

WHAT IS SONGWRITING?

Many different answers. But the way I look at it: music is basically transcription of emotion. In the notes, you're writing down your feelings.

You might also be telling a story, like with prose fiction. You can write songs to do that, too. But unlike a short story or novel, a song can capture just an individual scene, a moment frozen in time. A thought. Prose fiction can do this with drabbles, but not everybody knows what those are; poetry does it all the time.

As in storytelling, you want to do, not say. Your singer is a character; your listener is a character. You're singing to them (Heather Alexander and Alexander James Adams, "March of Cambreadth"):

*Axes flash, broadsword swing,
Shining armour's piercing ring
Horses run with polished shield,
Fight those bastards 'till they yield
Midnight mare and blood red roan,
Fight to keep this land your own
Sound the horn and call the cry,
How many of them can we make die?!*

or you're expecting them to be your singer, to feel what your singer is feeling, and how they're feeling about someone or something else ("I'm a Slut," bis):

*Have I done something to upset you?
Was my dress a bit too see through?
Was it talking to that boy that I knew?
Don't you like my brand new hairdo?
You tell me I deserve this
'Cos I'm a slut and I provoke you
To do these things to me*

or react to what the implied *narrator* character is singing (Blur's "Country House").

*He lives in a house, a very big house in the country
He's got a fog in his chest so he needs a lot of rest in the country
He doesn't drink smoke laugh, takes herbal baths in the country
Says she's come to no harm on an animal farm in the country*

Or some mix. Folk in particular will have multiple characters and tell stories outright, but even then (Tam Lin, etc) there tends to be a an emphasis character, because somebody is singing.

EVERY TUNE HAS ALREADY BEEN WRITTEN

All we're doing is making shit up. Seriously. Make shit up. If you make something up and you don't like it, make something else up. Play a note, then play a second note. Don't like it? Try a different second note. If you end up making something somebody else made before, don't be embarrassed; change it.

The important thing to remember is that pretty much every sequence of notes has already been written by somebody already somewhere, sometime. There's 100,000 years of humans being around, and music has been around some large chunk of that. You are reinventing the wheel, but that's okay, because it's what you bring to it that matters.

NOTHING YOU DO ON PURPOSE IS WRONG

Whether other people like it is a different matter, but it's not *wrong*. It may not be what you want either, but that's okay. Try something different. Guess a lot. That's okay.

TRACE OTHER SONGS TO LEARN; FILL IN UNFILLED BITS TO LEARN

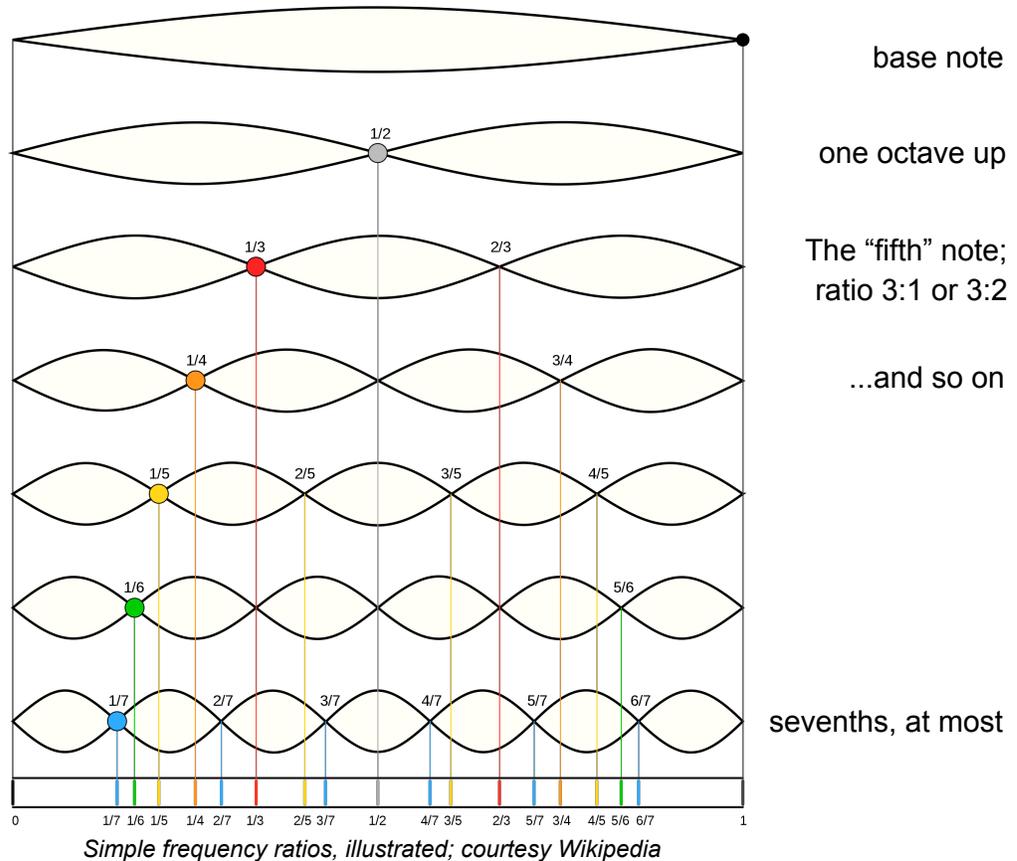
Artists trace all the time. It's a way of learning. Write new words for other songs, write new melodies for other words, take existing words and melodies and make your own chords and arrangements. It is okay to make new words to an existing song as a learning exercise - or as a final effort, as long as you're either an amateur or acknowledge and license as appropriate if a professional. Weird Al spends most of his musical life doing this. Folk has a long tradition of this; so does rap and hip-hop, where it's called mixtaping - you take someone else's beat and rap something new over it.

