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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

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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.rock-songs.com/>
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

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

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.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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Writing Lyric Lines: 20 minutes

Pick and choose words and phrases directly from your Proven Rock Lyric Vocabulary and use them to write **every other** line that fits with a basic story or theme. Write 5 sets of 2 sentence lyric lines. Many rock songs are abstract, and the song is not fully formed yet, so the lines don't have to make perfect sense. These will eventually make up your verses, chorus and bridge.

Don't repeat words from your PRLV in your songs, except for in the choruses which will be discussed later. There is a very good chance you will run out of words from your 5 song Proven Rock Vocabulary, so just go pick words and phrases from 5 more songs.

Choose two or three PRLV words and phrases at a time and let the theme you chose in the last step guide you to brainstorm a line that uses them. Keep fillers in mind to use and **also throw in your own words**.

Over time, you'll come to know instinctively many commonly used rock words that you can throw in to your lyric lines...

Example of some proven rock fillers

Baby, babe
Oh, ah, ooh
Sky
Lady
Life
Saturday, Sunday
Black, red
God
No, no
Yeah
Man, woman
Child
Rain
Stars
California
Hey, hey
Girl
Day, night
Sea, ocean
Gold
USA, America
Fly

You will find many more recognized filler words after you have created a few different PRLVs.

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So now I wrote some lines using words from the PRLV and a few common words that I've learned are used in all rock songs like "Free" and "Sleep". I use the theme I made up to write lines of a story. All the words in **bold** are from the Pearl Jam-based Proven Rock Lyric Vocabulary or words that I have come across from other PRLVs...

"Picture of Clouds" Every Other Line Example

The **child's** drawing **God** in **candle** wax

Line written later...

Whispering about **butterflies** to her **Mom** in the morning

Line written later...

Nothing is **free** and you can **starve** alone

Line written later...

Willing to face things she can **sleep** without **sinking**

Line written later...

Rhyming and Back Filling Lyric Lines

Now take the **last word** from every line you have written, and find a rhyming or close to rhyming word from the Proven Rock Lyric Vocabulary or a rhyming dictionary and place that word underneath every other line.

You can also rhyme the second to last words of the songs, two words at the beginning and ending of a single line, words in every other or a sequential line, or any other way you can think of. **The important thing is that your lines rhyme in some way.** Ideally the last words of the lines should rhyme, but that's not always possible when you're trying to create a story, so try your best.

Important: You're lines must rhyme in order for the melody to fall together naturally at the end of this process!! Also, audiences must hear rhymes to feel comfortable. Rhyming is not optional for commercial songs.

"Picture of Clouds" Rhyming Example

Find a rhyming or similar sounding **last word** before writing the remaining lines...

Nothing is free and you can starve alone

...**home**

Willing to face things she can sleep without sinking

...**painting**

It can all come together with a gentle touch

...**much**

Nothing has been better since she arrived

...**survive**

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Rhyming Dictionary Links

<http://www.rhymezone.com/>

<http://www.rhymer.com/>

<http://www.writeexpress.com/online2.html>

<http://rhyme.poetry.com/>

Then back fill the remaining 10 lines with sentences that make sense in the context of your story or theme. You will have written 5 sets of 4 lines. 3 of the sets will be verses. 1 of the sets will be your chorus and 1 will be your bridge.

“Picture of Clouds” 5 Sets of 4 Example

All the words in **bold** are from the Pearl Jam-based Proven Rock Lyric Vocabulary or words that I have come across from other PRLVs. All the lines are based on the main theme...

The **child's** drawing **God** in **candle** wax
Making finger paint **hearts** with tiny **hands**
Whispering about **butterflies** to her **Mom** in the morning
Having **breakfast** with her **daughter** and in **love** with the story

Nothing is **free** and you can **starve** alone
Wed to her **man** and a place and a **home**
Willing to face things she can **sleep** without **sinking**
And **stay alive** by thinking about her **baby painting** a
Picture of clouds, **picture** of clouds

The little **one** plays violin like it was a **memory** inside
The tune is **haunting** like a **dream** you can **recognize**
Mother can hear her through the **door** and is proud
Helping her mind **escape** from the debt and their **town**

It can all come together with a gentle **touch**
No need to **roam** when you have so much
Nothing has been better since she **arrived**
Yeah **life** can happen and you do more than **survive**

On the **porch** coloring canvas with **spinning suns**
The girl is **fierce** like a **lion** not yet **unleashed** on the **world**
Far from things **wicked** and **tattooed** now she plays cello
Mother surprises her with **lemonade** and Jell-o

Finally, fine-tune your lyrics to make some sense. You should give the listener an idea of a basic story or theme, but in rock most people like to read their own meaning into the song. Even if you were to spell out your story perfectly, most of the audience will interpret it their own way anyway. Be more concerned with getting across a theme, your lyrics sounding cool and interesting, and creating rock genre-based imagery than on making complete sense.

