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Tell Me A Song, Sing Me A Story:

Storytelling In Music Through The Decades

Storytelling has a magical quality that gives all art its evocative power and stands as a foundation to create, build and share. However, exactly how this foundation was formed and an in depth exploration of why it has deep-rooted connections to art is far too unrecognized. So in order to better understand these connections, I am pinpointing my focus on storytelling's power on songwriting and music. The question is then posed; what about storytelling in song has influenced modern songwriting in music?  The idea that the primary influence of songwriting is built on a human desire to feel connected to one's environment and the people in it through the medium of storytelling is what I believe accurately answers this question. This reasoning stems from the malleability of storytelling. Being the foundation of other forms of art, when the method in which stories are told changes, a ripple effect is created that alters its roots. Looking specifically at music and songwriting, this change can come in forms such as new unique melodies, a change in lyrics, or a change in how those lyrics are portrayed through the words of the song. Through the analysis of concept albums and songs, a social experiment, interviews, and through the process of writing my own songs and seeing how they are interpreted, I have used my research and field data to establish a spacious opinion on the importance of the history that storytelling has, and how it will lead our view of the arts in the future.

The roots of storytelling are seen all throughout history, and many critical points in our past could not have happened without its consistency. The understanding of our past, our present, and what our future may be would be drastically different in the absence of storytelling. Pivotal moments from the past such as the use of slave songs during the early to mid 1600's or the writing of songs from the "Flower Power" era during the Vietnam War all share one thing in common; they were and still are considered songs that had practical and artistic purposes. They are tales of struggle and hardship, but they weren't just told to a passerby on the street. These stories were sung to large groups of people, a method that allowed these stories to plant themselves in people's memories and encourage them to share them with others.

The slave era was burdened with countless hardships, but they used song as their primary form of communication. Slaves would share stories with each other through song in order to communicate and relay messages that needed to be known among the slaves on a plantation. Song's like "Follow the Drinkin' Gourd" refered to the Big dipper, and aligning it with the north star as an escape route for slaves.

***"When the great big river meets the little river***

***Follow the Drinking Gourd.***  
***For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom***  
***If you follow the drinking gourd."***

This line from the song is stating that there will be a man waiting where two rivers meet, and he would help the slaves to freedom.[[1]](#footnote--1) However, the beauty in which these songs were song on the plantation didn't give rise to any suspicion amongst the slave-owners. These songs were crucial in the escape of many slaves, as well as the formation of today's largest known slave escape route, the Underground Railroad.

"Flower Power," also known as the Love Generation, was the mixing pot that brought together people of many musical and social backgrounds to protest the Vietnam war. Artists such as Marvin Gaye, The Beatles and Donovan wrote songs that contained powerful and reverberating messages against violence.

***Imagine no possessions  
I wonder if you can  
No need for greed or hunger  
A brotherhood of man***

People were taking the Vietnam War, a section of history that would become a story for later generations, and combining those messages with music.[[2]](#footnote-0) This created an environment in which the people of America could share beautiful yet heartbreaking songs about the violence of the war, and unite to make change for our country and the world.

Looking at storytelling in it's present effect on songwriting and music, through my research I have discovered four major methods of communicating messages and stories through song: Lyrical storytelling, Non-Lyrical storytelling, Collaborative storytelling and Varied interpretation. Amongst these methods that I call “The Prime Four,” there is a shared importance to how stories are told, as I believe they act as the centerpiece for songwriting.

Lyrical storytelling consists of songs with lyrics that are very much so understood by the listener. It is probably the most common form of storytelling in songwriting that we hear today. Albums such as George Harrison’s *All Things Must Pass* and *Sea Change* by Beck are albums that both strongly demonstrate this sphere of storytelling; they both share clear messages that can be easily interpreted by the listener, and their messages are relatable which is proven by their current popularity. *All Things Must Pass* is an album that talks about the birth, life and death (an insight into the existence of The Beatles) and how they exist in a singular cycle that should be shared and appreciated by everyone, and understanding it is a key to living peacefully.[[3]](#footnote-1) This is a message that drove the American people towards peace, and it was done so through the power of understanding these lyrics and using the stories that Harrison shares in the album to come together and make that peace. *Sea Change*, a darker album, was mostly influenced from a break up that Beck had with an old girlfriend.[[4]](#footnote-2) This sounds like a very stereotypical premise for an album, but with the stories he told, he made the sadness less about how he longed for his girl to return to him, and made it more about how simply awful he felt about himself. This is something that most breakup songs don’t dwell upon, and doing so made his lyrics more relatable to the listener, and once again, proving that stories that exist in song can connect many people in a simple way. Both albums have different approaches to reaching out to the listener, but they both are incredible albums that could be considered foundations for the sphere of lyrical storytelling.

Non-Lyrical storytelling consists of songs that are entirely instrumental, meaning this sphere could also just be called “Instrumental Music.” Constructing layers of instrumentation that have the ability to conjure feelings with the same ability that words can is the essence of this method. The beauty behind this technique is that there are some stories that, when words fail to tell, a beautiful melody takes its place. In a TED Talk with popular musician, Andrew Bird, he said that instrumental music can be described as an attempt to create a piece that "bridges the gap between feeling and melody."[[5]](#footnote-3) With an array of musical ability, Bird uses all kinds of instruments and a looping machine to piece together sounds (like details of a story) into one beautiful song that doesn’t even need lyrics to share what it is about. A band that is known for their ability to do this is Explosions In The Sky. The aspect of originality that they contain is that all of the titles of their songs precisely match the emotions that the song conveys. For example, the song “First Breath After Coma” makes one feel exactly how it sounds; they are washed over with a sense of birth and relief. In an interview, members of the band said that they try and create an image, and build a song that musical portrays and tells the story of that image or idea.[[6]](#footnote-4) This in itself is part of the essence of Non-Lyrical storytelling, and it perfectly shows the power that not only instrumentation can have on the listener, but on the artist as well.

