



SECTION A
Preparation

Chapter 1

Song Production: The Marriage Between Composition and Audio Production

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INTRODUCTION

If a song or composition of any kind is ever to be heard away from a live performance, it needs to be captured through some form of recording. By committing a composition to changes in magnetic flux or binary code, its recording will effectively set a composition in stone and represent it on the majority of occasions that it is heard. Regardless of whether you are approaching this book as a potential producer or a composer of some kind, the manner in which the process of production is married to the composition is therefore extremely important. A good marriage takes a bit of give and take and the relationship between a song and its production is no exception.

WHAT IS A SONG?

There are numerous ways of looking at exactly what a song is, especially when we see it in its role as part of a production process. For some it tends to be the starting point that kicks the process off, and for others, it's more intrinsically linked into the production process and emerges and evolves along with the sound and vibe of the track as it is built.

Regardless of the manner in which it appears, a song will always consist of several key ingredients. Whether it be conceived by an acoustic guitar-wielding singer/songwriter, a sampling enthusiast, or a combination of similar approaches, a song will always include elements of form, melody, harmony, rhythm and lyrics. The way these elements meet and marry up can vary considerably from writer to writer and producer to producer, but they will inevitably be required to gel to some degree at some point. If we look to a dictionary or encyclopedia for definitions of "song," we will invariably be presented with a definition such as this one from Grove Music.

... a piece of music for voice or voices, whether accompanied or unaccompanied

This is a very basic definition, but it has to be. The simple reason for this is that there are so many different kinds of song. They can be so vastly different that it almost seems unsophisticated to use the same word "song" to describe them all. A children's song, for example, is almost always going to be a huge distance from a Death Metal song with regard to its compositional makeup. Similarly, Hip-Hop and Folk songs tend to see very few things eye to eye, but nonetheless, a "piece of music for voice or voices, whether accompanied or unaccompanied" is classed as a song regardless of the genre that it falls within. The marriage of several key ingredients results in a compositional structure that transcends the class of genre and subculture, and it's these ingredients that give us the most obvious handle when it comes to getting hold of exactly what a song is. However, if we regard a song to be merely a combination of pitches, rhythms and sounds, we are missing something very important in what defines them. A song should not be defined purely by what it *is*. What it *does* is also of immense significance. Before we move on to look at the functional purpose of a song, a brief appreciation of each of its ingredients will be beneficial.

Melody

Regardless of the genre in which it resides, and the degree of effort that went into shaping it, a song's melody is a fundamentally important ingredient. This is because it is usually the part of the song that the listener will be able to get involved in most readily. It is often referred to as the "top line" in a song because it does effectively sit on "top" of most of the other ingredients and is easily accessible regardless of the extent of musical understanding possessed by the listener. Unless the range is way beyond physical limitation, it's likely that someone enjoying any given melody will have a stab at joining in from time to time. It's something that we humans just do. More often than not we feel more comfortable doing it behind closed doors, but getting involved in a song through participation tends to take place when we are enjoying what we are hearing. The melody provides the means to do just that.

It's fair to say that there are plenty of songs that have had a proportionally tiny amount of time spent on the construction of the melody compared to other ingredients. It's also fair to say that this fact has not hindered their success a great deal where the melody was never intended to be the focal point or the reason why the song exists. The "feel," or "vibe," lyrics, or ambient sonic qualities may have been the driving force behind a song's creation, and although these qualities can hold a song up, they cannot completely negate the importance of the position that a melody will inhabit. It may well not be the focal point of composition in all genres, but it will almost always be exposed on the surface nonetheless. Both writers and producers need to be fully aware of this fact. Whether it be a very simple repeating three-note motif or complex labyrinth of inverted and interrupted scales and modes, a melody, no matter how simple or what instrument it is conveyed with, is always going to be a readily accessible element of any song.

Harmony

In case you haven't come across the term in this light before, the word "harmony" here is not being used to describe just what a backing vocalist sings. Harmony is the term used to describe what many songwriters prefer to call "chord progression." The harmony is the chordal structure that supports or harmonizes the melody and that can convey a great deal of information about the genre of a song. Some styles of music such as Country Music tend to be built on relatively simple harmonic structures, whereas others, including Jazz Fusion for example, usually feature much more elaborate use of extensions and chord substitutions.

There are genres where the supporting role of harmony is very evident. It can simply be conveyed through a realistic and transparent recording of an acoustic instrument or three, and generate a believable representation of a live performance. In other genres, however, the harmony can take its place with confidence at center stage. A song's purpose isn't necessarily to be memorable or singable. These are undoubtedly worthy attributes, but making a song good to dance to, or good to chill out to, or good to experience in any other way are also relevant and appropriate qualities for writers and producers to aspire to. A song can exist primarily to showcase a collection of sounds and the harmony will provide the vehicle to convey a lot of that information. It will also provide a platform on which a Producer

may find opportunities to pivot towards varying genres. It's not just a case of recording the right notes. Capturing the right sounds is actually a more pertinent pursuit in some cases. Writers and producers should never lose sight of the purpose of a song, and the way in which the harmony is written and recorded will do a lot to define a song's character and intention.

Lyrics

From the above definition, it is clear that a song needs to include some words to be sung in conjunction with the melody. Without lyrics, the melody in a song ceases to be part of a song, and becomes just a melody. This would render it more of a "composition" than a "song." Similarly, a lyric without a melody behind it ceases to be part of a song and becomes just a collection of words or prose.