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Structuring and Fine-Tuning the Song: 10 minutes

Important: How to Pick the Chorus and Title

Look at your five sets of lyric lines and normally one will jump out at you at the most interesting. This will be your chorus and your “hook”. If none of them seem cool or interesting enough to be “chorus-worthy”, it’s very important that you keep writing 4 line sets using the PRLV until you have one.

Then pick the most interesting short phrase, from the most interesting verse and repeat it a couple of more times at the end of the chorus, or before/after each line of the chorus. That’s exactly how I came up with “Picture of Clouds”. **This short phrase or hook must also be the title of the song!!**

Another 4 line set may jump out at you as a little different and this could be your bridge. Cut and paste the chorus after each verse. Cut and paste your bridge after the second chorus. Stick to the proven song form below or the form of one of the proven hit songs you chose to create your Proven Rock Lyric Vocabulary:

Structuring Golden Rule:

*The choruses of great rock songs are **always** played and sung stronger, louder or higher than the verses. The bridge can go either way.*

The Universal Rock Pattern

You may not like it, but it’s true that the vast majority of rock songs on the radio fall loosely into the following pattern in **4/4 time**. But that’s just how things are.

In Jazz its Verse – Verse – Bridge - Verse

In Blues it’s the twelve bar blues repeated

And the standard progression in rock is...

Verse – Chorus – Verse – Chorus – Bridge – Solo – Verse – Chorus – Chorus

That’s it! Don’t be scared of it, just use it!

Yes, you may want to add an intro, outro and other riffs. But it is very important that you do that after the song is complete as discussed in the “Putting it All Together” section. Your song should not be based on a cool complicated riff, but on simple chords that anyone can play.

At this point you can also come up with an extra line or two or three at the very end of the song for ad-libbing on the last chorus

"Picture of Clouds" Fully Structured Example

The child's drawing God in candle wax
Making finger paint hearts with tiny hands
Whispering about butterflies to her Mom in the morning
Having breakfast with her daughter and in love with the story

Nothing is free and you can starve alone
Wed to her man and a place and a home
Willing to face things she can sleep without sinking
And stay alive by thinking about her baby painting a
Picture of clouds, picture of clouds

The little one plays violin like it was a memory inside
The tune is haunting like a dream you can recognize
Mother can hear her through the door and is proud
Helping her mind escape from the debt and their town

Nothing is free and you can starve alone
Wed to her man and a place and a home
Willing to face things she can sleep without sinking
And stay alive by thinking about her baby painting a
Picture of clouds, picture of clouds

It can all come together with a gentle touch
No need to roam when you have so much
Nothing has been better since she arrived
Yeah life can happen and you do more than survive

On the porch coloring canvas with spinning suns
The girl is fierce like a lion not yet unleashed on the world
Far from things wicked and tattooed now she plays cello
Mother surprises her with lemonade and Jell-o

Nothing is free and you can starve alone
Wed to her man and a place and a home
Willing to face things she can sleep without sinking
And stay alive by thinking about her baby painting a
Picture of clouds, picture of clouds
The suns always shining, the stars are aligning
In a picture of clouds

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Choosing Chords: 10 minutes

Finding a great chord progression is the easiest part of the whole process. You may not believe this at first... **Chords progressions are not copyrightable, only melodies and lyrics lines are.**

If they were, every blues artist in existence would be a criminal for using the 12 bar blues. When you get to know the very limited range of popular rock chord progressions you will understand. Feel free to use any chord progression from anywhere.

Just get the chords to the songs that formed your Proven Rock Lyric Vocabulary by figuring them out or getting them off the Internet. You can also use sites or books that list standard rock chord progressions. Use the progression as is, or put a small personal twist on the voicing or timing of the chords. However, keep the song in 4/4 and make sure most all chords start on the 1st or 3rd beat. Here are your chord rules:

1. Use chord progressions from proven hit songs
2. Add a small personal twist
3. Keep the chords on the beat. No off or upbeat timing
4. Play most chords in open position or simple bar chords
5. Use 4/4 time
6. Stick to a moderate tempo
7. Only use 1 or 2 different progressions

Do not be afraid to use the same **one** progression for the entire song! Jimi Hendrix said "All I need is three chords and the truth". "Little Wing" and "Hey Joe" are both only one progression through the entire song. At most use 2 progressions - 1 for the verse and 1 for the chorus. For the bridge just pick one of the two. Simple songs get covered by other artists more and are easier for an audience to understand and recognize as "the type of music they like".

