

# Proceedings from the Documentary Songwriters Conference

Bay Chamber Concerts and Music School, Rockport, Maine

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## Participants

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5. Melodi Var Öngel
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10. Beverly Pacheco
11. Chris Finn
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13. Caroline Rex-Waller
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15. Malcolm Brooks
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## Questions chosen for exploration

Participants chose 4 questions to focus on:

1. *How to find or create groove*
2. *How to respect the story-source vs. your own opinion*
3. *How to spot archetypal themes*
4. *How to know when to rhyme and when to stay true to meaning*

## Findings: Strategies and Techniques

From discussions, simulations, and songwriting sessions:

### ***How to find or create groove***

1. Listen to the recording read-through or sing-through of words and note which syllables are accented. Tap your hand in sync with the accents. Treat the taps as possible downbeats and upbeats. Often the accents will suggest a tempo and either a duple (straight) or triple (swing) groove.

2. Imagine you are moving your body to the read through. Your body may move on accented notes and suggest a tempo to you
3. Use your body, or mouth, or both to mimic a drum set. For example say “boom” for the kick drum and “chock” for the snare sound and “Tst, tst, tst” for the high hat.
4. Consider working in layers of groove, from simple to more complex. It may be easiest to hunt for a basic pulse at first. The pulse may suggest a tempo, but not a full groove with upbeats and backbeats. Once you detect a pulse however, and start tapping to it, louder pulses may suggest downbeats or backbeats, and smaller accents may suggest the upbeats.
5. If you are listening to a sing-through, sometimes the words sung on higher pitches may suggest accents. Those accents may suggest a pulse and groove.

### ***How to honor both the Story-Source’s desires and your own opinions***

1. If you, as musical sherpa, and your story-source disagree on an aspect of the song, it may be helpful to retrace your steps and place the disagreement in the context of a series of items you have agreed on. With a renewed appreciation of collaboration, both of you may be more ready to resolve a difference of opinion.
2. Seek agreement on the arc of the melody, either in the chorus, or in the verse, or in how the two combine to create a complete arc. If you agree on the overall shape of the arc, smaller differences may be easy to resolve.
3. To help the story-source perceive the pitch and phrasing of their sing-through, sing your interpretation of what you heard. Allow your musical experience to adjust pitches to fit a scale pattern that you feel might represent what the story-source intended. Sometimes a sing-back delights the story-source and lets them feel listened to and heard.
4. Consider asking questions to understand what the story-source is desiring or feeling. You may make more progress this way than with driving ahead with what you want.
5. To make decisions easier, offer the story-source choices and play or sing the options. For example, you might say, “The melody could rise to this note” (and sing the phrase), “or the melody might rise to this note” (and sing the phrase with the alternate note). “Do you have a sense of which one feels best to you?”

### ***How to spot archetypal themes***

1. An archetype is the energy behind a common human experience. It is the energy and feeling behind such events as birth, marriage, death, transformation, loss, and transcendence. It is also the energy and feeling behind such human roles as the young hero, the guru, the seductress, the wise herbal-healer, the father, and the mother.
2. Clues to an archetypal message in a spoken story may lie in certain phrases. Ask the story-source and yourself which lines use emotional words or convey striking images.
3. Ask the story source which lines feels meaningful.
4. If you find an image that feels striking or meaningful to the the story-source, draw out more clues by saying, “Tell me more.”

### ***When to rhyme and how to stay true to meaning***

1. First, simplify the words as much as possible.
2. If a word seems to unwieldy to sing, consider replacing it with a more singable word with similar meaning.
3. In some cases, adding a rhyme make the lyrics more memorable without detracting from authenticity or distorting the character of the lyrics
4. If you know your audience, and you choose to write for them, consider they care about rhyme? Recall that a number of poets have stopped writing with rhyme
5. Place authenticity before cleverness. When in doubt, check the words in the spoken text
6. There may be times when the story-source used a colloquialism or trite phrase that did not convey the intended meaning. Feel free to help choose an alternate wording.