When lyrics are written, they can define genre. At the very least, they can suggest them. There are some themes that are universal and can be found in all genres and styles of production. Songs about love can take many guises and can be found nestling in all sorts of different styles of music for example. However, there are some lyrical themes that will not be particularly welcomed or appreciated in some genres. When a song is written and produced, there needs to be a considered understanding of what it communicates and the manner in which it is communicated. If lyrics can define or limit genre, then they can also do a lot to define production style.

Rhythm

The previous three ingredients all occur concurrently and are in effect stacked on top of each other in the creative process. Rhythm doesn't quite fit into that club. Owing to our entrapment in the space-time continuum, rhythmical elements all take place after each other, and the timing of each event is just as important as each event itself. The speed of the song, the regularity of the harmonic pulse, variation in stress pattern, and the changes in chord and note length are all incredibly important in defining whether a collection of neatly stacked notes will be magical or plain old monotonous. Time signatures are also important tools in the rhythmical makeup of any given song. Like harmony, the manner in which a rhythm is presented affords the producer the opportunity to land a clear production stamp on the recording. Whether it be through the complexity of the arrangement itself such as the interplay of polyrhythms, or the textures and sounds used to create them, the presentation of a rhythm will have significant impact on the perceived character of the song it is embedded in. Even the most unimaginative sequence of chords, words and tones can become interesting when they are presented in an unusual and unfamiliar manner, and it is this manner that we will get to shortly.

Form

In addition to rhythmical elements, the other linear-based creative decision rests in the construction of the form of the song. The writing of songs is generally categorized through naming each section. Pretty much any song we come across will contain a chorus or pay-off line of some kind, and this moment will be surrounded

and usually held up by supporting sections such as introductions, verse, bridges and alike. Editing the form of a song is often massively important in making a song “work.” A song can consist of all the right ingredients, but if they are thrown in the pot in the wrong order, then the recipe just won’t work and the result will be inedible. Cliché phrases such as “Don’t bore us, get to the chorus” are often heard and with good reason. The stage of ordering the different sections of a song is where we can carefully present the information as a purposeful chain of events. Things that are generally important to consider in the structuring of a song are the need to make sure it is an appropriate length for its target audience and market, that it contains information that is interesting with as little padding as humanly possible, and that it achieves what the audience wants to hear with regard to listening complexity. Some audiences like songs that consist of ten or more sections. Some don’t and would rather have a very safe and predictable passage through the song to a tidy conclusion. Whichever way a song goes about its business, the order in which the different sections appear, and the manner in which they slot together is very important. Reflective editing is in effect the only thing that separates song writing from improvisation, and should therefore be taken very seriously.

Opportunities for the editing of song structure present themselves consistently throughout the production process and should always be confronted head on when they arise. Generally speaking, it’s a good idea to ensure that the first draft of any song has the basis of the song all there so that editing can be a process that hones rather than adds. It may be that the composer or composers choose to edit the song before it reaches a producer if the compositional approach makes that a possibility, but even in those cases, the song should still not be above further editing as the process progresses through each stage. Getting the song to fit where it is heading will almost always require some chipping away at the edges that are stopping the substance of the song fitting into the hole it’s designed for. Some of these protruding edges are more obvious than others, and it may be a while into the production process before it becomes apparent they are an issue that needs addressing. One of the most valuable things that a producer can bring to a song is objectivity, and it’s often in the structural makeup of a song that a producer can make the quickest and most effective changes.

Like a good partner in any marriage, a producer will be able to help a song build in confidence and identify and pronounce good and admirable qualities within in. A good producer will be honest with the composer and composition and help extract the best out of it. This process in itself will invariably lead to hidden gems in the composition coming to the surface.

IS A SONG JUST A COMBINATION OF ITS INGREDIENTS?

So, what can we do with these ingredients? The main task at hand is to ensure that they all slot together neatly and enhance each other to maximum effect. If we were to visualize the combination of ingredients, it could be easy to see them as being stacked on top of each other. This would certainly seem to work as far as the writing process is concerned, where the melody *may* have been written first, followed

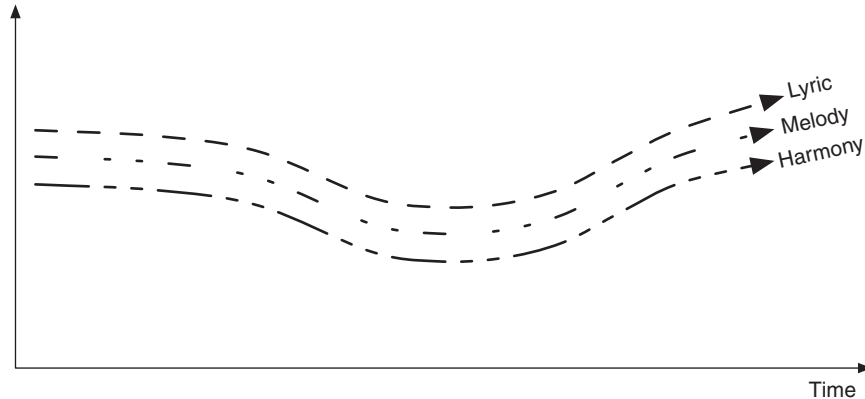


FIGURE 1.1
Matching song layers.

by a harmonic chord progression to underpin it and then followed up with some lyrics that work with the melody.

