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## The SongMix Method

### How to Write a Hit Rock Song in 1 Hour

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## SongMix Method: How to Write a Hit Rock Song in 1 Hour

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## Part 1: Change How You Look At Songwriting

### How to Become a “Great” Artist

*“Bad artists copy. Great artists steal.” - Pablo Picasso*

Reading this quote changed my view of songwriting forever. We all know that copying songs and selling them as your own is illegal. We also know that copying a certain artist’s style leads to an unoriginal sound that audiences hate. That’s not what Picasso is saying to do and neither am I.

What this quote means to me is that all great art forms have an underlying vocabulary of ideas, themes and images that great artists have learned to shamelessly steal from. Rock songs are no different. You may not believe it now, but after you start analyzing tunes in the way presented here, you will be stunned. For instance, think of the hundreds of hit rock song titles that use the word “Fire” or “Black”. The Doors, U2, the Stones, Pearl Jam, and many more ALL have songs with those words in the title. Do you?

If you don’t “steal” enough from the underlying vocabulary of rock words, themes and chord progressions, large audiences will **not** identify your music as **the type of music they like**. But if you “steal” too much from a particular artist, sound or song, then people will see you as bland or a sound-alike, and you may even infringe on a copyright.

You MUST find the balance between these extremes if you want to create a hit song every time you sit down to write. If you want any commercial success, sitting down with pen and paper to write a “truly original” song from scratch is your formula for failure. Using only your own mind, most of your songs will inevitably sound too different from the public’s familiarity with the genre to ever be hits.

When you look at a mega-hit rock writer, you’ll see how they borrow directly from their predecessors and use common rock themes. For instance Spingsteen’s “Born in the USA” talks about war, home, and America. He uses the words penitentiary, town and fire, which are straight out of many other rock tunes. These themes and words have been used over and over for instance by Dylan (Masters of War, Subterranean Homesick Blues), U2 (A Sort of Homecoming, Sunday, Bloody Sunday) and The Rolling Stones (200 Light Years from Home, Gimme Shelter).

But you may ask, what about Beck? He’s completely different and he still has hits, right? Wrong, for instance he uses the super commonplace rock word “Black” in tons of his songs - Black Tambourine, Black Hole, Blackfire Choked Our Death, Super Golden Black. Underneath all that sampling, Beck’s songs have simple, standard chord progressions. Like Devil’s Haircut – D G C and Hotel City A E F#. By the way “Devil” and “City” are also highly reused rock words.

So do you have a song about the war, or about longing for home, that has the words “Devil” or “Fire” in the title? You should, and your target audience will eat it up!

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## Before You Start: Understanding the Rock Genre

All genres have standard themes and structures. Blues are usually about troubled relationships and difficult lives and set to the 12 bar blues. Country is about pick up trucks and cheaters and rest on C and G. Rock is no exception. If you want to write a hit song, the public needs to identify with the topics you are talking about, the basic form of the song, a familiar chord progression and the words and small phrases that are used to be recognizable as the art form known as “Rock”.

One “weird” line, word or chord progression can turn off a listener who is used to a certain style of music. You need to stick to what audiences know as the “type of music they like”. Even an “out-there” band like Tool sticks the common rock themes of sex and drugs, and basically revolves around the pentatonic rock/blues scale. Originality only counts if you have a firm foundation in the genre and **then** you add your own slight twist.

Think about it. There are only three elements to a song - the words, melody and chord progression. So what determines whether or not a song is a hit, is the words, melody and chords that are chosen to make up that song. For **your** song to be a hit you must choose words, chords and a melody that your audience identifies with immediately as “that’s cool, that band sounds like so and so, but with a new original sound!”. Using words, phrases, songs structures and chord progressions that are common to your genre is **not** copyright infringement, its part of carrying on a tradition.

At first it feels really strange to outright borrow from other artists. In fact, it’s a humbling experience to put aside the need to make a song totally “mine”. However, you’ll come to understand that that’s just how things work when you are in the business of pleasing people who are fans of a certain genre. What if Snoop Dog starting rapping about his new pick-up truck or how much he loves his son?? That would be ridiculous of course, because those are popular country themes. Or what if BB King started singing about doing drive by shootings?

It’s easy to pinpoint the themes in country, rap and the blues. But do you know the common themes in rock? Sure, there’s sex and drugs, but you’re a rock songwriter so do you know at least 3 more of the top of your head? Would you be surprised when I tell you that the idea of freedom, certain colors, and various elements of the earth permeate songs from every major rock band? Sounds odd, I know, but I can prove it if you keep reading.

