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What's a Melody For?

By SUZANNE VEGA

*Once upon a time you dressed so fine
You threw the bums a dime in your prime.
Didn't you?
People'd call, say "Beware doll,
You're bound to fall," you thought they were all
Kidding you.*

Remember that song? I'll bet you do. What's the melody? Pretty much one note from the beginning to the end of the phrase, with a lift at the end. Is it a cool song? Yes, very. It's Bob Dylan — "Like A Rolling Stone." A classic. As classic as "My Way" by Frank Sinatra or anything by Rodgers and Hammerstein.

How about this one?

*Holly came from Miami Fla
Hitch-hiked her way across the USA
Plucked her eyebrows on the way
Shaved her legs and then he was a she
She says, hey babe
Take a walk on the wild side
Said hey honey
Take a walk on the wild side.*

That's Lou Reed, "Walk on the Wild Side." It's another classic. What's the melody? A couple of notes here and there in close proximity to each other.

Imagine either of those songs with wide intervals and sweeping melody lines. I don't think so. Both are served up the way they are meant to be. And they are great songs. So a great song does not need a well-crafted, "memorable" melody to work. There are a million examples of this — blues songs, folk songs, three-chord rock songs, rock poetry, rap music.

So what is a melody for? I used to think of a melody as a kind of serving tray for the lyrics and the story within the song. However, that doesn't mean I haven't been moved by a gorgeous melody.

I still remember hearing "Changes" by Phil Ochs for the first time. I was at sleep-away

camp and one of my counselors was singing it in her room. Suddenly I was filled with a deep sorrow, the reasons for which I couldn't pinpoint or place. I began to cry. My counselor looked at me through the door, and asked if I was homesick.

"No!" I said.

"Did somebody say something mean to you?"

"No!" I said.

Eventually we figured out. "Is it the song? We can sing another one!" She did, and the mood lifted and sailed away within minutes. The melody was like a code of emotion, that worked directly on my — what? brain? heart? soul? A combination of all three. But later on, as a songwriter, I still thought of a melody as a serving tray of sorts, or a bed that the words lie down on.

The first songs I wrote that really felt original had almost no melody. "[Cracking](#)" is a song I wrote when I was 20. In school we had been studying the opera "Wozzeck" by Alban Berg, and talking about the use of *sprechstimme* (spoken-voice) in the works by Bertolt Brecht. Melody? What was it for? To express big sweeping emotions like love. But it felt more modern, if you were writing songs to express shock or stress or madness, to just do away with it. Later in life, around the time of my first marriage and the birth of my daughter, I felt the desire to explore melody again. Bigger emotions demand wider expression.

Some of my favorite melodies are: "You Took Advantage of Me" (Rodgers and Hart); "Birdhouse in Your Soul" (They Might Be Giants); "Almost Blue" (Elvis Costello); "The Art Teacher" (Rufus Wainwright); Mozart's 40th Symphony; many songs by Laura Nyro. Sting's melodies like "Roxanne" and "King of Pain" are elegant jewels. The Jason Mraz song "I'm Yours" is a good melody. "Isn't She Lovely" by Stevie Wonder still fills me with joy.

Melody is its own idea, like sculpture. You don't look at a piece of sculpture to see what is resting on top of it. A great melody has its own design, a beautiful combination of intervals and rhythms usually expressing the emotion of the song. Somehow a melody is connected, like the sense of smell, to memory, so when you hear a song it connects you in a flood of emotions to the time and place of that song. I am sure there are reasons in the brain for this, but as a songwriter I don't need to know how the brain does it, only that it does. Here, for example, is [one article that puts it succinctly](#). There are so many articles and books about what music does to the brain that I can't list them all here.

One thing I noticed after the birth of my daughter, Ruby, was that melody engaged her attention in a way that lyrics did not. I suppose this should have been obvious, but it hadn't occurred to me that she was preverbal, and so a 7-minute song with complex lyrics would make her attention wander (unless it was a song containing farm animals), whereas a clear melody would make her turn her head towards me and would hold her attention completely. Much of our early time together was spent in my holding her in the

rocking chair, inventing little melodies for hours, with nonsense lyrics and made-up phrases, anything to soothe her colicky belly and stop her shrieking.

Now Ruby is a vocal major in high school. Recently, she sang a song she was practicing for a test in school, a vocal line of an Italian art song from the late 1800's. I didn't need to know the story or what the words meant to feel the impact immediately — hearing her sing the melody line moved me to tears. (At which point she clapped her hands delightedly! Wicked thing.)

Speaking of what a melody can be used for: Last month I attended a hearing in Albany to protest the \$7 million that was cut from the New York State Council on the Arts budget. I found it to be a fascinating process. I am on the advocacy committee of National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences (NARAS) and write letters or go to Albany from time to time to lobby for or protest against various bills. This was a joint hearing held by Senator Jose Serrano and assemblyman Steve Engelbright. Men and woman in groups of three came forward and addressed the dais — a stage on which a few state senators and assemblymen were, well, assembled, in a hearing room at the Legislative Office Building.

Each person testified about how the cuts would affect them and their businesses personally ([Sen. José M. Serrano](#), for instance).

This got me to thinking about the word “advocate” (invoke, vocalize) — in other words, “speak forth” to an audience that “hears” you. After all, it's called a hearing. Some of the speeches were impassioned, some dry; some long-winded, some to-the-point. All of them were moving, and frequently the assemblymen and state senators were sympathetic. (In spite of this sympathy we learned at the end of the day that the money was cut.) The hearing went on for a couple of hours, so when Tom Chapin presented his testimony in the form of a song he had written for the occasion, it was a welcome moment, and a relief from what had gone before.

You can see his [performance on YouTube](#).

The song's impact in this moment was thunderous — it had a simple melody, and yet to hear all the issues of the morning put succinctly into song moved everyone in the room to a standing ovation. Not to mention it was a welcome break from the hours of testimony — a little levity and entertainment. For that one moment, Tom Chapin might have been Bruce Springsteen, and Hearing Room A (2nd floor) Madison Square Garden.

His song is called “You Can't Spell Smart Without Art” and it makes the point eloquently. The right combination of words and, yes, melody at the right moment can have a powerful effect. The latest news is that \$50 million has been allocated to the N.E.A. as part of the recovery package, in part because of the organized lobbying efforts of arts advocates across the country.

Just think of a world without art, without song — how would we celebrate? What would we dream of? What would set our imaginations free? How could we express our emotions for our husbands and wives and children? Celebrate a birthday? A melody is for

expressing emotions: delight, passion, sadness. It reminds us of what we have felt and experienced before, in our own personal code of emotion and history. Priceless!