Figure 1.1 is obviously a simplified representation of the manner in which these compositional elements fit together, but it serves its purposes for the time being. The reality is that every writer, regardless of experience or skill, will have a collection of snippets of songs lying around the place. It's likely that there will be the odd few lines of lyrics scribbled down on scraps of paper, melodic phrases sung to death but as yet unfinished, chord sequences that sound "nice" but inconclusive, and possibly a few "vibey" tracks stored away on a tape or hard drive somewhere just waiting to be let loose. Coming up with the occasional idea here and there isn't generally that difficult. What can drive us slowly insane is figuring out where each of these individual moments of brilliance can find their life partners and make truly beautiful music together. The first thing to remember here is that the writer should never rush this process. If two ideas don't go together in their current form, then they don't go together in their current form and that should be the end of it. If a writer is crafting a song on their own, it can be very easy to lose an objective view of the song as it evolves. The goal can get clouded and the composer can get so close to the composition that they really can't see what they have in front of them anymore. One of the benefits of the production process is that it will invariably introduce at least one more pair of ears to the process at some stage. In addition to facilitating the recording and presentation of the song, the person filling these shoes, often the producer, will be able to offer this objective opinion and help keep the crafting process focused and beneficial. Sadly, it's a common problem to see writers who are struggling through on their own marry off incompatible ideas simply so that they can just get shot of them. That will never do anyone any favors other than possibly a short-term favor for the writer, but even that is likely to come back and haunt them (Figure 1.2).

The ingredients we have to play with need to be nurtured and slotted together neatly. On occasions, they will fit together nice and snug. This can happen naturally as a result of writing different elements concurrently such as the melody with

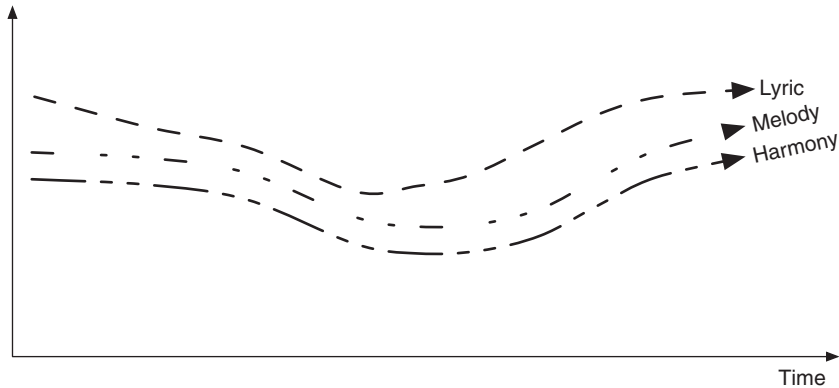
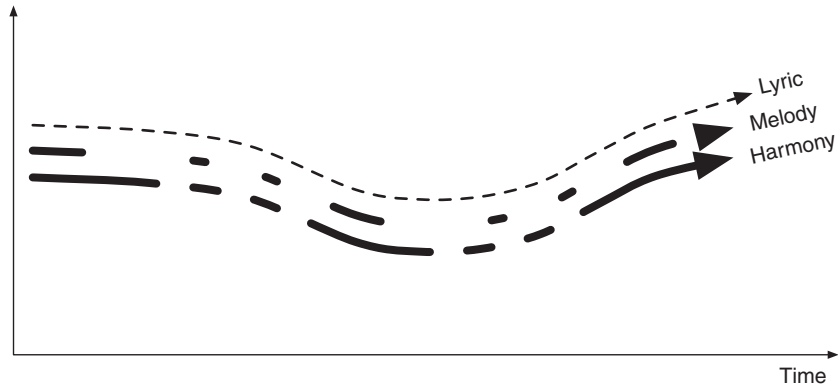


FIGURE 1.2
Mismatched song layers.

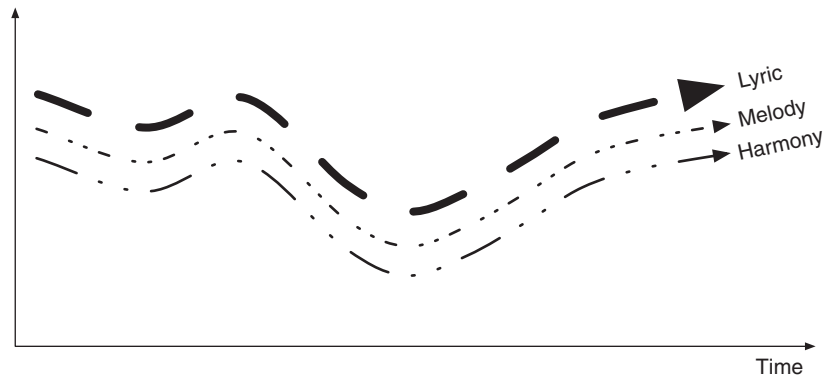
the lyric or harmony with the melody, and sometimes the writer can be fortunate enough to have two or more separately fashioned ideas that seem to have been made for each other fall into each other's arms after the event. On other occasions, however, they may not go neatly together in the first instance but will be able to work something out through a little bit of give and take. This may require a lyric to lose a word or syllable here and there, and the rhythm of the melody may have to adjust its run a little bit, but this often happens in the process of writing anyway and is no bad thing.

