

Songwriting to Tell a Story

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Introduction

- Course focus: Lyrics for SCA-appropriate original songs. Intended for songwriters with limited to moderate experience.
- Your Mileage May Vary™. Use the guidelines that work for you, break “rules” when the song calls for it.

Songwriting as distinguished from poetry

- Poetry—words read as speech. Songs—words sung to a tune
- Choice of tune controls the way the words are delivered—tempo, phrasing, space for breaths
- Music adds emotion—less emotional descriptive required
- Rhyme more critical for songs than poetry
 - Helps the singer’s memory
 - Helps the audience catch crucial words
 - Reason bards wrote in verse and song before widespread literacy

Why write songs?

- Songs are short (this is a big plus!)
- Songs keep their shape—you and others will perform exactly what you wrote
- Forces conciseness and hard choices
- Boils the story down to essentials
- Challenge is like an escape artist
 - Self-imposed shackles—melody, rhythm, rhyme scheme
 - High degree of difficulty to do well—audiences recognize and reward this

Engaging and keeping the audience

First principles:

- Crowd-pleasing, “tight” song
- For most SCA venues, *under 5 minutes* (including intro)
- *Clarity and efficiency* in storytelling
- Grab the audience’s attention, and *do not let go!*

Draw the audience into the story—you *must avoid*:

- Confusion—struggling to follow words, logic, context, theme
- Boredom—stretches without surprise, suspense, emotion, new action
- Distraction—clunky or “clever” lines at the expense of the story
- Fatigue—the piece is just too long

Brevity: 3-5 minutes—be considerate of:

- The audience’s attention span
- The performer’s preparation time, voice, and endurance (often you!)
- Other performers waiting for a turn

Song structure

- Most songs divided between verses and choruses/refrains
- Measuring song length in “verses”—meaning one time from verse through chorus (40-60 seconds):
 - Modern popular song, commonly 3 verses with a “bridge” after the second
 - Scadian song, “rule of thumb” is 4 or 5 verses with no bridge
- Break your story out, 1 part per section (example: Intro, complication, rising action, climax)
- Choruses:
 - Often the same set of lines repeated after each verse
 - Allows the audience to join in, gives a breather from the action
 - May stop story moving, consumes limited time, pulls focus?
 - Alternative: “working chorus” continues/counterpoints action—key words, rhymes, or images repeated

Finding a story

- Story that evokes feeling/has something universal—funny, sad, hopeful, angry, inspired
- Scadian life, mundane life, news—strong emotional trigger—could be a song!
- Think of a story framing, jot it down, pull it out when you're ready
- Great Scadian practice—retell existing story—maybe change culture or perspective
- Listen to your muse. Try things out. Muscles strengthen with practice

Telling a story

- Story perspectives:
 - Third person (“*She* swam the river”)—traditional, provides distance
 - First person (“*I* swam the river”)—powerful, immediate, less common in period
 - Second person (“*You* swam the river”)—seldom used, can be effective
- Songwriting modes:
 - Narrative mode (telling a story)—storytelling songs often use this mode, but don't *have* to
 - Lyric (expressing feelings)—monologue mode, often first person
 - Dramatic (delivering a message to a character)—evokes (can be!) dialogue, often first person
- Consistency in person and mode prevents confusion.
- Conscious shift (i.e., during chorus) can add interest

Songwriting process

Preparation—You may wish to:

- Get the tune first—gives you structure and tone—you can always rewrite it later
- Outline your story, plan the verse/chorus sequence
- Jot down lines, rhymes, theme or “message”
- Working from sources? Take time—weeks or months—to absorb them in before starting
- Have more story detail than there's room for—it won't all fit, but it will add richness

Completing the first draft:

- “Hooks”—memorable phrases, good-sounding, nail the “point”. Make songs sticky
- Don't have to start at the beginning—leave space for what's missing
- Things may shift from outline—adapt, keep what works
- Drop out details as you go—which ones are necessary?
- Tune, clever wordplay, rhymes, or images may fill story gaps
- Ambiguity: Lyrics can be mysterious—don't need to explain everything
- Goal: Finished draft—doesn't have to be perfect

Polishing:

- Sing to yourself, repeatedly. Remove obstacles—change words that make you stumble
- Test audience (friends or family you trust). Ask for honest feedback—resist being defensive
- Rhymes:
 - “True” rhymes (same sound ending) clearer than “near” rhymes—not mandatory
 - Complex rhymes add interest
 - If cleaning up language or story messes up rhymes, find new ones
- Scansion:
 - A song “scans” well if words and stresses fit the meter cleanly
 - Fix scansion as you polish—song sounds better and is easier to follow
- “Yoda speak”—inverted phrases for rhyme or period sound—gets distracting. Simplify language
- Change or rewrite your tune if you need to. Maybe that changes line length—could make a better song

Other Resources:

- Lisa Theriot, “So You Want to Write a Song” <http://www.ravenboymusic.com/so-you-want-to-write-a-song>
- Isolde de Lengadoc, “Period Songs” www.fileden.com/files/2010/1/24/2736963/Period%20Songs.pdf
- “Understanding and Writing Lyrics” <http://www.soundonsound.com/sos/dec00/articles/lyric.asp>
- “24 Lyric Writing Tips.” <http://www.musicradar.com/tuition/guitars/24-lyric-writing-tips-131050>

The Bastard's Tale © 2004 by Eric Schragger

In the village I hail from a man met a maid,
He was caught by her unblemished face.
He professed her his love and she flushed and she smiled
And she took him into her embrace.

But the man was a noble of lofty degree
And his duty soon called him to home.
When he told her the truth on the night that he left
She confessed she had news of her own.

He gave her a bastard! They said,
For worthy she wasn't to wife.
The blood of my childbirth left her with a stain
That she wore for the rest of her life. *(Repeat last 2 lines)*

So when I was a boy, she would try to explain
Why it was we were always alone.
As I grew into manhood, it harder became
To find ways to keep flesh on our bones.

As my mother grew weak, I worked hard every day
On my strength and my speed and my blade.
When she fell ill, I knocked upon door after door
Seeking pay in an honest man's trade.

Nay, you worthless bastard! I heard.
They all saw that villainous brand.
My blood boiled within me that I be denied
For a thing in which I had no hand. *(Repeat last 2 lines)*

I found other employment to which I was suited—
No pride, but the payment was...good.
So my mother's last days knew a doctor and comfort;
I buried her as a son should.

'Twas a few weeks ago that I spied a young man
In the clothing and manner well-born,
But the badge on his coat was one I'd heard described
And his face, it was much like my own.

Gods, stand up for bastards! I prayed.
Protect me, and I'll make you smile.
His blood is no thicker than mine at the source
And the color we'll know in a while. *(Repeat last 2 lines)*

Now the deed, it's been done with professional skill,
And I don't care if I've been fate's pawn;
For my father knows now he has only one heir:
Here I am, on the gallows at dawn.

Think you I'm a bastard? I ask.
Your answer I know in advance.
The river can't separate your blood from mine;
That is done on the rocks we call chance. *(Repeat last 2 lines)*