### **Personal Next Steps**

At the close of the conference, participants said what they planned to do in the future. Here are their next steps:

- Collect a story with a family member
- Then collect a story with a participant in the conference
- Host a doc songwriting event
- Write a doc song with accomplished musicians who haven't used the process
- Bring this work to populations who have not had the opportunity or do not have a voice
- Develop a training process for documentary songwriting
- Introduce documentary songwriting process to a local ukulele group
- Explore working with children using the doc song process
- Create a database of melodic models, with links to recordings with front-peak, mid-peak, and end-peak melodic arcs
- Collect stories from Cypriots about conflict and the separation, working with the two languages – help them create and sing their songs with local musicians
- Use the process with accomplished musicians not yet familiar with it
- Lead the process in organizations where voices and stories tend to go unheard or are difficult to hear (prisons, etc.)
- Find ways that doc songwriters can get paid

## Comments on the conference itself

What to keep (+) and what to change ( $\Delta$ )

+	$\Delta$
Size of the group	More opportunities to observe
Diverse levels of experience	Self-selecting groups
Food – muffins	Write down “bin questions”
Barbara	More time!
Sondra	Expand the conference into two events – general/overview and specialized
Helpful to have everyone in the room	What’s next? When is a song done?
Loved group performances	How do I keep doing this?
Working with different people	

## Appendix - Schedule, List of possible questions, Poster writings verbatim, Purpose of the Conference

### Schedule for the Day

#### **Morning: Discovering and Experimenting**

8:30 registration and preparing name tag, enjoying coffee, muffin

Agree on goals - What brought you here today

Agree on the schedule

Set ground rules if any

Clarify roles – who will be timekeepers, facilitators, actors for simulations

9:00 Create a list people's individual Questions for the day

Narrow the list to 4 Questions of greatest interest

9:30 Explore Question #1

Discussion and Simulations

10:00 BREAK

10:15 Question #1 continued,

Collect observations and possible solutions

10:30 Explore Question #2

Discussion and Simulations

Collect observations and possible solutions

11:15 BREAK

11:30 Explore Question #3

Discussion and Simulations

Collect observations and possible solutions

12:15 LUNCH

#### **Afternoon: Wrap up questions, then Application and Practice**

1:00 Explore Question #4

Discussion and Simulations

Collect observations and possible solutions

1:45 Break into small groups, go into studios, apply discoveries in actual writing

2:45 BREAK Cookies and milk

3:00 Return to studios and break-out rooms

3:45 Re-assemble and present songs and findings to the overall group

4:00 BREAK

4:45 Reflect on the day

Summarize discoveries and techniques for publishing

List what worked, what could be changed for future conference

Consider setting a personal goal to apply what you experienced today

5:30 Clean up and pack up

6:00 Close

## Examples of possible questions

Some examples of questions to explore (Feel free to choose from here or make your own):

### 1. Getting the Story:

- a. How to frame your request to your Story Source to ensure that the story will contain a song
- b. What are some active listening and support skills
- c. Follow-up questions: When and what to ask after the story has been told
- d. How to know when you have enough material
  
- e. Promising lines to look out for – how to spot archetypal themes
- f. Types of lines that look promising but are actually difficult to develop
- g. When typing: How to ask the the Story Source to slow down
- h. When typing: Short term memory strategies to keep something in your head as you're typing

### 2. Shaping the Lyrics:

- a. Building a knowledge of archetypal themes and recognizing them in the text
- b. What would happen if key phrases were selected, and then the text were distilled, before it was broken into lines of free verse
- c. Whether to edit for metric symmetry and make lines of even length
- d. When to look for a synonym
  
- e. When to rhyme
- f. How to manage audience suggestions

### 3. Finding the Melody:

- a. How to decide whether to ask the Story Source for a read through first, before asking for a sing through
- b. How to collect and use melodic models
- c. How to choose which arc to use (front-peak, mid-peak, or end-peak)
- d. How to spot words to accent and words to hold out

- e. How to choose a scale (major, minor, blues, middle eastern, fiddle)
- f. How to help the Story Source to start singing
- g. How to test for singability
- h. When to leave pauses and make space
  
- i. How to design a verse that leads into a chorus
- j. How to design bridges and codas

#### **4. Finding the Groove and Chords:**

- a. How to collect and use groove models
- b. How to choose the chords for the melody
- c. How to decide harmonic rhythm and pace of changing chords
- d. How to decide whether chords should move up or down
- e. How and when to use alternate chords
  
- **Boundaries and roles:**
  - How to know how much influence the sherpa should exert on the song
  - How to decide when to ask for more from the Story Source and when to make suggestions (Is there a conflict between quality of product and quality or process)
  - How to let go of your own idea of what's best for the song, or how to advocate for your idea
  - How to switch between paying attention to your intuition and paying attention to the Story Source
  
