

Song Structure Handout

Working with parameters

It is our experience that some writers resist the notion of writing within a structure on the grounds that it makes them feel like they're writing "mechanically." We would urge you not to feel that way. Unless, of course, you find *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* "mechanical." Or all the songs of Richard Rodgers. Or, for that matter, the compositions of Stephen Sondheim, Kander & Ebb, Jason Robert Brown, etc., etc. Just because these writers have crafted their songs until they rhyme perfectly, or just because they've constructed it so it has maximum emotional impact, that does not cause their works to be "mechanical."

If you approach them correctly, parameters can actually guide you towards Inspiration, rather than prevent you from accessing it. The creative impulse drives a song. The craft is there to deliver its message. You want an audience to be able to receive the message you're hoping to convey. *Craft* assists them along the way. *Bad craft* hinders them.

Structure gives an audience some handles to hold onto; it allows them to listen more easily. The AABA structure, for instance, is designed to hook an audience in and hold them. Once they've heard a lyric in the first A, they hear it repeated in the second A, and then a third time in the final A. "Tell them what you're about to tell them; tell them; then tell them what you've told them."

There are plenty of song structures from which to choose, and each has its own special characteristics. Some structures are better suited for story-telling (AAA, for instance, because the "narration" isn't interrupted every verse with a refrain), some are better for emotional arcs (AABA and ABAC, especially). You should take every opportunity you can to study these structures and progressions, and write in them. Utilize their strengths. Thousands of writers have gone before you trying out many many different approaches, and undoubtedly you can contribute an approach of your own as well; but our point is that several structures have flourished because they're good at delivering messages to an audience in powerful ways. We urge you not to reject them as being traditional or mechanical. We urge you to embrace them as being vehicles to convey the vital message which is inside of you.