

Such a song can have a richness that is like hidden gold in what seems at first to be river mud. You have to go prospecting.

There are good and bad commercial songs, as well as good and bad artistic songs. The two are not mutually exclusive. We are not talking about a rigid divide but degrees of emphasis. As a songwriter, where you place yourself between those poles is up to you. It may change from time to time, from project to project. As you gain experience as a songwriter you learn how a particular artistic choice will take a song in one direction or the other, and so be able to adjust accordingly. The important thing is to be aware of these competing pulls. For a variety of reasons, *The Songwriting Sourcebook* leans toward song techniques that will help you write songs that fit some of the expectations of the commercial popular song: brevity, immediacy, repetition, hooks. It focuses on well-known ways of building a song from recognizable sections.

THE STRUCTURE OF SONGS: FILLING THE MOULD

The Songwriting Sourcebook provides information about two essential parts of songwriting: chord sequences and the moulds into which those sequences are put, namely song sections. In most popular music, a song has three main sections: the verse, the chorus and the bridge.

The chorus

The chorus is the most important section. It is usually the most memorable element in the song. It is the part the audience will remember the longest and enjoy singing the most. It is often the part of the song where the dominant emotion is strongest. If the song makes a statement of some kind, this is where you will find it. The success of a commercial song usually rests on its chorus. If you have ideas for two chord sequences, the stronger one should become the chorus, provided it isn't too long or complicated. There is a tendency for choruses to simplify musically to achieve greater focus.

The verse

The verse is the section that leads to a chorus or joins choruses together. It often maps out the territory. If the chorus is the house, the verse is the plot of land on which it's built. A good verse not only holds interest in its own right but prepares for the chorus, both lyrically and musically. It may describe a situation so the chorus can comment on it. A verse may say, in a love song, that X is in love with Y but Y is in love with Z. In the chorus X will declare his position: that he will pursue Y or walk away.

The bridge

As James Brown cried in 'Sex Machine', "Shall I take it to the bridge?" Most songwriters feel that once you have had two verses and two choruses, it is time for something new. The function of the bridge is to contrast with the verse and the chorus, to introduce new musical content, to take the song somewhere else. For the lyric, this is a chance to imagine an alternative to the events and emotions previously described. Various musical devices, such as different chords or a key change, can enhance this sense of contrast. In some songs the bridge will lead straight to the final chorus. The bridge is also known as the "middle eight" – because it comes in the middle of the song and is often eight bars long. A bridge can be complemented or replaced by an

12 The Songwriting Sourcebook

instrumental solo. The solo could be the bridge itself, or it could come before or after the bridge. A more complex song structure might have a bridge and later on a solo over the same chords.

Verse, chorus and bridge are the three *primary* sections of a song. If a songwriter gets these right, the rest of the song will usually fall into place. Often the first ideas a songwriter has will become a verse or chorus. Songs also have what might be termed *secondary* parts. These include the intro, the outro (coda), the prechorus, short link passages and possibly solo sections.

The intro

Although a song could begin at bar 1 of a verse or chorus, most have some kind of introduction. The intro's job is to set the scene. It signals to the listener what type of song to expect. It establishes the dynamics (loud to soft), the tempo (fast to slow), the beat (4/4, waltz, shuffle, etc), the instrumentation, the key and most important of all the atmosphere – much of which depends on the initial harmony. Major chords will provide an upbeat intro; minor chords will evoke unhappiness or loss. A clutch of sevenths might give the intro a jazzy or bluesy feel (see Section 7).

The link

If a song moved straight from verse to chorus and back to verse, it might sound too hurried. Without pauses in the melody and lyric, a song could seem “gabbled”. The link creates breathing space for both singer and listener. Links are often short – four bars – and are usually instrumental. They can recycle a chord sequence from another part of the song, such as the verse or intro. They can be given extra interest by placing instrumental hooks in them, such as a guitar riff or a memorable melodic figure played on another instrument.

The prechorus

Sometimes a verse has two sections. The first part is lyrically different (and possibly musically altered) each time a verse comes round, but the second part remains the same. This is a prechorus. A prechorus is a powerful way of signalling that the song is heading for the chorus, because the same words heard before chorus 1 are the ones heard before chorus 2. It is like sending the message: hold on, the chorus is coming. A good prechorus can be something of a hook in itself.

The outro (coda)

This covers everything after the last chorus, assuming that the song doesn't just repeat the last chorus and fade. A variation on this is to repeat the basic structure of the chorus but simplify it in some way. For example, you could play a solo over the chorus's chord sequence while the singer ad libs. A coda may also have a new sequence, which might suggest that the situation described in the song has now been changed in some way. If the intro is recycled as the coda, the song will possess a strong circularity; this can be satisfying if it fits the lyric. Always remember to consider if the theme of your lyric might imply one structure more than others.

These are the basic elements of song structure. They are the moulds into which harmony is poured. So now to those chord sequences ... and perhaps your first song.