When I discovered how blatantly all the major rock stars rip each other’s ideas off, it actually made me mad that I wasn’t in on it the whole time!! That’s until I understood that “Rock” is an art form just like “Impressionism” or “Cubism”. That means there is a school of thought, mentors, teachers, traditions, themes, philosophies and images that are a part of that art form. Great writers like Dylan, Maynard from Tool, Kurt Cobain, Sting and all the others all know this instinctively. That’s why not so great writers struggle for ideas, get writers block and throw out half the songs they write.

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A few examples of commonly used words in rock

“Free”

Keep on Rocking in the Free World  
Free Fallin  
Free Bird  
If You Love Somebody Set Them Free

“Riders”

Riders on the Storm  
Two riders were approaching, the wind began to howl  
I Know You Rider  
Ghost Rider  
Midnight Rider

“Fire”

I'm On Fire  
Ring of Fire  
The Unforgettable Fire  
Play With Fire  
Light My Fire

“Sun”

Invisible Sun  
House of the Rising Sun  
Waiting for the Sun  
I know you'll be a sun in somebody else's sky

That's just a handful of dozens of common words that have been proven to sound cool in a rock song and that your audience will subconsciously recognize.

Original line example

I'm just using these few words in a new way...

[And the rider feels free under the fire of the sun](#)

Without knowing some of the specific underlying words in rock and without having a reference in front me, it could take me a week to come up with a line that decent. Using this method I came up with it in about 30 seconds. That could even be a chorus and the song would be called “Fire of the Sun”.

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Some examples of common themes & imagery in rock

**Rebellion (against society, education & religion)** – Like a Rolling Stone, Jeremy, All Along the Watchtower, My Generation, The Wall, Ants Marching, Losing My Religion

**Freedom** – Born to Be Wild, Born to Run, Free Bird, Freedom (Rage Against The Machine, Jimi Hendrix, Fleetwood Mac and many more)

**The elements and the universe (the sky, fire, water, sun, moon, sky, rain and snow)** - Light My Fire, Fields of Gold, Harvest Moon, Fire (U2, Jimi Hendrix, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Springsteen)

**Home** – Rocketman, Hometown, A Sort of Homecoming, Home (Staind, Sheryl Crow, Smashing Pumpkins, Collective Soul and many more)

**Sex** – Brown Sugar, Crash Into Me, Suffragette City, Your Body Is a Wonderland

**Mom/Dad** – Alive, Let It Be, The Wall, Fix You, Mother (The Police, Blind Melon, John Lennon, Danzig, etc.)

**Drugs** – Under the Bridge, Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds, Captain Jack

**Death** – American Pie, Man in the Box, Ordinary World

**The Devil** - Sympathy for the Devil, Devils Haircut, Devil (Stained, Tears for Fears)

**Spiritual Searching & God** - Stairway to Heaven, Imagine, Dream On, Purple Haze, I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For

**Love & Relationships** – Layla, Every Breath You Take, Heart Shaped Box, Glycerine, The Scientist, Just Like Heaven

**Prostitutes** – Honky Tonk Woman, Roxanne, House of the Rising Sun

**Anti-materialism** - Hotel California, I Can't Get No Satisfaction, Money, Californication

**War** – Won't Get Fooled Again, Gimme Shelter, Sunday Bloody Sunday, The Rooster

**America** - Born in the USA, America (Jewel, Moterhead, Santana, Yes, Gary Numan)

An original theme example

Here is an original storyline using the lyric above and a common rock theme...

**A guy just got out of prison and he's living life again as a free man**

## What You Will Need

You will need an open mind. First you will need to get over the fact that to be a commercial success, you can be original, but you also need to have a sound that the public is familiar with. You will need to accept the fact that you do not have total free creative reign over your own songs if you want to please a certain audience.

Some discipline. Just grabbing your guitar and strumming/singing what comes to mind is easy. That's why songwriting that way does not get great results. Learning a craft and art form takes some work and commitment to the principals in this book. It will take time and effort to master the vocabulary, imagery, themes and progressions in rock, but it's worth it.

To get the kind of amazing results that this book claims to deliver, you need to patiently read about these techniques thoroughly and follow the instructions in order and completely at first. Only once you have mastered the outlined methods, should you adjust the process to your own liking.

