Meet Me at the Intersection of Melody and Word

By Robert Priest

Music and poetry each have their own power but when they intersect in the form of a song each can make the other more powerful. A great melody, suitably arranged and appropriately sung can take a poem which might otherwise be buried in a barely read anthology and corkscrew it permanently into the neurons where it replicates away leaving the listener almost unconsciously playing it again and again in the brain. The intersecting wave patterns of a song can penetrate and permeate our tissues till they come vibrating back through our own larynxes and lips; till the rhythm starts undulating in our pelvises and pounding away in our feet. That's pretty powerful. And that's one type of song.

Then there are songs where the lyrics provide the leading edge. Out front, unavoidable and magnetic. I think of a song such as Dylan's Masters of War. This would make a decent spoken word piece spoken passionately to an audience but with the advantage of that catchy borrowed melody to take the tenor, pitch and emotion of the voice to very razz places, it becomes its own geist. Such songs can reach the soul and communicate with the whole biology far beyond the mere brain.

Other kinds of song/poems twine music and language in a way that can bring solace or joy to those in the throes of being torn away from a love relationship or joyously beginning one. From one cerebral cortex to another song waves wash in, soothing, prodding, relieving, invoking spells that can provoke the workaday limbs into unergonomic undulations just for the joy of it, just for the sorrow of it.

None of which is to say it is easy to come up with the kind of song/poem I am describing here. And I'm certainly not saying that a lot of poetry that might work well in a book of poetry is suitable to inhabit a melody. For each person, for each culture there are parameters of taste which can define or limit the type of language suitable for song. Such aesthetic parameters can sometimes even divide the tribes: heavy metal fans pooh-poohing twee folk ballads while pop aficionados scoff at heady jazz — and that's just fine (as long as it's nonviolent) because every once in a while there can come a song that transcends all such division and with something as close to magic as we can get, bring the whole world together if only for a minute or two.

Another notable intersectional aspect of music and poetry manifests in the long tradition of co-writing songs. Think Rogers and Hammerstein, Lennon and MCcartney, Holland Dozier and Holland or Billie Eilish and her brother Finneas. I've written music to many of my own songs and I've got a decent voice, but I wouldn't say their strength is particularly in their musical impact. Fortunately for my catalogue once I realized I can come up with way more lyrics than melodies, I started co-writing with favourite songwriters. This was way back in the 80s. Basically I went out to clubs that featured singer songwriters and kept track of the people who were producing the kind of music that I wanted for myself. When I found someone I would approach them and see if they wanted to work with my lyrics or have me develop lyrics for their unfinished songs. Not every songwriter wants to or has the gift of putting lyrics to music, but over the years I found quite a number, mostly in Toronto but further afield as well. When the co-writing goes on in the same room it is a cooperative social interaction as much as anything. It also involves a bit of surrendering the ego to a larger communal aspiration which is a good social/spiritual skill to develop. Plus, for me, the process is a fun and productive antidote to the solitude of writing poetry. When it works we both come away with the gift of a new song. Over the years I would have to say that the songs that have risen to the top of my catalogue are 95% those written with other writers. Another advantage is that when the music that is developed is challenging for me to play on my brutalist guitar, I have to

improve my chops — something which my co-writers are usually happy to run me through. So there is an education.

So far I've had one co-write that rose to number one for two weeks on the Canadian charts in 1992 — *Song Instead of a Kiss* by Alannah Myles. Of late, a couple of songs co-written with indigenous balladeer Julian Taylor have risen into the top five on the CBC charts and are lately getting nominated for all sorts of awards. The big award for me though is in getting a poem Trojan-horsed into the media and thereby maybe even helping to sell a book of poetry or two. In general, I hate to see a good piece of music ruined by tepid lyrics and that is why I have often urged talented poets of a certain type to bring lyric writing into their practice. Among other things, diversifying your practice might also increase your income opportunities. But even if it doesn't, extending your poetic reach and learning a new craft is very good for brain health. As is getting up in the morning, knocking back a coffee and putting your whole body on vibrate as you sing a song you helped to create. Highly recommended.

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