Different Measurements

Just as different recipes and tastes require different quantities of each ingredient in food, so too do different genres require different weights of each of these ingredients. The word "weight" has been used here as opposed to "amount" for a simple reason. If a song is 3 minutes long, then there will be 3 minutes of each ingredient present for the most part. There may be moments where the vocal melody departs for a moment along with the lyrics but there will be constant rhythmic and harmonic information at play throughout. The weight is about how important each of these ingredients are at any given time in making the song work. Some genres of music are typically more dependent on some ingredients above others. For example, folk songs tend to rely very heavily on lyrical content because they commonly exist primarily as a platform for the lyric to say something. There may be an age-old story that is being conveyed, supported subtly and sensitively through a simple chord progression and arrangement. In many songs such as this, the harmony is nothing to write home about because it isn't supposed to be the focal point. It can just support and play its part accordingly. If it suddenly got really interesting and all sorts of inversions and extensions were at play, then there is a danger that it would start to fight with the lyrics at the front of the stage and distract rather than compliment. Similarly, there are many "Urban" songs featuring an interplay of rhythmic elements in the production that are more of a focal point than the authenticity and historical grounding of the lyrical narrative. In these cases, the "vibe" of the track is often what the song is really all about, and the lyrics are there more as a means to an end rather than a focal point in themselves.

**FIGURE 1.3**

Where lyrics are less of a focal point than other layers.

**FIGURE 1.4**

Where lyrics are the focal point.

The subtle variation in the balance of ingredients needs to be considered carefully, and even though decisions regarding the arrangement and sonic production will frequently come after it has been written, it is still wise to have these considerations in mind when crafting the song in the first place. Some songs will have a fairly even spread of weight right across the ingredients and some will have a very obvious tipping of the balance employed. The significance of each of those ingredients varies according to what the song is trying to achieve, and to a large extent, the genre that it is found within.

What Does the Song Do?

In addition to looking at the ingredients that go into making up a song, we also need to look at what the song does. Understanding how a song is put together does not necessarily mean that we understand what it is doing or how it does it. We know a lot about the human body these days, but there are still millions of things that we don't quite understand and that scientific analysis is never likely to answer. For example, we understand how the ear works in principle, but can't quite seem to get a handle on why different combinations of waveforms hitting them will generate different emotional responses. Beyond the physical makeup are the emotional and spiritual elements, and this principle applies to songs as well.

We can achieve all our musical grades and get 100% on any music test we ever take, but that will not necessarily make us better songwriters. It means that we know how to control our tools and that we can craft effectively, but it doesn't mean that we have the skill or understanding required to manipulate emotional response in listeners. There are plenty of songs that seem to do everything "right" with regard to compositional makeup, but that leave the listener stone cold. On occasions such as this, it may well be that a producer can make all the difference. In any team creating a recorded product, it can be hugely beneficial to have someone who isn't musically educated. It can be easy to forget that the majority of the listening public will relate to a song on more of an emotive level than an analytical one, and having someone in the team who can offer an "outsider's" perspective in this respect can be massively helpful.

It doesn't matter who that person is or what role they fill. A songwriter with no formal musical training write a song without really understanding it and have a producer focus it a little through applying some core musical principles, or a producer without a traditional musical education can help convert a "correctly" fashioned song into one that goes beyond being competent and into extraordinary.

A song is more than the sum of its parts. In fact, it could be argued that the song exists before any of the ingredients are wrapped around it at all. The ingredients are the tools that enable the writer to give the guts of the song a physical representation. Musical ingredients are essentially an outworking of mathematical principles, and if songwriting was just about combining them, they might be interesting and clever, but they would never really be any more than that. The soul or guts of a song is what can make it magical and wondrous. The ingredients we use to give body to songs are just tools that carry and embody, nothing more and nothing less.

The chapters that follow in this book are all very useful in playing a part in sharpening our tool sets and enabling us to get a handle on what we can do in the process of getting a song from demo to delivery, but it is fundamentally important to grasp the fact that if the guts of a song aren't in place from the start, the rest of the process will be nothing more than artistic and scientific endeavor. It's all about the song and the vast array of options open to the writer and producer can be so overwhelming that it is easy to forget this point sometimes!

WHAT'S THE POINT OF WRITING A SONG?

In seeking to ensure that the quality of the song itself doesn't get neglected under the pile of instruments, plug-ins, monitors and master copies, it's a good idea to start the writing process with the question "Why is this song being written?" It may seem like a mind numbingly obvious thing to ask, but the reality is that this question is often bypassed entirely so that the fun of playing with buttons and automation can begin. The simple truth is that if we don't know why we are writing, the chances are that we won't do a very good job of writing the song in the first place. Even the most basic thoughts such as "What is the song about?" often go unanswered. Nine times out of ten, the reason why writers struggle to finish songs is because they don't actually know what they are writing about. The song has kick-started with a flash of inspiration and got off to a flyer, but that inspiration has

not turned into perspiration and has remained the fuel for about 20–30 seconds of promise. There are obviously exceptions to this where songs just seem to appear through just getting on with it, but for every one that works like that, there tends to be a considerable number more that grind quickly to a halt. Knowing the point of a song is massively beneficial. Firstly, it gives us something to work toward and therefore aids the focus and creativity in the writing and production. Secondly, it gives us some kind of meter by which we can assess how successful we have been in achieving our aims.

What Is It Supposed to Achieve?

We can know what it is about and who it is for without knowing this piece of information. Knowing what the song is intended to achieve enables the writer to be considerably more focused in ensuring that the desired outcome becomes a reality. It will also help set the goal posts for the entire team who will be working on making the product fit for purpose throughout the entire production process. Whether it be to generate an emotional response, to advertise an event, to accompany an occasion, or simply to get something off your chest, a good song will serve some kind of purpose in addition to just existing. The “what,” “who” and “where” are all important links between what the song is and the manner in which it will be presented.

