

# What makes a song great?

Michael Shorr takes a shot at answering that musical question

Asking, “What makes a song a great song?” in this column is a little like asking, “What is the meaning of life?” It’s a huge and slippery topic, and would take a whole lot more than 800 words to do it justice.

Songwriter



THE HUM

Deonne Kahler

Michael Shorr tried, though. The Berklee College of Music graduate, University of New Mexico-Taos songwriting teacher, and song analyst on Taos’ syndicated radio show “Art of the Song,” gave it a valiant effort.

He started our discussion with a couple of caveats, in that assessing the quality of a song is entirely relative to one’s experience and preference. If you’re a huge fan of American country music, you may not think a critically acclaimed Indonesian song is all that terrific. If we’re not familiar with the style of music, we may not be able to make any judgment on quality.

And then there’s the fact that we all tend to pass subjective judgment — the “there’s no accounting for taste” phenomenon, or as Shorr more politely put it, “Whatever someone is creating is going to reach someone somewhere.” Regardless of quality, all songs will find an audience, even if it’s just your mom who loves that tune you wrote in college, where the lyrics feature the words socks, rocks, and alphabet blocks.

I’ll throw in one more proviso. For the purposes of this skim-the-surface discussion, let’s narrow it down to pop, rock, folk and country — we won’t attempt to talk about jazz, classical or hip-hop, since those genres tend to have complex and distinctive standards.

In terms of how to begin defining what makes a song great, Shorr started



Michael Shorr makes learning about music fun.

Courtesy Dorie Hagler

by listing its elements, which include melody, chords, lyrics, form or song architecture, and something he called groove. As a general rule, all those pieces must be operating synergistically, although there is something that is perhaps even more important.

“One thing that makes a great song is that it comes from a place of real honesty about some deep emotional experience,” Shorr explained. “It comes through in music as well as in lyrics. When both of those things are working together and really evoke the emotion in the listener, really capture that experience, it’s probably well on the way to becoming a great song.”

Shorr cited National Public Radio’s list of the most important musical works of the 20th century as good examples, songs such as Willie Nelson’s “Crazy,” Cole Porter’s “Night and Day,” and “I Wanna Be Sedated” by the Ramones.

Why is the Ramones’ song so great, for instance? “It’s a really good example of the music and the message being perfectly in synch. Angst, tension, fear, excitement, nervousness — all of those feelings are captured in the music.” The song’s machine-gun

rhythm echoes the anxiety in the lyrics: “Hurry, hurry, hurry, before I go insane, I can’t control my fingers, I can’t control my brain ...”

Shorr relayed Ira Gershwin’s comment that as the songwriter, you have to prove your title, meaning the lyrics should logically lead up to the title of the song. Let’s try it with the Ramones, does Shorr think it works? “Hell yeah,” he replied. In other words, wanting to be sedated is indeed the logical response to the singer’s feelings of desperation, of being out of control. Shorr pointed out another element of greatness related to this tune, which is that “I Wanna Be Sedated” is really fun to sing.

A song’s melody is also a key factor. Take “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” by Harold Arlen, where the first word and its two notes — “Some-where” — make an octave jump. “That’s a powerful interval,” Shorr said. A great song might also include what’s called a motif, or a short recognizable piece of melody that gets repeated. Shorr said the best example of this is Beethoven’s “Fifth Symphony.” You know: bah bah bah BAH, bah bah bah BAH.

Balance can also be used to great effect in a song. “I saw this study on beauty in *Time* magazine, and they found that symmetry is something people find beautiful,” Shorr said. “They did a graph of Denzel Washington’s face, and everything is perfectly symmetrical and proportioned.” It’s satisfying to the listener if a song’s elements feel balanced, like Denzel’s gorgeous face.

Ye, we also like to be surprised. Shorr cited the predictable ABAB rhyme scheme, as in “Mary had a little lamb, its fleece was white as snow, and everywhere that Mary went, the lamb was sure to go.” But Shorr said the less common rhyme of “Mary had a little lamb, its fleece was white as snow, and everywhere that Mary went, she sold the wool to pay the rent,” can be effective because it builds a song’s tension and drama.

There are so many elements that can make a song great, and there is obviously no one formula to get there. Even musical geniuses like The Beatles wrote clunkers — “Octopus’s Garden” anyone? Shorr recalled the words of Mike Reid, cowriter of “I Can’t Make You Love Me” (a hit for Bonnie Raitt and a truly great song), who said, “You have to move a lot of earth to find those nuggets of gold.” In other words, you have to write a lot of mediocre songs to get the great one.

Songwriting really is a bit of a mystery. “There are only 12 notes in western music, so how can you have such musical variety?” Shorr said. “Mozart is one of the greatest composers in history, and he had the same old notes. What is it that made his melodies so extraordinary? In a way, you just feel it. Maybe that’s the mark of a great song, what effect it has on people.”

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*Some days, the “Saturday Night Fever” soundtrack is the perfect thing. Great songs or not? You decide. E-mail Deonne at deonne@rightbrainleft.com.*