- **Life as a documentary songwriter:**
  - How to talk about documentary songwriting when somebody asks you
  - How to find strength to overcome self-doubt and insecurity
  - How to find opportunities to collaborate with Story Sources and other sherpas
  - How to book doc songwriting workshops and live sessions

Transcriptions of the notes written up on poster papers

#### **First collection of questions:**

- 1) How to find story source – (4 stickies)
- 2) How to explain entire process / commitment from story source – (2 stickies)
- 3) Test for sing-ability – (6 stickies)
- 4) Archetypes (what is that) – (6 stickies)
- 5) Choosing important lines – (3 stickies)
- 6) How to create groove – (7 stickies)
- 7) Finding a story – (4 stickies)

- 8) Finding / developing a melody – (5 stickies)
- 9) When to rhyme /staying true to meaning – (6 stickies)
- 10) How to simplify / work in group – (0 stickies)
- 11) Respecting story source versus your own wishes / feelings – (10 stickies)

### **Chosen Questions:**

5. *How to find or create groove*
6. *How to respect the story-source vs.your own opinion*
7. *How to spot archetypal themes*
8. *How to know when to rhyme and when to stay true to meaning*

### **Discussion:**

#### **1) *How to find or create groove***

- Read through of words
- Use your body/mouth to create pulse
- Objects/body to simulate drums
- Find pulse → backbone
- Keeping it simple
- Explore variations of basic groove
  - a) Creating groove through different pitches that your body responds to
- From voice → finding accents on words

#### **2) *Honoring Story-Source vs. Own Opinions***

- (Groove, Pitch) “What are the basic elements I have to work with here?”
- Create an arch (High Point/low point)
- Repeat it back (what’s your interpretation?)
  - Let the story-source hear what they sang
- Probing/asking questions rather than driving with what you want

#### **3) *How to Spot Archetypal Themes***

\*The energy behind a common human experience/the common experience and how it is expressed.\*

- What are the emotional lines/images? Finding the core/what is the story about?
- Asking the story-source “what are the meaningful lines?”
- Finding one image that resonates and then asking questions about that line to draw emotion → “TELL ME MORE”
  - (Finding the “seed” of an idea.)

#### **4) *When to Rhyme / Stay True To Meaning***

- Simplify lyrics
- Identify words that are hard to sing
- To Rhyme or Not To Rhyme?



- Does it help us remember?
- Is the rhyme distracting?
- Does rhyme help the song “spread”?
- Who is your audience?
- What genre are you working in?
- Use Extraordinary Language (\*\*Not witty and pretty, but AUTHENTIC\*\*)
- Go back to original text
- Revisit/Revise clichés
- Ask followup questions

## Takeaways

### *From Songwriting Groups*

- Don't always need to rhyme
- Focus on archetype
- Shifting melody to fit lyrics
- Story source was comfortable
- Change lyrics for singability → collaborative
- Choosing one song
- Lack of material – kept talking
  - Knowing when to look for more
  - “Is there anything else?”
- Simplifying lyrics to help with melodic structure
- Coaching through layers of groove
- Have a ball!!!
- “Being Bare’ – No one above anyone else’s
- Avoiding rhyme when necessary
- Cutting
- Pulling back in text when necessary
- Offering multiple solutions
- Differentiating between chorus and verse

### All Together

+	Change
Size	More opportunities to observe
Diverse levels of experience	Self-selecting ? groups
Food – muffins	Write down “bin questions”
Barbara	More time!

Sondra	Two events – general/overview and specialized
Helpful to have everyone	What’s next? When is a song done?
Loved group performances	How do I keep doing this?
Working with different people	

## Purpose of the Conference

- To give docsong enthusiasts a chance to discuss desires and personal goals
- To give musical sherpas, both newbie and seasoned, a chance to improve in any area of the process, such as
  - designing a melody
  - identifying a groove in a smartphone recording
  - getting a Story Source to start singing
  - asking questions to find the emotional message in a story
- To gain knowledge and confidence through experiencing a series a docsong sessions, from story gathering to finishing arrangements
- To connect with other people who are making music and bringing this out into the world, to connect with others to help me work through problem spots. After saturday I might have 4 or even 15 people to call
- Skill acquisition is not the only for criterion for success. It’s only a day
- Documentary songwriting can build intimacy quickly because it is rare to be listened to so well and feel taken care of after all that you shared
- It may be nourishing and rare, because the world offers so many ways to connect superficially rather than deeply