HOW DO WE IDENTIFY WHO THE SONG IS FOR?

This book is all about the process through which a song will make its way through the necessary steps to arrive at someone’s ears dressed as *suitably* as humanly possible. Knowing where the song will be “delivered” is useful information to know so as to ensure that the content of the package is right for the recipient. There’s no point sending someone something that they don’t like. The creator gets to choose whether knowledge of the recipient dictates the creation and treatment of the song, or whether the song’s creation and treatment dictates who the likely recipient will be. Songs will appeal to different people on different levels. For some, the compositional makeup of the song is the most important part. For these, the interplay of rhythm and harmony, and of lyric and melody will be where the appeal is grounded. It should be noted here, however, that there are plenty of recipients of songs that will not be attracted on these grounds at all. For many, the attraction to a song is generated not through its content, but the manner in which it is dressed up. The production process is what does this dressing and advertises the song to its full potential. Even if the recipient is able to understand how cleverly crafted a song may be, there is no guarantee that this knowledge will help them get past several other stumbling blocks. One such stumbling block is the production style that the song is wrapped in. When songs are written, the genre that they will fall into can be very obvious even when the song is in its most raw and delicate state. The lyrical theme or groove for example can dictate whether a song is likely to be more suitable for a folk or reggae market straight off the bat. However, it is possible to write a song that facilitates numerous possible routes into all sorts of different genres owing to the fact that its content isn’t pushing it anywhere specific. The genre a song lands in isn’t always dictated by the song itself. Sometimes

it needs to be decided by the producer or arranger at a date after it has appeared in its first form. In fact, there are occasions where a producer may be so sure that the song needs to head to a certain audience that elements of the compositional make up are altered to ensure that its journey into that marketplace is more focused and effective. This marketplace is very important when it comes to viewing the song as a “product” which is essentially what it is when it comes to getting it “out there” to people. Regardless of the impassioned heartache and personal soul-searching that has gone into making a song authentic and “real,” the moment it starts its journey into the big wide world, it becomes a product. For some reason, there are plenty who frown on people “selling out” in this way. It’s not “selling out,” it’s giving out.

The manner in which a song is dressed up and sent out can have a direct effect on whether people will like it at all. When music fits into different genres, which it almost always seems to do to aid marketing and clarification, it also falls into the grip of the subcultures that surround it. When a song and its production gets classed as “Death Metal” for example, it finds its way into the “Death Metal” camp and into the presence of the attitudes and dress codes, etc., that typify that genre. What this then results in is the fact that unwritten rules of taste dictated through fashion and trend above musical appreciation come into play in deciding how accepted that material is going to be. If a song and accompanying production from a foreign camp are thrown into the mix, then there is a real threat that the production itself will get cast aside without a second’s thought. The reason for this is that a large number of recipients in the marketplace listen to what they think they are supposed to be listening to above what they can learn to appreciate on a musical level. It happens right across the board in every music genre. Painful though it is to have to acknowledge, there are plenty of recipients who will immediately dismiss a song simply because they can’t associate it with how they view themselves and the subculture and accompanying genre or genres of music inherent in that identity. So even if the song is superbly crafted and sent out to breathe with the best upbringing possible behind it, the recipient may cast it aside without a second thought for reasons that are nothing to do with the song at all. Marketing, introduced later in this book plays a massive part in getting the songs to those who will appreciate them, and also in telling them why they will appreciate them. There’s a lot more to it than simply combining ingredients as cunningly and effectively as possible. In addition to facilitating a more focused writing and production process, knowing the vision for the product will also enable its marketing and publicity to be more tailor made. If the creator goes with the song first recipient later approach, it could well be that the song is fashioned in such a way that makes it completely undeliverable. As touched upon above, there is no guarantee that the audience will want to hear the song at all if their position has not been considered in its construction. The creators may get lucky and fashion something that fits nicely into a market without much prior consideration, but from a production perspective, it makes much more sense to have the needs and wants of a designated marketplace in mind before or at least at the early stages of a song production.

If knowledge of a target market is useful in focusing the production process, it follows that it makes sense to purposefully glean as much useful information from that target market in ensuring the resulting product ticks all the boxes it needs to.

What Works?

An obvious place to start in discovering what will work for a designated audience or recipient is just to ask them. Obviously it can't work as simply as this as there will be too many people to ask, and asking them would not provide useful answers as the majority of recipients would not be able to provide the kind of concise musical answers we would require anyway. What we can do is to look at what else that market is listening to. Through identifying the kinds of songs and productions that are popular among the audience that we choose to target, we should be able to get some kind of idea what they will like to hear.

It is interesting to note that target markets tend to identify and present themselves quite coherently whether they mean to or not. It's common for fans of certain artists and their body of songs and productions to share a common interest in other similar artists. Website retailers have got wise to this fact and use it to their advantage in purposefully targeting products at browsers who they have good reason to believe will like what they are pushing. www.amazon.com and www.play.com are just two of many good examples of such sites. Phrases such as "shoppers who bought this also bought ...," and "like this?, then you'll probably like this too ..." are commonplace and are actually very useful for both the retailer and the buyer. The retailer can count on it as an effective marketing tool to target the most likely demographic to part with some cash, and the buyer can use it as a means to discover new artists that they will probably appreciate discovering. It's not just retailers either. There are plenty of other places where this mentality can be seen at work. Online radio stations are another example where the online community of listeners can introduce other listeners with an identified similar taste to new music whether they do it intentionally or not. The website www.last.fm is a good example of this, and nowhere is it more obvious than at www.audiomap.tunegluen.net. Knowing what people are listening to can be more revealing and more helpful than actually asking them what they want to hear.