Examples of common rock chord progressions

Why make your own chord progressions up when there are hundreds of proven progressions in hit songs that you can use? Coming up with an original progression is a waste of time and adds to the risk that it may sound too strange to your audience. Here is a few that have been reused by every rock artist from the Beatles to Pearl Jam:

E D A
D A E
A D G D
E G A E
D C
C Em F G
C D F E

Just pick one or any other progression from a hit song in your genre, make a small alteration and strum! Remember how easy blues artists have it so don't make it harder on yourself!!

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Standard rock progression site

<http://www.angelfire.com/fl4/moneychords/lesson.html>
<http://www.angelfire.com/fl4/moneychords/rock.html>
<http://www.angelfire.com/fl4/moneychords/RBprogression.html>
<http://www.angelfire.com/fl4/moneychords/classicrock.html>

Chords site

<http://www.chordie.com/>
<http://www.harmony-central.com/Guitar/tab.html>

“Picture of Clouds” Chord Progression Example

For the sample song I saw the progression to Jimi Hendrix’s “Little Wing” which is one long progression that is just repeated for the whole song:

Em G Am Em Bm Bb Am G F C D

I liked that idea and then I created the same kind of extended progression but using simpler chords that I saw in 2 different Pearl Jam tunes:

C E C E G F E G F E

6 Rules for Singing the Melody: 10 minutes

You’ll be surprised that when you have great rhyming lyrics and a killer rock chord progression and a solid song structure, the melody will fall into place easily...

Follow these 6 simple rules to come up with a melody for your song:

1. Don’t “write” a melody, just sing what comes to you **after** you have written lyrics and found a cool chord progression.
2. Sing the verse melody at the low end of your range, and sing the chorus melody at the high end of your range.
3. Sing the chorus stronger than the verse. The bridge can go either way but stronger works better.
4. You should be able to sing the entire tune on pitch and without straining in any way.
5. The melody should be very simple but with a slight twist.
6. Sing passionately and with conviction, but **not** forcefully and straining.

If you really stick to these rules, a great, natural melody will write itself!! **For this method of melody creation to work, you must have come up with the lyrics and chords first as described in the previous steps.**

Part 3: What to Do With Your Songs

Putting It All Together

If you find that your tune sounds way too much like the songs in the PRLV, then you borrowed a little too much, so next time give it a little more of a personal twist. Over time you will get better at it and find a balance.

Once you have lyrics, chords and a melody, then put together a simple page like the “Fake Sheet” below and give it to your band or song writing partner. Also write down the actual timing of your chord progressions by measure in some simple way as shown. Add the copyright notice as in the following example.

Once it’s all done, record the song in anyway possible, no matter how good or bad the recording. You’ll now have two permanent versions of your song, on paper and audio. Don’t let your tunes get lost in some old notebook where you forget the chords and how the melody went!!

“Arranging” the Songs

After you give the songs to your band, producer, or other partners, you may want to arrange them to give them a fuller sound. This is where you might come up with all the other elements of a commercial song such as:

- Intro and outro
- Guitar and bass riffs
- Harmonies
- Solos
- Keyboard parts
- Samples
- Breaks and stops
- Sequenced loops
- String arrangements
- Some ad-libbing in the very last chorus

...and anything else you can think of.

Arranging Golden Rule:

A hit rock song should be able to be played solo on guitar or piano with one vocal and get consistent audience compliments.

So that means if your song “only sounds good with the harmony” then it’s probably not that great. The lyrics, chord progression, melody and hook in the chorus should be so cool and also simple that it needs no help to stand on its own two legs as a song!

If you can’t sing your song with one instrument and feel great about it, then fix it or trash it!

