

THE LAST WORD

The story song – where literature and music meet

The songwriter takes on an enormously difficult task; presenting the emotional depth of a concept that might normally require volumes to communicate, in the process condensing it into a mere couple of hundred words and a catchy tune. Unlike the poet, the songwriter stretches beyond



JON CHANDLER

the realm of words, matching lyric poetry with compelling melody, allowing the listener to experience what has been described as true magic.

The story song is a unique pairing of melodic and literary elements that serves to create an aural experience that is, by degrees, meaningful, wistful, wise and often lovely. Story songs can be categorized as the shortest of short stories but can be as emotionally striking as any words on paper. Utilizing lyrics to convey literary concepts while adding a melody that fits the emotion and construction of words is both challenging and rarely successful.

But when such components are blended properly, songs like “Eleanor Rigby,” “Ode to Billy Joe” and thousands of others are the result.

The story song has long been America’s music, from African-American slaves using their unique instruments and tragic experience to create striking, mournful ballads to the minstrels and cowboys crooning “Old Dan Tucker.” The 20th Century provided fertile ground for story songwriters, with World War I echoing through songs like “My Buddy,” and the Great Depression and World War II eras producing incredible musical stories of America from writers as diverse as Woody Guthrie and Johnny Mercer. The advent of mass media provided a world-wide stage.

Over recent decades, the story song has become the staple of Americana Music, the amalgam of folk, roots,

country, Western, blues and jazz.

Like all writing, songwriting is an exercise in pure concentration. It is inspiration leading to action and is a very pure form of creativity. When a melody or lyric line strikes, the writer is immediately off to work before it’s forgotten. The result can be thrilling.

Inspiration is fickle, and each song has its unique challenges and rewards. Of course, the story song begins with the ever- and over-asked question: Do you write the music or the words first? The answer is “yes.” Some songs are written subject to a musical phrase, while others begin as a lyric line that begs to be hummed. Each path is equally valid.

Constructing a song is subject to few rules, but songwriting is a perfectionist’s craft. If a line bothers the writer in any way, it’s not right. If the concept the writer is attempting to communicate doesn’t quite fit the rhyme or meter that has been chosen, it’s not going to work.

Which brings up a few suggestions.

Never finish a line with a suspect word or term just to make it rhyme. It’s apparent to the listener.

Delve deep into the emotion of the moment. Work with the lyrics until they perfectly describe the song’s concept. Revise, revise, revise.

Once in a blue moon, a song is written in an hour. One is never written in 10 minutes – or at least a good one – and some will take months or even years. Be patient.

Write visually. Let the listener see the protagonist. Remember what she looked like at a certain moment. As Adam Duritz of Counting Crows says in “A Long December”: “All at once you look across a crowded room/and see the way the light attaches to a girl.”

The story song can be viewed as a short and powerful book. It’s written subject to the same creative processes and can have an equally powerful effect. It is indeed magic in a bottle, and few creative endeavors rival its passionate impact.

Oh, and you can dance to it.