Through what they refer to as "Hit Song Science" a company called "Polyphonic HMI" has developed a scientific means of determining the "hit" potential in any song they choose to look at. Through a process they term "Spectral Deconvolution," they have systems in place to analytically assess more than 60 parameters of any given song, and to assess how viable the combination of melody, harmony, rhythm, tempo, octave, fullness of sound, pitch, brilliance, etc., are in giving the song "hit" potential. This may seem a little far-fetched or painfully cold and calculated, or possibly a combination of both, but the principle is actually very sensible and clever. The basic premise behind the technique is to compare the results of the analysis to other songs that have gone on to be hits before. Polyphonic HMI have developed their own "Music Universe" in which they have plotted previous hits like little stars in the cosmos. These songs have been plotted in accordance with the results that came out of their analytical assessment, and it shouldn't be surprising to discover that a lot of the songs assessed actually cluster together in different parts of this "universe." This clustering together reveals that their musical makeup and production sound actually shares a lot in common. We have just acknowledged that this similarity exists in the "real world" where fans of one artist tend to share

an interest in other similar artists too, and “Hit Song Science” provides a scientific framework through which the level of this similarity can be quantified.

One of the main sources of inspiration for a budding songwriter is to hear a song and to think something along the lines of “that’s a great song and I’m going to write one just like it.” The writer then has the option of carefully analyzing the song and trying to replicate something similar as a sort of pastiche, or just going with a similar “vibe” and hoping the result will be pleasing. Generally, the second of these approaches is considered to be more credible as it seems less like cheating, but that isn’t necessarily the best way forward. The scientific approach that Polyphonic HMI takes to the assessment of these songs is exactly the same the songwriter will have, it’s just that the guesswork is removed and some hard evidence takes its place. Obviously, there is more than just the quality of song and production itself that goes into making a song a “hit” and Polyphonic HMI are keen to state that even a song they assess as having massive hit potential won’t necessarily go on to be one. Unless it is marketed appropriately and effectively, a song production will not get the chance to be heard and appreciated regardless of how magnificently constructed it is. Writing a cracking song and making it sound incredible is just a part of the mountain of work that needs to be done.

Hit Song Science works its scientific magic at the end of the production process. That’s all well and good in giving a result once the product has been completed, but what about at the start of the process? Is there something that the writer can do to ensure that the product will start off on the right foot? Emulation would seem to be the most straightforward approach to employ at this stage. Providing alternate versions and adaptations of previously successful models is always a sensible business strategy. If a product seems to be doing well, then it makes sense to “jump on the bandwagon” and to put out something similar. It is certainly the sensible thing to do in the business marketplace where projected sales and forecasts are as close as we can get to predictions of how things will go. It happens in music too. It doesn’t take long to think of a song and accompanying artist that came along with a massively successful mold-breaking song, only to be followed by a small but prominent group of artists and/or bands that provided something similar. This happens because those controlling the purse strings at the labels need to make some money, and they are able to do so through following the trailblazer at the front once they have established a new product and paved the way for some new growth in the market. It can seem very unmusical, and that’s because it is. At a relatively early stage in the lifespan of a song production, it ceases to be a ‘song’ to those who market it and becomes a “product” or a “unit” much like any other.

If this pastiche and jumping on the bandwagon happens so often, how is it that new genres and new types of production get a foothold in the market? It tends to be where money isn’t a driving factor. The majority of labels endeavoring to survive in the market simply can’t afford to take many risks with regard to trying something new. The Internet revolution has hit record labels particularly hard and has resulted in the scaling back of operations, decreased advances and alike. Those in charge have staff to employ and salaries to pay and therefore need at least some products that are almost guaranteed to sell. Whether the chief executive happens to like the

product in question personally is rarely of any consequence at all. It's generally where money gives way to a sheer love of creativity and something new that new songs and productions can be given space to flourish. Once that new sound has had some time to develop and invariably grows with popularity, it's then that it can start to turn into more of a commercial viability for some of the big labels. It is at this stage the "underground" nature of the new genres tends to be brought "above-ground" and marketed to the masses. The development and mass marketing of House Music is just one of many good examples of a relatively small and local music phenomenon being taken aboveground and transformed into a mass produced product.

It's not all about creativity free of financial shackles though. There are also times where bands and artists with a massive and passion ate following are able to release something completely new and "fresh" relatively safe in the knowledge that a large percentage of their fan base will buy it because it's them and not necessarily because they like the new material. Almost everybody has at least an artist or band or two that they have taken to heart, and whose new album they will always buy. That level of loyalty can lead to new ideas, songs and sounds making their way safely into the public arena too.

What then can the writer and production team do with all of this information? If a song production is going to do a good job of appealing to a target audience, then it needs that target to be identified. It also needs to tread carefully between providing something that the designated audience will want to hear and something new enough to warrant them paying some attention. If all new productions were simply reworks of previous successes, then the musical marketplace would quickly drill itself into the ground through a gradual and gut wrenching decline in variety and adventurous output. A good product will be one that is similar enough to be safe, but at the same time, different enough to warrant it's existence in its own right. A way of working within this understanding is to purposefully create what I term the "Triangle of Influence" (Figure 1.5). It must be stressed here that this is not the only way forward. It is, however, a useful technique for exploring possibilities defined by whatever the current music market place happens to be revealing.

