Songwriting Cheatsheet

If you study the charts, you’ll realize that great pop songs are not accidents, and they are too plentiful to be the products of so-called “inspiration”. Pop songwriting is a craft that can be learned and applied with practice. I’d like to share what I’ve learned over the years from both my own writing and conversations with many professional songwriters. Hopefully you can apply these tips to your own songs!

The elements of a great pop song are as follows:

1. **Song Structure**

Great songs start with a great structure. While there are several popular structures used in pop music today, what they all have in common is that they provide a balance between repetition and presenting new information. A great song structure is designed to keep giving your listener something new, but also provide them with enough familiarity to keep them engaged.

Let’s first define the typical sections, or parts of a pop song:

**Verse:**

Tells the story – answers “who, what where, when and why?”. Lyrics usually change from verse to verse, while the melody usually stays the same (though it is sometimes embellished upon slightly with each passing verse).
Pre-chorus (or “the climb”):

Functions to build energy and lead the listener into the chorus.

Chorus:

Sums up the message of the song – answers the question “so what?”. Contains the song’s “hook”. Lyrics and melody usually stay the same in each chorus.

Bridge:

Provides lyrical and melodic contrast – usually by offering a different point of view or perspective (something we haven't heard before). Also provides a reason for leading the listener back to the final chorus.

This brings us to the most common song structure used today:

**Verse --> Chorus --> Verse --> Chorus --> Bridge --> Chorus**

It's easy to see why this structure is the most common. It provides a perfect balance between new information (the verses) and the familiarity of the chorus. And just when things might get a bit monotonous, the addition of a bridge provides the contrast needed to mix things up. But we still end with the familiarity of the chorus. Brilliant. If you're new to songwriting and haven't tried writing to a specific structure, try it out!

2. Melody

In pop music, melody is everything. Writing a good melody isn't difficult, but here are a few things to keep in mind:
Keep it simple:

The simpler your melody is, the easier it is to remember. If your melody is too complicated, it will alienate your listeners. I often ask songwriters the question – could a preschooler sing this thing? If not, make it simpler. Here are some tips to help simplify your melodies:

Use stepwise motion:

Most pop melodies are comprised almost entirely of stepwise motion (meaning the space between each note is primarily a whole step or less). Most melodies rarely leap more than a major third. When writing a melody, try to limit yourself to mostly stepwise motion - this will make the melody easier to sing along to (and easier to remember).

Limit range:

The range (musical distance between the lowest and highest note) of a typical pop song’s melody is just over an octave. Try to limit the range of your song's melody - this will make it easier to sing along to (and also easier for the artist to sing, as most pop singers have a limited register in which they sound their best).

Tessitura:

This is perhaps the most important parameter you can manipulate with regards to your melody. Tessitura refers to the highness or lowness of a melody. Writing a melody that is higher in a singer's range will cause them to sing with more INTENSITY, vocal strain, and energy - while a lower melody will sound more reserved.

The trick to manipulating tessitura comes when you pair it with song structure. A great melody mirrors the arc and energy of a song – often by
being lower in tessitura in the verses, rising slightly (perhaps by a third or fifth) during the pre-chorus, and then hitting the top of its range in the chorus. It’s no surprise that most melodies reach their highest pitch in the chorus – it’s where the song needs the most energy! By manipulating the tessitura of your melody, you can literally “add” emotion where it is needed the most.

Note stability:

Without getting into music theory too heavily, it’s important to know that certain notes in a given key will feel more stable than others. What I mean is that certain notes give the listener a sense of resolution, while certain notes make the listener sit on edge – thinking that there is more to come.

The tonic (the “1” of a key – aka the note “A” in A major) and the dominant (the “5” of a key – aka the note E in A major) are more stable than any other notes. Use this to your advantage when writing your melody – try to save the tonic for the chorus if you can. Chorus melodies often end with the tonic as well. Why? Because the tonic provides the strongest sense of resolution and completion – as should the end of your chorus!

