

JOE DOLCE NEWSLETTER



SONGWRITING WORKSHOP 28

The Difference Between Poetry and Lyrics

‘Always be a poet, even in prose.’

Charles Baudelaire

The best way to start this one off is with something a bit pithy.

So here it is:

Bob Dylan is a lyricist, not a poet.

Leonard Cohen, on the other hand, is a poet, who also writes lyrics.

Don't get me wrong – although Leonard Cohen, much like Dylan, has influenced me as much as anyone in modern times, I am no current fan of either of their present writing.

There once was a much younger poet named Leonard Cohen, who published two books of acclaimed verse - 7 years before he ever recorded a song! I am talking about the Leonard Cohen who wrote *'The Spicebox of Earth,'* not the one who wrote the lukewarm and more recent *'Book of Longing.'* I will have a lot more to say about the dilution of Cohen's writing – and also the astounding effect he has had on my own poetic output – a paradox - but I will save that for a future newsletter. I just wanted to get your attention straight up so that we can have an interesting time from here on and not just another boring workshop experience!

So, let's create a quick definition of what constitutes the primary difference between *poetry* and *lyrics*. (It's personal, so don't go woodpeckering this down in hickory. Just think about it.)

For me, the poem starts and finishes on the page. That is the litmus test. It works its magic - without hearing it read, without music, without percussion - without performance. Just sitting there naked on that piece of paper. Real poetry lives in that narrow white rectangle.

Ninety-nine percent of hip-hop, just about all of pop, and most of folk music requires music and performance to bring it to *real* life.

Sometimes lyrics *can* work on the page, however, and then they are usually referred to as *light verse*.

Here is an example of a lyrical verse that most likely began its life as a song – but the music has been lost and it only survives now as words, first collected in *The American Songbag*, by Carl Sandburg, in 1928, and then in *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*, edited by WH Auden, in 1938. I created a song from it and recorded it on my album, *The Wind Cries Mary*.

Cocaine Lil and Morphine Sue

Did you ever hear about Cocaine Lil?
She lived in Cocaine town on Cocaine hill,
She had a cocaine dog and a cocaine cat,
They fought all night with a cocaine rat.

She had cocaine hair on her cocaine head.
She had a cocaine dress that was poppy red:
She wore a snowbird hat and sleigh-riding clothes,
On her coat she wore a crimson, cocaine rose.

Big gold chariots on the Milky Way,
Snakes and elephants silver and gray.
Oh the cocaine blues they make me sad,
Oh the cocaine blues make me feel bad.

Lil went to a snow party one cold night,
And the way she sniffed was sure a fright.
There was Hophead Mag with Dopey Slim,
Kankakee Liz and Yen Shee Jim.

There was Morphine Sue and the Poppy Face Kid,
Climbed up snow ladders and down they skid;
There was the Stepladder Kit, a good six feet,
And the Sleigh-riding Sister who were hard to beat.

Along in the morning about half past three
They were all lit up like a Christmas tree;
Lil got home and started for bed,
Took another sniff and it knocked her dead.

They laid her out in her cocaine clothes:
She wore a snowbird hat with a crimson rose;
On her headstone you'll find this refrain:
She died as she lived, sniffing cocaine

Did you ever hear about Cocaine Lil?
She lived in Cocaine town on Cocaine hill,
She had a cocaine dog and a cocaine cat,
They fought all night with a cocaine rat.

See, it is not necessary to hear this verse read, or hear music behind it, to be transported by it. It has great rhymes and rhythm. In a sense, it is lyric writing at it's finest.

But what I am suggesting now is *another level* of songwriting consciousness altogether. I am proposing that it is possible to write an authentic poem, not a *lyric*, and then transform that into a living song.

In order to do this, however, firstly, the songwriter has to know *how* to write a real poem. A poem that can stand on its own two beautiful feet without crutches. This requires as much self-training and reading, studying and absorbing the varied and infinite poetic repertoire as it took you to learn to write, play and sing songs. Whew! That's a lot of work. (So start early, kids!)

No classical composer so far has achieved this goal, in my opinion, including Wagner. Wagner had a vision of the *writer-musician*, evident from his vast body of original librettos, but Wagner was no poet and his words fail utterly on the page without the music. Just try reading those librettos stripped down to pure language without falling asleep.

Just about anyone with any musical skill can set a poem to music. You just put notes under the words and find a trained singer to sing them. That don't make them living songs. Percy Grainger more or less said, *'Anyone can write an oratorio, but to write one of the world's songs – now that's something.'*

Schubert, in fairly recent times, succeeded probably better than anyone in creating living songs-from-poems, most notably Goethe's, *The Erlking*, a magnificent song from a magnificent poem - but Schubert did not write poetry himself.

So where can we look for the pioneers in this area?

We have to go back to the 16th Century, to John Dowland, the *'English Orpheus,'* to find a poet-musician who could write his own verse and create living songs out of existing poetry. But Dowland also happened to be a virtuoso lutenist. Words. And music. Ok. Now we're talking! Here is the lost template for the vision of the writer-musician of the future. Percy Grainger, Alfred Deller and Philip K Dick are just a few of the many creative folks who inspired by Dowland's voice:

'Flow, my tears, fall from your springs!
Exiled for ever, let me mourn;
Where night's black bird her sad infamy sings,
There let me live forlorn.'

Yes.

"He chose for musical setting some of the most perfect lyrics that have ever been written in the English language, yet never did he fail to re-create the full beauty of the poet's thought in music." Peter Warlock

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dowland

<http://www.thehypertexts.com/John%20Dowland%20Poet%20Poetry%20Picture%20Bio.htm>

A good and logical way for the untrained singer-songwriter to get started on the lyric-poem path is to start as Woody Guthrie did by creating your lyrics out first so that they work on the page – and *then* set them to music. Learn to write stand-alone light verse that you can set to music in the form of songs.

