

THE LYRICS OF

DO YOU WANT TO WRITE SONG LYRICS? HAVE A LOOK AT HOW SOME TOP SONGWRITERS, PAST AND PRESENT, HAVE USED WORDS TO EXPLORE IDEAS AND FEELINGS.



If you watch MTV or listen to the Top 40, you have probably heard of Eminem. This rap musician has many fans, but there also are many people who don't like his work. Why? His songs are filled with controversial lyrics.

Eminem has been acclaimed for his talent. He won a Grammy last year. His CD *The Marshall Mathers LP* is the fastest-selling hip-hop album ever. But groups across the country have argued that his sometimes violent and vulgar lyrics should be banned from radio airwaves and record stores. These groups say that lyrics in popular songs can have a great influence on people who hear them.

Throughout the history of rock 'n' roll, songwriters have expressed controversial ideas. Sometimes their work has stimulated people to think or act differently. Rock lyrics have often expressed rebellion against authority. One thing is certain: Eminem is not the first songwriter who has shocked listeners. And he probably won't be the last, either.

"You Don't Own Me": Boys and Girls

In the early 1960s, songs about boy-girl relationships written from the girl's point of view were popular. Many celebrated falling in love and being loyal to one boyfriend. In many songs, the girl expressed sadness about an unfaithful guy. Often girls were shown as victims of boys' insensitivity. That was a traditional female role. But some songs indicated that something else was quietly going on: Girls were asserting themselves more.

In songs like "He's a Rebel" (1962) by the Crystals and "Leader of the Pack" (1964) by the Shangri-Las, for example, girls



The Shangri-Las

OF REBELLION

proclaimed independence by linking up with rebellious guys, often motorcycle types their parents disliked. In "He's a Rebel," the singer explains that:

Just because he doesn't do what
Everybody else does
That's no reason why
I can't give him all my love.

In 1963, Leslie Gore's "You Don't Own Me" spoke up for girls' and women's independence in a new way. The lyrics have a surprisingly modern tone of voice:

You don't own me.
I'm not just one of your many toys.
You don't own me.
Don't say I can't go with other boys.
And don't tell me what to do
And don't tell me what to say
And please, when I go out with you
Don't put me on display....

In 1972, Helen Reddy's "I Am Woman" became a feminist anthem:

I am woman, hear me roar
In numbers too big to ignore
And I know too much to go back an'
pretend...
But I'm still an embryo
With a long, long way to go
Until I make my brother
understand.

"You Don't Own Me" and "I Am Woman" were actually written by men. More recently, however, songwriters like Lauryn Hill have expressed women's points of view. In her 1999 song "To Zion," she celebrates the life of the infant son she chose to have:

Woe this crazy circumstance
I knew his life deserved a chance
But everybody told me to be smart
"Look at your career," they said
"Lauryn baby use your head."
But instead I chose to use my heart.
Now the joy...of my world...is in Zion!...
How beautiful if nothing more than to wait
at Zion's door
I've never been in love like this before...



Lauryn Hill

"Give Peace a Chance": At War with War

As songwriters rocked into the late sixties and early seventies, rebellion became focused ➔



on war—particularly the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. In 1970, Edwin Starr's "War" made the point directly:

War! What is it good for?
Absolutely nothing!

Songwriters responded to specific events. In 1970, at Kent State University in Ohio, an anti-war protest turned violent. Four students were shot and killed by National Guard troops. Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young created a song titled "Ohio" to remember the students who were killed. The lyrics criticized President Richard Nixon and suggested that there would be further conflicts between troops and protestors:

Tin soldiers and Nixon coming
We're finally on our own
This summer I hear the drumming
Four dead in Ohio

Other songwriters took different approaches. Folk singer Pete Seeger adapted verses from the Bible (Ecclesiastes) into the song "Turn, Turn, Turn," and it was recorded by the Byrds in 1965. The lyrics encourage listeners to imagine a world of peace:

To everything, turn, turn, turn
There is a season
And a time to ev'ry purpose
under heaven...
A time to love
A time to hate
A time for peace
I swear it's not too late

"All we are saying," John Lennon sang in 1969, "is give peace a chance."

"At the Crossroads": Equal Rights for All

How many years can some
people exist
Before they're allowed to be
free?
How many times can a man
turn his head
And pretend that he just
doesn't see?

Those lines from Bob Dylan's "Blowing in the Wind" (1962) refer to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the effort to gain equal rights and opportunities for African Americans. The fight for equality has been waged in many songs. In 1973, Stevie Wonder's "Living for the City" told how each member of an African American family struggles to succeed against the odds. For example:

Her brother's smart, he's got more sense
than many
His patience's long, but soon he won't
have any
To find a job is like a haystack
needle
'Cause where he lives they don't
use colored people
Living just enough, just enough for
the city.

In recent years, rap musicians have addressed similar issues. In 1993, LL Cool J spoke out against the living conditions in poor neighborhoods in "Crossroads."

People livin' in a shack—at the
crossroads
Little kids sellin' crack—at the
crossroads
Stab you in the back—at the cross-
roads
Everybody's gettin' jacked—at the
crossroads

In 1997, KRS-One's "Can't Stop, Won't Stop" took on the issue of illegal drugs in inner city communities—and police corruption. Police have a drug dealer in custody. But they'll let him go if he'll lead them to bigger fish:

The D.T. said, let's make a deal...
no need for guessin', yes they want my
supplier
I said, what makes you think there's any-
one higher?
He said...now the whole investigation is
federal
we want you to point out the rest of the
cops that are criminal
he continued to say you can't think it thru
this whole drug game is bigger than you



Bob Dylan

Public Enemy's "Shut 'Em Down" (1991) raises the issue of corporations making money from the black community, but not supporting it in return:

I like Nike but wait a minute
 The neighborhood supports so put some
 Money in it
 Corporations owe
 Dey gotta give up the dough
 To da town
 or else
 We gotta shut 'em down



LL Cool J

In "Rebirth," (1991) Public Enemy makes a bitter observation about racism:

These days
 You can't see who's in cahoots
 'Cause now the KKK
 Wears three-piece suits

Whether you agree or not, you get the point. And that's part of the power of the music of rebellion. Songwriters' messages are broadcast daily to the nation—with a forceful beat behind the lyrics. The words echo in the minds of millions every day.

—Sarah Kizis

write

DO YOU WANT TO WRITE SONG LYRICS?

First, decide on a subject you truly care about. Memorable lyrics come from the heart. Then, follow these tips from the pros:

1. Speak in language that people really use. As different as "You Don't Own Me" and "Can't Stop, Won't Stop" are, the listener hears a voice in each that is immediately identifiable as real.

2. Find words that capture emotions. Lauryn Hill's lines "I knew his life deserved a chance" and "How beautiful...to wait at Zion's door" share her joy in being a mother.

3. Use details. Listeners connect with specifics. In another line from "Living for the City," Stevie Wonder says of a young woman, "Her clothes are old, but never are they dirty." This detail captures her pride and determination. By focusing on Nike, instead of just any corporation, Public Enemy strengthens its point.

4. Paint pictures with words. What images come to mind from L L Cool J's "Crossroads," for example? From "Ohio," whose lines are as direct as newspaper headlines?

5. Use figurative language. A metaphor like "but I'm still an embryo" in "I Am Woman" conveys the idea that the singer is only beginning. "To find a job is like a haystack needle" makes Stevie Wonder's point forcefully.

If you are so inclined, write music to go with your lyrics. Otherwise, choose a popular song, and write lyrics to match that tune.