



# Off the Hook

## HOW TO BUILD A SONG

BY CHERIE YURCO

■ Many of us have a song inside our heads, whether it's just a vague idea, a memorable hook, a catchy melody, or the whole package. No matter if you are starting from scratch or writing words for a particular tune, this article offers tips on lyric writing.

Begin by thinking of lyric writing as a three-step process: inspiration, writing, and revision. In the earliest stage you should get in touch with your creative side, abandon all rules, and write whatever pops into your head. There is no structure at this point, only ideas.

Eventually, you will add structure to your ideas. Many successful songs use the alternating verse-chorus form. You may want to start your first songs by following this simple structure. Here are some more tips:

### 1) Don't be too specific.

If you leave room for a listener interpretation of your lyrics, more people will be able to relate to your song.

### 2) Stick to simple structure.

To get a better feel for song structure, listen to your favorite songs and try to determine their structure. Use the list of basic song parts on the following page as a guide. Then, practice putting your own words to the music.

### 3) Be yourself.

Write about what you know and believe in. If you are stuck for ideas, ask yourself these questions: How do I feel? How is my love life? What do I want? What don't I want? What is something new I've learned or experienced? What are my favorite memories? What do I want to tell the world? Once you find your inspiration, don't be afraid to change it and embellish it!

### 4) Carry a songwriting notebook everywhere you go.

Keep your creativity turned on constantly by thinking about how people speak—the words they use, the cadence and rhythm of conversations, the emotional state of people around you, and how they and your surroundings make you feel. Jot your thoughts and song ideas down in the notebook.

### 5) Remember that it isn't like writing a story.

You don't have to, and shouldn't, include too much detail. There doesn't have to be a clear beginning and end, either. It's okay to leave the listener wondering what happened.

### 6) Don't rhyme for the sake of rhyming.

Though rhyming may make your song smooth and easier to remember, rhyming just for the sake of rhyming can be difficult and dangerous. You could get stuck at a dead end pretty quickly, or worse yet, take your song in a direction you never intended. At least at the beginning, consider not trying to rhyme, at least not all of the time. As alternatives, repeat a sound or vowel instead, rhyme every couple lines, or use *slant* rhyming, where words end with the same letter or sound.

## Here are some basic parts of songs:

**INTRO:** A good intro catches a person's attention. It is often instrumental with a slower tempo than the rest of the song.

**VERSE:** The verses build up the tension of the song and fill in details of the song's message or story. One or more verses usually precede the chorus. Typical rock songs have two or three verses, which sound alike, but have different words.

**REFRAIN:** The refrain is a line that is repeated at the end of each verse.

**PRE-CHORUS:** The pre-chorus is optional. It ramps the song up for the chorus. A pre-chorus may contain a chord progression from either the verse or the chorus.

**CHORUS:** The chorus contains the hook, or most memorable part of the song. It is usually the most simple part of the song and contains the song's central message or theme and offers a solution or relieves tension that builds in the verses. Generally speaking, the chorus is repeated at least once.

**BRIDGE:** An optional transition, the bridge happens once, replacing one of the verses in the verse-chorus form. It may introduce a new musical theme and often happens near the end, between the second and third chorus. It can be an instrumental break with no lyrics.

**SOLO:** A single performer's part comes to the forefront and the rest of the band will drop out or play softer. Sometimes it is included as part of the bridge.

**BREAKDOWN:** A breakdown adds dynamic range to a song. It can be the same as the verse or chorus, but with less instrumentation. Sometimes the breakdown is used to turn down the energy level of a song, just before it is boosted way up.

**EXTRO (OR CODA):** This final part of the song is often an instrumental version of the hook. Sometimes it is slowed down or the final chord is held.

FOR MORE ON MUSICAL STRUCTURE, SEE THE SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2010 ISSUE OF *MAKING MUSIC* AND THE ARTICLE "A FORMAL AFFAIR, GETTING DOWN TO THE BARE BONES OF MUSIC."

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