Recent Writing Example:

I came up with the 35 songs for my recent **Leadbelly Ballad Novel**, in only three weeks – including 100 pages of biographical drama! Believe me, I have never done that before, or since, and I had no previous experience of that kind of speed of output but the songs just kept coming and I just kept writing them down until the well done run dry. (My usual songwriting goal is to write ten songs worth keeping - *a year!* If I am lucky.)

My original plan was to create about forty songs to help *illustrate* the biographical dramatic text that I had written. So I got pretty close. The text is based on the story of Leadbelly's life and the songs were to be completely original, not Leadbelly's own songs, but written somewhat in the style of Leadbelly, and also the ancillary music of the times, ie. sukey jumps, blues, hollers, old timey, gospel, bluegrass, & country - to create atmosphere around the story, but also to be stand-alone songs that wouldn't require any introductions.

I started by using index cards to write down titles and themes like: *Eli Whitney and the Cotton Gin, The Ku Klux Klan, Houston Riot of 1910, Jack Johnson and The Mann Act*, and so forth. Seminal events and people of the period that Leadbelly lived in. Then, I would assemble a page or two of notes on each theme or topic, using source material from books and the internet. Finally, whenever the spirit moved me, after I had primed the pump so to speak, I would turn this material into lyrics. Sometimes by personalizing it with some experience I had actually had which came close to what I was writing about. Such as the time I was refused service, in the 70s, at an all-black diner in West Virginia – for being white! That was special. I found myself often waking up in the middle of the night and writing out the lyrics to two or three of these songs at a time. Some I would assemble an entire lyric in my head before even turning the light on. (Preparation is everything.) Then I would go back to sleep. When I woke up in the morning, I would pick up my guitar and set the lyrics to music, working until I found something original and honest and true to the words. Then I would turn on the recorder, record it and move on to the next one. I did this day after day. (I am still teaching myself to play and learn those songs that I first wrote down during that intense three weeks. That's a lot of new songs to memorize.) The creation pattern for all of them was the same: idea or title first, words second, music third. Each one of these lyrics had to work on the page without the music – as they form part of the text – and they had to work as stand-alone songs – without the supportive text of the biography. Ultimately, they remained lyrics, or light verse, not poems. Have a look at a few. Most of them will make sense to you without having to hear any music:

<http://members.iinet.net.au/~dwomen/files/IreneLyrics.html>

OK. So let's now look at some *poems*, as compared to lyrics.

Here's one of Leonard Cohen's early ones, from '*The Spicebox of Earth*':

As The Mist Leaves No Scar

As the mist leaves no scar
On the dark green hill,
So my body leaves no scar
On you, nor ever will.

When wind and hawk encounter,
What remains to keep?
So you and I encounter,
Then turn, then fall to sleep.

As many nights endure
Without a moon or star,
So will we endure
When one is gone and far.

This is a poem, not a lyric. It doesn't need music. Now, it certainly could be turned into song, by, say, using the first verse as a chorus. But it works fine as it is. It doesn't really cry out to me to be a song.

Let's compare it to one of Dylan's middle period lyrics:

Lay, Lady, Lay

Lay, lady, lay, lay across my big brass bed
Whatever colors you have in your mind
I'll show them to you and you'll see them shine

Lay, lady, lay, lay across my big brass bed
Stay, lady, stay, stay with your man awhile
Until the break of day, let me see you make him smile
His clothes are dirty but his hands are clean
And you're the best thing that he's ever seen

Stay, lady, stay, stay with your man awhile
Why wait any longer for the world to begin
You can have your cake and eat it too
Why wait any longer for the one you love
When he's standing in front of you

Lay, lady, lay, lay across my big brass bed
Stay, lady, stay, stay while the night is still ahead
I long to see you in the morning light
I long to reach for you in the night
Stay, lady, stay, stay while the night is still ahead.

Not one of his best, I know, but can you feel the intrinsic difference? This is a lyric - not a poem. It *needs* the music. Without the music, this is very weak set of lines. Take them apart. No poet of any real language awareness would put *'you can have your cake and eat it too'* in a poem. Dylan can get away with using wise-acre clichés like this because of his *attitude*, but these lines require Dylan's unique personae and distinctive voice – and music, of course - to prop it up and give it its legs.

I would wager that it is almost impossible for anyone to read those words without hearing the music. But try and isolate them and see them as simple light verse and you will see what I mean.

Now let's look at this ancient poem written by Sappho (600 BC) - *'Fragment 64'*:

Tonight I've watched
the moon and then
the Pleiades
go down.

The night is now
half-gone;
youth goes;
I am in bed alone.

Short, but so beautiful. Just a fragment, really. At first glance, it doesn't resemble a song lyric. Nothing repeats. Nothing to make a chorus out of. But Sappho was said to have often sung her poems to harp accompaniment so I tried to imagine how a song could come out of this fragment. I found that if I simply repeated a few of Sappho's key lines, it would work. The lines in **red** are the added text:

Tonight I've watched
the moon and then
the Pleiades
go down.

The night is now
half-gone;
youth goes;

**The night is now
half-gone;
youth goes;**
I am in bed alone.

**The night is now
half-gone;
youth goes;
I am in bed alone.**

The new lines actually *dilute* the poetry but *enrich* the song! Another paradox. Now I would never reproduce these new words as the lyrics - but only give the original poem. The new lines, to me, are like an *invisible file* on a computer. They are necessary for the song, but are not necessary for the poetry. Herein lies the distinction and the essential difference between lyrics and poetry. Have a listen to the song version and compare. The poem is successfully transformed into a living and very singable song:

<http://www.myspace.com/joedolcemusic>