“Picture of Clouds” Fake Sheet Example

“Picture of Clouds”

| C | E | C | E |
| G F | E | G F | E |

The child’s drawing God in candle wax
Making finger paint hearts with tiny hands
Whispering about butterflies to her Mom in the morning
Having breakfast with her daughter and in love with the story

Nothing is free and you can starve alone
Wed to her man and a place and a home
Willing to face things she can sleep without sinking
And stay alive by thinking about her baby painting a
Picture of clouds, picture of clouds

The little one plays violin like it was a memory inside
The tune is haunting like a dream you can recognize
Mother can hear her through the door and is proud
Helping her mind escape from the debt and their town

Nothing is free and you can starve alone
Wed to her man and a place and a home
Willing to face things she can sleep without sinking
And stay alive by thinking about her baby painting a
Picture of clouds, picture of clouds

It can all come together with a gentle touch
No need to roam when you have so much
Nothing has been better since she arrived
Yeah life can happen and you do more than survive

On the porch coloring canvas with spinning suns
The girl is fierce like a lion not yet unleashed on the world
Far from things wicked and tattooed now she plays cello
Mother surprises her with lemonade and Jell-o

Nothing is free and you can starve alone
Wed to her man and a place and a home
Willing to face things she can sleep without sinking
And stay alive by thinking about her baby painting a
Picture of clouds, picture of clouds
The suns always shining, the stars are aligning
In a picture of clouds

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Practicing and Fine Tuning: Ongoing

After 15 minutes you'll have a basic idea of the melody. However, you'll need to play through the song 5 or 6 times to fine tune what you've created before playing it for anyone. Take the time to really work out what you'll sing for every line, but if it doesn't come naturally after a few times of playing through the song, then it was not meant to be and you should start over with a different chord progression.

Writing this way will decrease the percentage of tunes that you scrap, and increase the quality of those that you keep. But, about 1/5 of them will still come up as garbage, and certainly some will be better than others. Just rotate them out of your set as you write better songs.

Also, even after you have played it out, don't be afraid to make slight alterations here and there if you find that for some reason a section just isn't working. You'll feel it if one of the sections of a tune just doesn't carry like the others. If you rewrite a section like the bridge or a certain verse, don't do it from your head, use the PRLV method! To trouble shoot a problematic song, figure out what step in the 1 hour process you need to go back to...

The 7 Step Method Outline

1. **Construct the "Proven Rock Lyric Vocabulary" (PRLV)**
2. **Imagine a story or theme**
3. **Write lyric lines**
4. **Rhyme the lines and back fill**
5. **Structure and fine-tune the song**
6. **Choose chords**
7. **Sing the melody**

Common Song Problems & How to Fix Them

Problem: Your lyrics seem too abstract, song doesn't make sense.

Solution: Go back and come up with a more defined story. Expand your PRLV. Write more lines that tell your story.

Problem: The song does not have a good enough hook and chorus.

Solution: Write rhyming 4 line sets using the PRLV until one jumps out at you and cool sounding and concise. If the most interesting phrase in that set could be a title, then that's your chorus.

Problem: The melody isn't good

Solution: The most likely problem is that the range and power of your verse and chorus are too similar. Go back and sing the verse lower and the chorus higher. Or, the lyrics are not rhymed well enough or the hook is not cool enough. If you improve those things and you still can't sing a naturally great melody, then find a new chord progression.

Problem: The tune doesn't come together live or with the band.

Solution: The song is just not good enough. Most likely problems are that the lyrics are weak, the hook is not strong, the melody is mediocre, or the chord progression is too complicated. Ask people and your band what they think and try to pin point the problem.

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A Better Way to Write Commercial Songs

Writing the way outlined in this book, someone asks me at every show, “Was **that** an original?!” That’s the ultimate compliment!

Of course, the whole process can take much longer than an hour if you want it to. Sticking to a time limit is not a requirement for writing an excellent tune. But the fact is that you can come up with much better results than you are used to - even in an hour. To me, the realization of things outlined in the book came over a 20 year period, and the 1 hour method took 2 years to fine-tune, so I hope I have saved you a lot of time and wasted effort!

Like I said, I’ve been writing the way outlined in this book for 2 years and sometimes I try to do it the way I used to...pen, pad, guitar and my own thoughts. Also, I used to write chords, melody then lyrics, which is the opposite of this method. I’m always sorry I try that because I always toss out the tunes I write the “old” way. They just don’t compare and I can tell when I play them out... the bands not as into it, people don’t watch as much, and I don’t get compliments. Here are the differences:

Typical Songwriting Method

Pen + pad + my own thoughts =

½ or more songs thrown away
Limited audience interest
Mediocre songs
Diminished confidence and motivation

1 Hour Hit Songwriting Method

Hit song list + Proven Rock Lyric Vocabulary + proven rock themes + cut up software + proven rock chord progressions list + rhyming dictionary + MS Word + my own thoughts =

Only 1/5 of songs trashed
Constant positive audience reaction
Songs that feel great to play
Tunes I think could possibly be on the charts
Lots more motivation and confidence onstage and in life

Feel free to experiment endlessly with progressions, lyrics and melody!! Just do it using proven building blocks that rock fans will recognize, admire and enjoy!