make sure your melody keeps listeners on the edge of their seats wondering what will happen next.

I could go on, but "writing about music is like dancing about architecture," as someone once said.

Finally, keep in mind that all the craft and polish in the world won't make up for the absence of "heart" and inspiration! So keep digging inside for those gems, and then go to town!