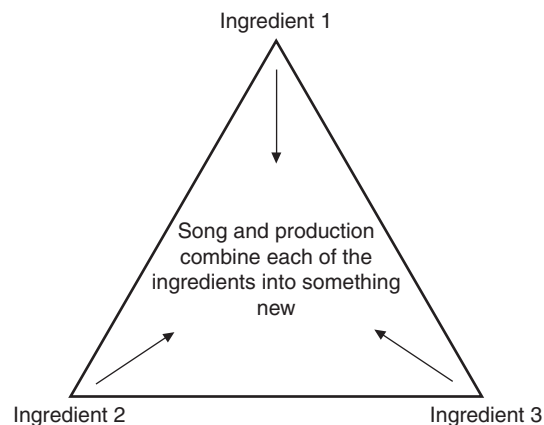


FIGURE 1.5
The "Triangle of Influence."

The premise is very simple. If we can acknowledge that artists who share a similar sound and composition style also share a similar fan base, we can use that knowledge to intentionally round up and satisfy that fan base through giving them what they want to hear. The intention of the "Triangle of Influence" is to identify three key ingredients in the song productions that are succeeding in the marketplace, and to intentionally place each of them in different corners of one triangle. The idea is that the writer/producer

can then create a track that sits in the middle of the triangle through borrowing elements of the productions that surround it. What is particularly important about this approach is that the elements plotted in each corner need to be carefully selected on the grounds of their appeal. The writer/producer needs to select corners that will draw the desired fan base, and this is done through carefully and purposefully identifying the elements of production sounds that are key in attracting the audience that are drawn to them (Figure 1.6). It's a technique designed to sharpen the writer's and producer's appreciation of current market trends.

As already identified, a fan base will cluster itself together around several similar artists in all sorts of different genres and corners of the marketplace. In doing this, they can reveal to us which artists share a common thread, and then it's just a case of pulling out the common musical denominators from each of those artists.

Factors contributing to this clustering together can be any one or a combination of a vast array of potential ingredients, but it is generally fairly obvious what the key components to the "flavor" are. It may be just one important element such as the fact that the productions tend to feature guitar solos, or they are built around solo male singer/songwriters for example. However, it may be that the appeal is grounded in a much more subtle and intricate combination of ingredients such as a combination of the technical proficiency evident in the playing of instruments, the lyrical theme of the material and the structural form of the material performed. It may be that just one of those elements on its own is of no particular interest to the fan base in question, but that the combination of those elements is what really works for that audience. These are the questions to be asked by the writer/producer and the answers should help populate the corners of the triangle. These corners should then be able to act as tempters in drawing fan bases at least to the edge of the triangle.

Once the production has lured the listener to the edge through sounding similar to existing material, the idea is that the song production created through borrowing elements from each corner around it will pull the listener into a slightly new sound. The sound should be relatively comfortable as it will include elements that the listener will already be familiar with, but it should also provide some additional interest from another corner manifesting elements of song production as yet undiscovered or unappreciated (Figure 1.7).

When the triangle is working properly, it should be attracting and bringing together audiences who may as yet have not been un-introduced. The reality of the model in practice is that the majority of each separate fan base will linger closer to the

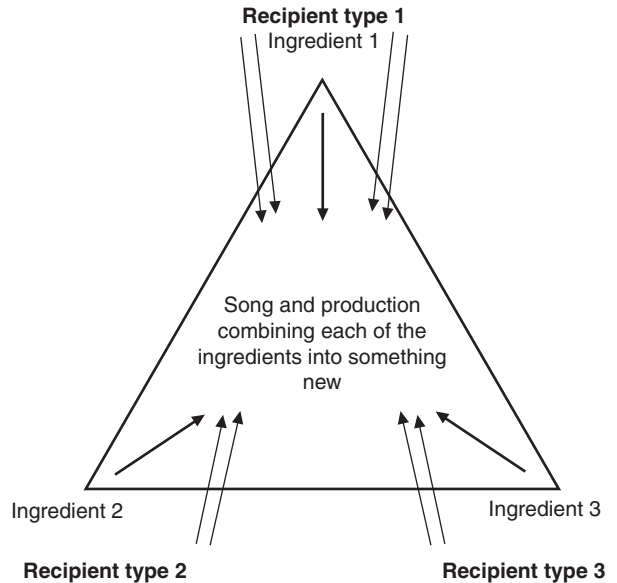


FIGURE 1.6
Caption Not Provided

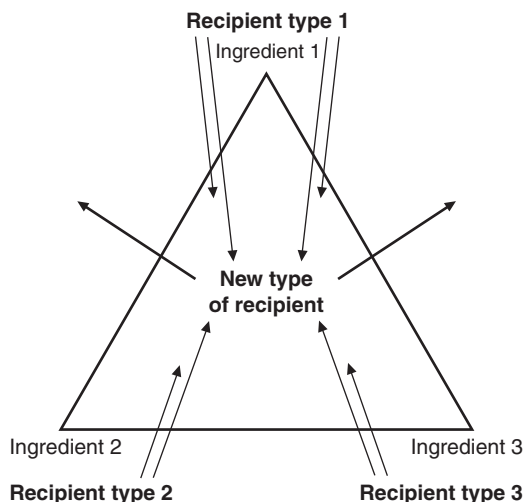


FIGURE 1.7
Caption Not Provided

familiar corner than others. That is to say that their interest in the new song or production will rest mostly in it's similarity to what they are comfortable/familiar with, but the added flavor of the other genres gives the taste just that little bit of an extra something. There are, however, some of the audience who will fall completely for the new sound they are hearing and will stand in wonder right at the center of the triangle having been lured completely by the combination of elements hitherto unexperienced in unison. Once these recipient types have been lured by the new sound, they will

also be introduced to each other's taste in music and may well find themselves moving on to discover new things as a result. These new things may be more of a voyage toward the other two corners of the triangle, or out of the triangle altogether to discover another sound somewhere else armed with their new discovery.