Changing words is like tracing, for songwriting. You learn from it.

Writing additional parts for existing songs is learning and creating as well. You have a song you like? Get your instrument or your voice and make a new part for your voice or instrument. Start by playing along with some part of the recording, then start to diverge until you find something you like.

WHAT ARE NOTES AND HARMONY?

- Notes are sound waves, which is to say, air (or other molecules) oscillating - vibrating - at a particular frequency.
- Each octave up is a doubling of that frequency. "A" below middle C is 220hz; A above middle C is 440hz. The air is vibrating twice as fast.
- A scale is a range of notes starting at one point and moving up to the next octave by frequency steps which form *simple ratios of their vibration frequency*. This is called *harmony*. A below middle C is 220hz; E above that is 330hz. 330 over 220 simplifies to 3:2, a very simple ratio. The brain likes simple ratios in hearing, which is why these combinations of notes sound good.



WHAT IS DISSONANCE?

- The more complex the ratio of frequencies, the more *dissonance* is introduced. Dissonance is complex ratios between frequencies, where the difference is still large enough to hear; they're more work for the brain to process, and this creates an emotional reaction. If you have A at 440hz from one instrument and A at 447hz from a second instrument, the second instrument will sound "sharp."
- From a practical standpoint, this is why B \flat and B don't sound very good together, particularly the entirety of the B \flat and B chords. B \flat below middle C is 233; B natural is 247. 233:247 is the simplest ratio - 233 is prime - which is quite complex. Your brain has a difficult time simplifying and abstracting this; the result is a feeling of dissonance.
- Dissonance is often used intentionally to evoke emotional reactions.

WHAT IS A KEY?

- The notes in a "key" are those notes whose frequencies, compared together, result in fairly simple ratios. The most complicated ratios you'll get in a key is 7ths.
- A piano keyboard has 13 notes between octaves, but only eight of them will form these simple ratios. All of them are needed to form the eight notes needed for all keys.
- Five of them will form *very* simple ratios. This is known as the pentatonic scale - penta, meaning five, tonic, meaning tones.

WHAT IS A CHORD?

- Chords are multiple notes from a key played at the same time. c+e+g = C major chord.
- Chords are “in a key” when they can be made with the limited set of notes which are included in that key. The F major chord is made of the notes f, a, and c, so F major is “in” any key that has all three of those notes. So F major is “in” the key of C major, F major, and Bb major, because the notes f, a, and c, are in all of those keys.
- It’s also in all the relative minors of those major keys, but we won’t talk about that for time. Further reading is recommended.
- That’s what it means when someone says a chord is “in” a key - all the notes that *chord* are found in the *key* the song is in. Basic chords have three notes; power chords are made of two notes; chords can be made of many notes, however.

WHAT IS RHYTHM?

Rhythm is counting with regularised emphasis and repetition. English has a natural rhythm.

ENGLISH HAS a NAT-ural RHYthm.

1 2 1 2 1 2 1 2

Emphasis placement can be really simple, like the above, or really complex. Up to you. The key element is repetition. Like with frequency ratios and notes, you’re playing with the brain’s abstraction and simplification engine. A beat you can “follow” is a beat your brain can parse and synch up to.

Generally, you don’t want fight word rhythm when writing your lyrics. Whatever your beat is, the strong moments of the beat should align with word emphasis.

For example - prepositions aren’t typically the important words in a phrase. Also, words have expected emphases. So if you find yourself singing:

IN Lon DON town THE sun DID rise

1 2 1 2 1 2 1 2

...you might want to try to figure out how to change either the beat, say, to a backbeat rather than a frontbeat:

In LON don TOWN the SUN did RISE

1 2 1 2 1 2 1 2

Or you could treat “in” as a pickup note, if that works:

In LON don TOWN the SUN did RISE

1 2 1 2 1 2 1 2

Or just reword it. It’s all up to you, because that’s what we’re all. we’re. doing. Remember:

It’s okay. Despite all the physics, you can’t get it wrong; we’re just making things up.