A solid idea of what Rock genre you want to fit into. For instance, "Hard" like Stained, "Classic" like The Rolling Stones, "Alternative" like Pearl Jam, "Jam Band" like Dave Matthews, or any other of the dozens of rock sub-genres. You will need to know this in order to create a Proven Rock Vocabulary in the style that you have decided to fit into. You can do this by making a list of bands you have been told you sound like, or that you love and want to sound like.

You should be flexible. This book presents a philosophy on becoming a great songwriter. It also presents a precise method as to how to write a song in an hour. You may come up with your own method that implements the overall philosophy of becoming an effortless master of the rock art form. For instance, I used to just use cut up engine software (more on this later) to generate words and phrases for inspiration. But sometimes I didn't have access to a computer and I adjusted my technique to looking through CD sleeve lyrics and picking out themes and phrases I thought were cool and writing them down in a list on paper.

Some basic music and writing skills: You don't need to be great or even very good, but you do need some ability to imagine stories and themes and to write basic lines that describe your ideas. You also need to be able to sing a basic melody and an instrument like guitar or piano. If you don't then find a songwriting partner that has the skills you don't.

A computer with Internet access to get to all the resources you'll need or get a large notepad with pencil, maybe a copy of billboard, some CDs and a rhyming dictionary. Preferably use a professional word processor like MS Word to avoid spelling and bad grammar mistakes.

If you want to market your songs commercially you will need the ability to perform live or you will need to find people who can play them live. For commercial success, the performance of your songs, either by you or someone else, must be excellent in some way. Even if you just want to market your songs to record labels and producers for other established artists to cover on their CDs, the song demo you send must be a very good, if not great performance.

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## Part 2: How to Write a Hit Rock Song

### Constructing the “Proven Rock Lyric Vocabulary” (PRLV): 10 minutes

1. Find 5 hit songs that are similar to the one you want to write. They should be in the current Billboard top 100, in the top 100 all time rock or pop CDs or the top 5 hit songs of a certain artist that influences you.

You can be creative in picking the songs. What’s important is that the songs you choose have **proven** appeal to the audience you want to gain fans within. If you want to write a song for a film, pick tunes that may have never made it on the Billboard charts, but were themes to hit movies. If you want to appeal to college market, then look at the College Music Journal charts.

The idea is that certain songs use words, progressions and stories that people naturally and instinctively like more than others. As a songwriter you need to find out what those elements are **exactly** in order to be a success.

2. Get the lyrics and chord progressions to the tunes. Find them on the Internet, on CD sleeves, in sheet music or listen to the song and write them down.

3. Make a list of words and small phrases that are in the song.

- To do this you can put the entire songs in a “cut up engine”. A “cut up engine” is software that randomly dissects the hit song lyrics into an unidentifiable bunch of words and phrases.

- Or you can visually go through each song and make a list of words and phrases on your notepad.

We’ll call the result of free-floating words and phrases your “Proven Rock Lyric Vocabulary”. Don’t be concerned that you are stealing songs.

**Words and small phrases are not copyrightable, only melodies and lyrics lines are.**

No one can own the English language. Think of how many songs use the phrase “rolling stone”!

To add your own unique twist, what’s important is to choose words and phrases that you like and resonate with you personally. For instance, if you’re analyzing Nirvana’s Heart Shaped Box and the phrase “umbilical noose” is too extreme for you, then just don’t use it. Or instead of the whole phrase “magnet tar pit trap”, maybe you just like the word “magnet”. That will still work and you’ll find your own use for the word, so grab it!

Have fun with it. You can mix and cut up a Pink Floyd, Police and Nirvana tune if you want and you’ll come up with a very unique vocabulary that will still feel good to a rock fan. So you see how you can “steal” directly from famous proven artists but still come up with unique lines that you can copyright as your own? The more you do this you will see how these major recording artists ruthlessly do this in almost every song they write. That’s why the public loves them, and the fans don’t even realize it!

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## “Proven Rock Lyric Vocabulary” Resources

Here are some places to look for artists and songs with established fan appeal...

### Top Artist and Hit Sites

<http://www.angelfire.com/fl4/moneychords/classicrock1000.html>  
<http://modernrock.com/charts/>  
<http://www.rockonthenet.com/archive/2000/vh1rocksongs.htm>  
[http://www.digitaldreamdoor.com/pages/best\\_songsddd.html](http://www.digitaldreamdoor.com/pages/best_songsddd.html)  
<http://www.rock-songs.com/>  
[http://www.billboard.com/bbcom/charts/chart\\_display.jsp?g=Singles&f=Mainstream+Rock](http://www.billboard.com/bbcom/charts/chart_display.jsp?g=Singles&f=Mainstream+Rock)  
<http://www.woxy.com/music/mr500-05.php>

Then you can go here to get the lyrics and chord progressions...