There are a multitude of different ingredients that can be placed at each corner of the triangle. Some will be inherent in the musical composition such as those discussed earlier. The shape of the melodic lines employed or the lyrical themes may well in themselves be sufficient to draw a crowd. Similarly, it may be instrumental factors such as the employment of acoustic guitars, fiddles, bagpipes, steel drums or Hawaiian nose flutes, etc., that can lure the listener. There are plenty of music fans whose music collection could be classified predominantly through instrumental lineup inherent within it. There are also the production factors to be considered, such as the quality of the sheen or mix, the use of effects in the production and authenticity or "realness" of the reproduction of the instruments recorded or simulated. The list could go on for pages and pages. Ultimately, it doesn't really matter what is allowed in each of the corners as long as it can be seen to draw a crowd. Whatever is placed there should act as bait attracting prey to the new things laid out before it. Once the prey (audience) have pulled up to the triangle, it's up to the other triangles to do their bit in luring them into the center to experience the full flavor.

Of course, the triangle of influence doesn't have to be a triangle, although changing it would mean having to change the name a bit. A similar result can be achieved through plotting a new idea between just two sources, or it can be a pentagon or dodecahedron, etc. It makes sense to keep the number of influences to a minimum though, to ensure the combination of flavors isn't so complex that it doesn't taste disgusting, or of anything in particular. If constructed and implemented effectively, a triangle of influence will give the audience something that they didn't know they wanted—until they got it. If a song production can achieve that, then it has definitely got something right!

CONCLUSION

In combining the pursuit of writing a great song with the production tools that shall be discussed in some detail in the coming pages of this book, the writer and producer both have to be careful that the process doesn't override the purpose. The reason for a song's existence should never be lost amidst the technology that captures it.

It is possible for a writer or producer to get so embroiled in the pursuit of the elusive vibe and kicking rhythm track, or something similar, that the point of the song gets completely lost.

Where this happens, there is a real danger that the resulting production will be little more than something that sounds interesting but has no real substance. It can be an interesting shell that has nothing in it once it has been cracked open. It's a sad truth that there are a lot of song productions that do exactly this. They sound great for a season, but when the current trends that they adhere to die, they are little more than collections of dated sounds. Only the most significant and seminal tracks will stand the test of time, and that will often be more as museum pieces than anything else.

The song has to come first in priority at least, if not in the compositional chronology, and this warrants the highest level of attention throughout the entire production process. The writer/producer should always evaluate the mileage in any given song production. Sometimes it is entirely fitting to produce something in the knowledge that it has a limited lifespan, but it's good to look beyond that wherever possible.

Traditional song writing ingredients can be divided up differently according to genre, and production elements need to be treated the same way. For some genres, it's obvious where DAWs, Samplers and Sequencers have evidently been huge contributors to the compositional makeup of songs. Pretty much any form of "Electronic" music will have had to use these devices through the very nature of the genre for example. Hip-Hop and House, Trance and Drum'n'Bass are other obvious examples.

There will be fans of some songs who claim that the production isn't a factor in their appreciation of the song as it may simply be a piano and vocal arrangement with no trickery at play in its recording. What needs to be remembered here is that there actually has been a considered production style employed. The fact that it might not sound particularly glossy and that hundreds of plug-ins haven't been applied doesn't mean that the track isn't produced, it just means that it has been produced to sound more natural than it could otherwise have been. That in itself is no easy feat!

In seeking to marry a song with a production style, it's important that the producer understands the genre and the audience attached to it. They need to understand elements of that genre with regard to all its ingredients whether they be compositional or sonic in nature. It is entirely possible to have a good production of a bad song and a bad production of a good song. Where it isn't due to engineering incompetence, the former will usually be where a well-crafted song has been

railroaded into the wrong genre because the producer didn't understand the song in the first place. The latter will be where the producer has a great deal of skill and can make even the dullest song sound interesting through a mastery of arrangement and engineering. There are a lot of songs that sound great in their produced state, but sound just plain tedious when stripped of the production that dresses them up. Whether this is a perceived problem or not depends entirely on the genre, as some songs are just not meant to be undressed. They exist primarily for the clothes on their back to have a platform to shine. Some, however, are created to sound great regardless of whether they are performed solo on any instrument, or whether a 20 piece band are giving it all they've got.

It all comes down to purpose. A good writer and producer should know exactly what they are trying to achieve before they complete the process. The vision needs to be in place and the song itself should tick all the appropriate boxes, even if it's just to act as a structure to dress up with arrangement, groove and vibe. A writer should be able to take pride in what they are writing and satisfaction out of how successfully it lands at its target regardless of personal taste. Getting a product from demo to delivery depends largely on starting the project facing the right direction. Once the goal is in sight, the tools are in place, and the demands of that target audience are appreciated, it's simply a case of getting the ball rolling...

FURTHER READING

- Cope, D. (Forthcoming). *Righting the Wrongs in Writing Songs*. TCT Press.
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Perricone, J. (2000). *Melody in Songwriting*. International Music Publications.