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 relationshps 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
proclaimed independence by linking up with rebellious guys, often motorcycle types whose 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:

"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 protesters:

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 every 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 “Blowin’ 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 crossroads
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 anyone 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
In "Rebirth," (1991) Public Enemy makes a bitter observation about racism: "Whether you agree or not, you get the point. This is part of the power of the music of rebellion. Songwriters messages are broad. Rebirth also the KKK casts its shadow, the world is watching, millions every day."

—Sarah Kitz

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Public Enemy's "Shut Em Down" (1991)

Public Enemy's "Shut Em Down," a song that raises the issue of corporations making money from the black community, but not supporting it in return.

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," the listener hears a voice in each that is immediately identifiable.
2. Find words that capture emotions. Lauryn Hill's lines "I know life was beautiful...to wait at Zion's door" are old, but never are they dirty. This is a metaphor, like "but I'm still an embryo." In "I Am Woman," conveys the idea the singer is only beginning.
3. Use figurative language. A metaphor like "I'm still an embryo" makes Stevie Wonder's point.
4. Paint pictures with words. What images come to mind from L.L. Cool J's "Crossroads"? For example: "Oh, whose lines are as direct as newspaper headlines?"
5. Use ѐne "holy" common sense. A metaphor like "I'm still an embryo" makes Stevie Wonder's point.