

Radio Ears

by Susan Tucker



In a recent issue of Writer's Digest Magazine, there was an interesting article on writing public service announcements for the radio. Now I know we're not writing P.S.A.'s, but we are writing for the radio. Consequently there were some good reminders for us as songwriters.

1) In radio, you have to write for the ear - not the eye.

It's always a good thing to remember that the people listening to our songs can't see any punctuation or spelling in our lyric. For example, they don't see question marks, so if we are asking a question, we have to build that into our lyric through phrasing, mostly of the melody. When you speak a question to someone, your voice rises at the end of the sentence. That's how we know we are being asked something, rather than being told something. Keep that in mind when you are writing your melody line and let your melodic phrase flow up rather than resolving down.

Listeners can't tell if you are using some cutsie spelling of a word. For example, if you use the word "read" in place of "red", the listener can't see that. Their ear will hear what it wants to hear. What feels normal to them-which ultimately may cause confusion and a lack of interest in your song. Lack of interest - that's not what we're after!

Use common language. A song goes by in a matter of 3 minutes. There is not time to get into a deep and detailed diatribe about a subject. You have to tell your story, make your point clearly and quickly. Most generally when a listener hears your song on the radio, they are also distracted by traffic, lack of time and numerous other things begging for their attention.

2) Print journalists give the most important information first. But radio listeners remember the last thing they hear.

This fact is something we learn early on in songwriting, and it's one of the most important facets of writing great songs. This is why we write a "hook" into our songs.

Although in songwriting we also need to pay attention to the opening line. That first line needs to serve the same purpose as it would in print journalism. Grab the listener and pull them in for more. When the opening seconds of a song (both melodic and lyric) are really catchy, every time it comes on the radio, the listener will tune up the volume and tell the passenger in the car - "Hey, listen to this song. It's great!"

There is no doubt though that a good song has a memorable hook. Radio listeners remember the last thing they hear. And a great song has several memorable hooks. Try to write hooks into your lyric, melody, instrumentation, and rhythm.

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