Collaborative storytelling is categorized as a story that is constructed by a group of people or a community, and is then shared through the perspective of a few different artists. All parts of art have been somewhat collaborative over the course of history, and song lies at the centerpiece of collaboration. A huge part of music that has promoted collaboration in writing is Hip Hop. Hip Hop is looked at as not just a genre of music, and while it is a culture that is still largely built on collaboration, for the sake of my project I solely observed the musical aspect. A great example of this method is an album called *Watch The Throne,* written and produced by both Jay Z and Kanye West.[[7]](#footnote-5) Individually, they are Hip Hop legends that will always be looked at for the unforgettable contributions they made, but this past year they combined those contributions to create an album that contained social commentary and stories of their grandiose success and fame that made for an incredibly entertaining listen. When two musicians put their ability together, they can put into a song what they are trying to convey in addition to what another artist is trying to convey. This makes for a song that shares stories that can connect with a more vast range of people, allowing the stories to be shared amongst an even larger community.

Varied Interpretation is a sphere that is not quite as popular as Lyrical Storytelling, as it requires a high level of songwriting ability. This method shows how some songs are written with an intended vagueness, which leaves the responsibility of constructing the story up to the listener. An amazing part of this method is that the writer is not the only one that has to put effort into creating a song that can hold different meanings and share different stories; it is just as much up to the listener to decide what they want to take from the song, and how they will share what they believe the story behind the song is with others. This joint responsibility further provides an explanation to how stories in song can drive people to feel more connected. A song that is a staple of Varied Interpretation is “Hallelujah,” originally written by Leonard Cohen. With many different versions of the song, Cohen must have wanted to build different versions of a story that he wanted the listener to piece together on their own.[[8]](#footnote-6) Despite this being the most complicated among the Prime Four, if done correctly, songs using this method can share some of the most powerful and enlightening stories out there.

After conducting all of my research and assembling The Prime Four, I set out to conduct my fieldwork. I planned to split it into three major parts. The first was a long interview with someone who has an extensive songwriting background. The second was a songwriting experiment that would test the legitimacy of the Prime Four, and the third was writing four different songs using each major storytelling method.

For my interview, I had the pleasure of talking with Andy Shea, an old camp counselor of mine as well as a musical mentor. He has been writing music since he was in high school and has written a countless number of songs. After finding out about his personal songwriting process, his history with songwriting and his ingenuity behind his songs, I asked more about if Andy felt that his songs did in fact share stories, and if so about what? He explained how while his personal music is less narrative than he would like it to be, he feels that songwriting and storytelling are both about sharing experiences and that is what makes them function equally.[[9]](#footnote-7) While one may not be directly telling a story, they can be giving emotion that can give insight into an experience the writer had in their own life, and this strengthens the connection amongst the writer and all the listeners. Some of his songs were written without the intent to tell a story while others were fully intended to share stories. Overall, the insight that Andy displayed and the diversity that his songwriting expressed made me more confident about not only my own songwriting ability, but also the power that an individual’s stories can have on just one person.

My songwriting experiment, the second part of my fieldwork, was unquestionably affective. The set up of the experiment was simple; I made two groups. One group contained five very experienced songwriters, and the other group contained five people with no songwriting experience whatsoever. I gave each individual in both groups 48 hours to write the lyrics for a song. The limitations were in their hands. They could write about whatever the wanted, and the song could be the length of their choice. In addition to this, I asked each person to give me a short analysis in paragraph form explaining what the songs was about, and their inspiration behind the lyrics. As each song was sent to me, I was extremely overjoyed by the fact that each song fell into each method among the Prime Four in a decently equal ratio. The explanations of the writer’s songs displayed how each song was unique and how it shared their stories differently without them even realizing it! One of the best parts was that looking at each song as one collection, it was hard to tell which ones were written by the experienced songwriters and the non experienced ones! This showed me that despite ones confidence in their ability to write a song, that ability is existent, proving that anyone can use a song to share their own stories.

Lastly, my project concluded with me writing one song for each method of the Prime Four. Being someone who has a lot of songwriting experience, I thought this part of the project would be one of the easiest, and I was very mistaken. Writing with the mindset that I had to make the words (or lack there of) fall into a rhythm that shared a story in a specific way was much more difficult than I thought, and something that I was not used to. I usually just let the words flow out and then interpret my feelings I have shared into the story I am subconsciously thinking of. However, looking back it was a powerful exercise. It not only strengthened my perception of how my stories can be constructed using song, but it strengthened my own songwriting ability.

Looking at my project in a singular sense, I now see it is my journey; a story that is my own. I learned about my self, my work ethic, my own songwriting ability and the importance of how song and story function together. I can see through my own research that when they can function as one, it can be not only therapeutic, but educating as well. Many of the people who participated in my experiment said they felt that writing their songs made them feel happier, as well as more connected to people that looked at their song and gave feedback. Anyone can watch a boring documentary or read an article, but when there is a song that coexists with that story, it is relatable, memorable, and simply makes people not alone, but connected to what and who is around them.

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