

A Broader Perspective for Singer/ Songwriters

by Dennis Winge

(Disclaimer: Part I of this article is just an opinion, and even if you don't agree with the opinion, the perspective could potentially be a useful one in order to help you assess your own strengths and weaknesses on the guitar, as presented in part III.)

I. The Rant: "How Guitars Helped Destroy Western Music"

The guitar is such an amazingly beautiful and versatile instrument, and yet in certain ways it has been at least partly responsible for the decline of western music. Most popular music is extremely focused on lyrics, with very little attention to harmony or rhythm, or even melody sometimes. A typical pop song is in 4/4, and may or may not even be played by a human drummer or bassist. The chords are very, very simple and repetitive. The melody can sometimes be catchy, but often, as in rap music for example, the focus is on the lyrics. Even if the melody is catchy and the words are great, that still leaves half the details ignored: ie, rhythm and harmony. By harmony I mean the harmonic structure, not voices singing in harmony with each other.

This is where the guitar comes in. Guitarists typically strum chords. Of course, the guitar has become a hugely popular instrument in the last few decades. Unlike the piano, where individual voices move melodically within each chords and also transition smoothly from one chord to the next, the guitar in pop music typically does neither of those. It stays on one chord with little or no inner voice movement until it is time for the next chord. And there typically little or no voice leading from one chord to the next either. In addition, these chords are typically very repetitive, with very few chords per section, and very few sections per song. On top of all that, the songs are strung with the exact same rhythm throughout the entire piece.

This is not to say that there are not some very beautifully songs that are harmonically and rhythmically simple; there are many. "Silent Night," for example, was written in Oberndorf bei Salzburg, Austria at the last minute on guitar one Christmas Eve when the church organ was broken. This is not an argument that simple songs aren't good. This is simply pointing out that the popularity of strumming chords on the guitar has helped to drastically dumb-down western rhythmic and harmonic sensibility.

Songs like "Amazing Grace" and "This Land is Your Land" are wonderful timeless classics, but not because anything interesting is happening rhythmically or harmonically. It is because they have memorable melodies and powerful lyrics. There is nothing wrong with songs like this. However, this style of songwriting and performing has become so much the norm that in very broad terms, *we have become oblivious to the fact that modern music is so biased toward lyrics first, melody second, and rhythm and harmony become a distant third and fourth.* Yes, there are many exceptions to this over- generalization, but most trained musicians will admit the basic truth referred to here, and it is nothing new. We have known this for a long time.

II. What is to be Done?

If the above opinion is even a partially correct, how does it apply to you as a guitarist and songwriter? Well first of all there's nothing anyone can really do on a mass scale about this "problem." Things move in cycles, and the description above is simply a reflection of where the pendulum has recently been swinging. It will naturally change as musical evolution always does. Besides, it would be arrogant to try to initiate a call to action to try and revamp modern music with one simple article. This is simply a call for musicians, especially guitarists, to consider exploring other possibilities more than they do now.

(And in all fairness, the guitar was only partly responsible for this decline. The other culprit is the computerization of music, which allowed the ability to generate grooves that could be copy and pasted for long periods of time with very little effort. Elements like form and dynamics have virtually disintegrated as a result of computerization, although interestingly, other elements, like texture and timbre, continue to be explored because it's easy to set up a computerized groove, and computerized music tends to look to texture and timbre as easy ways to provide variety.)

III. Your Personal Assessment

Songwriters, ask yourself each question below. If the answer is 'yes' to any of them, read way to expand your songwriting horizons.

1. Do I only write songs starting with lyrics or chords first?

Try writing songs using melody or rhythm first, and then find chords that accurately help portray the emotion you are after. Don't just start with a few chords that go together, and then make up the melody on top of that. There are many ways to harmonize a melody and by starting with melody first, you may come up chords that really spice up your song. As to how to learn to harmonize a melody, you can get books on harmony (or read my article on [How to Harmonize a Melody](#)) or simply play around with different chord possibilities for each bar.

2. Do I strum a song the same way all the way through?

Expand your rhythmic vocabulary. Learn new strumming patterns and consider alternatives to strumming like fingerstyle, using alternative voicings, embellishments, voice leading, and at the very least, vary up the strum pattern for different sections of the songs. Also learn about different time signatures, half time, double time, etc.

3. Do I pay attention to other elements besides melody, harmony and rhythm?

Learn about each element of music independently, and explore ways to incorporate them into your songwriting. The seven elements are harmony, melody, rhythm, texture, timbre, dynamics, and form. Each is a fascinating study unto itself and I guarantee you will get tons of new, fresh ideas from studying each one separately.

4. Do I consider other possibilities for constructing a melody other than what comes out naturally from my voice?

Consider learning a chord melody to your favorite song on guitar. Put the melody on top, and play chords under it at the same time. This develops a guitarist's sense of the melodic, as well as harmonic possibilities on the guitar. Classical and jazz guitarists have done this for generations, but the overall popularity of these two genres is relatively small.

We could go on and on here, but point three seems to sum it all up. Just keep in mind that most pop songs focus on lyrics, then melody, so learn about the other elements each in their own right. You have no idea how much fun you're missing if you don't. Even a relatively unglamorous element like form can be quite fun to play around with. Master dynamics, for example, and amaze your audiences instantly. Keep on learning and keep on growing. Musical pendulums will swing, so why not be ahead of the curve, instead of following it?