### Lyric & Chord Sites

<http://www.azlyrics.com/>  
<http://www.lyrics.com/>  
<http://www.sing365.com/>  
<http://www.chordie.com/>

One way to create the Proven Rock Vocabulary is to put the lyrics in cut up software that you can find here...

### Cut Up Software Links

<http://www.lazaruscorporation.co.uk/v4/cutup/textinput.php>  
<http://www.languageisavirus.com/cutupmachine.html>  
<http://www.esoteric-sensationalism.com/>

### History of Cut Up Technique

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cut-up\\_technique](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cut-up_technique)

These have a built in rhyming dictionary, thesaurus, and many other convenient features that will cut down your songwriting time...

### All In One

<http://www.masterwriter.com/>  
[http://www.virtualstudiosystems.com/content.php?pg=l\\_features](http://www.virtualstudiosystems.com/content.php?pg=l_features)

### Brainstorming

Enter your PRLV songs in the cybernetic poet for some automatically generated lines to give you some thematic and lyrical inspiration...

[http://www.kurzweilcyberart.com/poetry/rkcp\\_overview.php3](http://www.kurzweilcyberart.com/poetry/rkcp_overview.php3)  
<http://www.paramind.net/>



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We'll use some Pearl Jam tunes with lots of radio play as examples to write an original song called "Picture of Clouds".

### Pearl Jam Song List Example

Alive  
Jeremy  
Black  
Elderly Woman behind the Counter in a Small Town  
Daughter

Now that you have the songs, go through and pick out words and small phrases you think are cool and make a list. Or, stick the entire lyrics from all the songs in cut up software. You'll get a list of great words that immediately create powerful images that are native to rock....

### Pearl Jam PRLV Example

A small set of the Pearl Jam-based "Proven Rock Lyric Vocabulary":

Child  
God  
Candle  
Heart  
Wicked  
Hand  
Whispering  
Butterflies  
Mother  
Unleashed  
Alive  
Picture  
Memory  
Haunting  
Dream  
Recognize  
Mother  
Starve  
Roam  
Survive  
Porch  
Sun  
Fierce  
Lion  
Tattoo

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## Imagining a Story or Theme: 5 minutes

Look through your Proven Rock Lyric Vocabulary and see what kinds of stories and images come to your mind based on the words and small phrases you see in front of you. Once you have a few possible ideas in mind and then move to the next step. You will be surprised how fast you can come up with an idea for a song while looking at the basic words and phrases that make up the genre.

Keep a list of common rock themes from tunes that make up your PRLV so you can use them if you need some inspiration. For the Pearl Jam example it could be a vague idea like “Something about a troubled kid” and it may become clearer like the theme below as you write the lyrics in the next step:

### “Picture of Clouds” Theme Example

From glancing at the Pearl Jam PRLV I brainstormed a bit and thought of a story line that I thought was interesting and I knew a little about.

### The relationship between a burdened mom and a gifted daughter

It’s similar to “Jeremy” which was a hit and therefore you know for sure it’s a story many people in your audience will relate to. But it’s different enough that the theme is still very much my own idea.

Coming up with a theme is a very important part of writing a great song quickly. It guides the writing of lyric lines. This formula demonstrates the idea...

### **Proven Rock Theme + PRLV = Super fast high quality lyrics**

You should work off of themes and stories in established songs, but pick those that mean something to you and that you can relate to in some way. Then add a slight new angle to it.

For instance, say you want to write a song about “War” because this is something people have deep passionate feelings about and it’s a standard rock theme. The problem is you have never been in a war and don’t know anybody that has been in a war. So what do you write about then? Well, you could write about what you think it would feel like to be in a war. Or you could write about your respect for people who go to war to ensure your safety.

Here is a great example of an artist outright exploiting a popular theme. Prisoners throughout the US all thought Johnny Cash had been to prison because he wrote “Folsom Prison Blues”. At the time Cash wrote that song, he had never stepped foot inside of a prison! He wrote the song because he was thinking of how it would “feel” to be in prison. In the movie “Walk the Line” his Dad even makes fun of him for it. Well Cash laughed all the way to the bank because that song made him famous!

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