Rhythm:

The rhythm of your melody can serve to provide additional contrast between various parts of your song. If your verse melody includes lots of short choppy phrases, try constructing a melody for your chorus that has a few long, connected phrases. The same goes for where your phrases begin. If your verse phrases begin primarily on offbeats, try constructing a chorus melody where each phrase begins on the downbeat. The downbeat of “1” is the strongest and most “grounded” place to begin a phrase – if you this place for your chorus, it will feel more “grounded” and stronger than anywhere else in your song (which is exactly what you want!).
3. Harmonic Underpinning

Let's talk about the chords that sit under your melody and the rhythm at which they change. Choosing the right chords and the rate at which they change can help strengthen your melody and propel your song.

Chord stability:

Remember when I mentioned that certain notes in a key sound more stable than others? The same goes for chords. Let's say I'm writing a song in the key of C. The chord built off the tonic (the I chord, or C major) is going to feel the most stable – so it would be wise to save this for the chorus. The V chord (G major in the key of C) wants to resolve to the I chord (called a cadence), so I might stick this chord at the end of the pre-chorus (so that it leads the listener right into the beginning of the chorus, where I've stuck the I chord). Chances are you're doing many of things naturally already, but becoming aware of why you're making these choices will allow you to manipulate them when necessary.

Picking the right chords can serve to strengthen your melody by supporting moments of tension, and providing release when necessary. If each section of your song starts on the same chord, try switching things up a bit. If you haven't already, try experimenting with different chords over the same melody!

Harmonic acceleration/deceleration:

What we're talking about here is literally the rate at which the chords change. Chords that change at a faster rate have more energy in comparison to chords that change at a slower rate. Using this knowledge, we can accelerate the rate at which the chords change during parts that need more energy (hint: the chorus), and decelerate during times that don't
(the verses).

A perfect example is the song “Grenade”, by Bruno Mars. The verse progression shifts between Dm and Am at 2 bars intervals. During the last two bars of the verse, the chords accelerate - they switch every bar. The chorus is based upon the progression [Dm, Bb, F, C] – but the chords shift….wait…could it be? EVERY 2 beats! The chords are moving faster than they are in the verse - we've harmonically accelerated! And what’s the result? The chorus feels like it's moving faster, and with more energy. It's no surprise that most pop songs harmonically accelerate during the chorus, as doing so adds energy and INTENSITY to the part of the song that needs it the most. Bridges often harmonically decelerate in comparison to the chorus (to provide contrast, as they are usually sandwiched between two choruses).

4. Lyrics

Good lyrics are an important part of any pop song – and good lyric writing is easier than it seems. Here are some tips:

Can you sum it up?

You should be able to sum up the entire message of your song in one short phrase. Try it with any pop song on the charts right now, and then try it with your own music. For example, “Someone Like You” by Adele could be summed up with this phrase: “You left me, but I still love you”. If you can’t sum up your song with one simple phrase, you’re trying to incorporate too many ideas, or your idea isn’t clear enough. Keep it simple.

Instead of abstract lyrics, paint a picture with sensory details.

Great lyrics paint a picture for the listener by providing a wealth of sensory detail that describes a story (tell us the who, what, where, when, and why).
Your lyrics should be simple and unfold like a story – you'll alienate your listeners if your lyrics are too abstract.

**Make every line count:**

A song is too short for filler – thus, every line in your song’s lyrics should serve a function (develop the story, drive your main idea, provide contrast, etc…). Take out phrases that are repetitive, and words like “just” and “really”.

**Title (and title placement)**

When choosing a song title, pick something original and unique – not something that's been overused a thousand times. Take a look at the song titles of this week's top 10 country hits for some great examples:

1. Keep Me in Mind
2. Let It Rain
3. Drink In My Hand
4. Tattoos On This Town
5. Easy
6. I Don’t Want This Night To End
7. You
8. All Your Life
9. We Owned The Night
10. Reality

With the exception of #7 (and maybe #5), every title on that list makes me want to listen to the song.

The titles of most pop songs almost always appear in their lyrics – usually at the beginning or end of their choruses. The title is often the song’s “hook” – which is usually the first or last line in the chorus. Listeners expect
to hear the song's title in these places – if your song’s title isn't clearly evident after listening to it, how will they find it and buy it?

More Resources:

Here are two great books I highly recommend for anyone looking to dive deeper into understanding the craft of songwriting:

- John Braheny - The Craft and Business of Songwriting
- Sheila Davis – The Craft of Lyric Writing

For more music-making tips and tricks, visit BehindTheSpeakers.com.
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