

A Good Kind of Stress by James Linderman

What we communicate to our listeners with our lyrics has as much to do with “how we say it”, as it has to do with “what we say”.

Like in a conversation, our tone, inflection, pitch, decibel level and general attitude will influence the impression we leave on our listener and therefore completely influence the impression they will have of our art, especially our songs lyric and its message.

When it comes to impacting the listener, one of the most important, yet underrated elements in lyric writing, is the placement of the stress syllables.

A stress syllable is the location of the strongly accented beat in the rhythm of a phrase.

The stress is often placed where there is a chord change and is also commonly found on the first and third beats of the bar or the second and forth beats of the bar.

If we use an underline to denote the stressed beats it would look like the examples below and we would use more volume and emphasis to make the stressed beats dominant.

1 2 3 4 or 1 2 3 4

It might seem like the simplest thing in the world to just place the important words on the stressed beats assuming that the less important words would naturally be left to the weaker locations and the job of placing the stresses would be done... sadly it is not so easy.

It all depends on exactly what specific words in our lines help to emphasize the message we are trying to express.

Consider the impact of the following example by reciting it aloud and determining its precise meaning and emotional power based on the stress placement

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4
She never even gave me a second look

When you stress "she", which is the subject in your phrase, you are telling your listener that it is imperative that they know you mean "she" and no one else. The same is true of the stress on the word "me", meaning me and no one else.

If this is what we want to communicate in this line then the stresses will communicate that perfectly to the listener, but if we are actually trying to express the hurt of being passed over in this phrase, then the stress need to be shifted away from subjects and objects and onto verbs, or action words and the quantitative or qualitative adverbs.

In other words, any words that express an action or measure the amount of an action will induce the greatest emotional response in the listener in this kind of phrase.

Read this example aloud and see how much more impact it has in expressing this hurt.

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4
She never even gave me a Second look

By shifting the phrasing over the count in this way we also get to put a stress on the word "second" which is a quantitative word that has some emotional value as well.

From the start of this phrase we can appreciate that "never" is a great, quantitative measurement word because it is so absolute, and therefore emotionally charged.

"Gave" is a powerful emotion word and we might use it as a bookend word for our next line by writing the word "stole" into it. Here is an example,

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4
She never even gave me a second look

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4
But with every glance I stole that night I read her like a book

Also notice that there are words in our example that precede the first beat of each of these lines.

In musical terms these are called *anacrusis* and to make these

preceding words fit there will have to be a restructuring of the rhythm of the melody and we may also have to rework the pitch selections because we will help emphasize the stress syllables by singing the highest pitches of each phrase there.

Four well known artists that instantly come to mind who are exceptional at stress placement, and the alignment of all the supporting words in a phrase would be Sting, Joni Mitchell, Jann Arden and Alanis Morissette.

Some artists that are just as skilled at this, that would be worth checking out would be Suzie Vinnick, Wendy Lands, Blair Packham and Michelle Rasky.

I'm also working on getting good at it too.

Another essential element of songwriting that helps to maximize the emotional impact of the lyric, is to make certain that the lyric, the melody, the rhythm, the tempo and the chord progression are all moving the song forward in a single unified direction.

When all of the elements of a song are all working together, and the most powerful words are being stressed, there is no telling what kind of incredible effect songs can have on listeners and how powerful the listener's enthusiasm will have on how we write and, ultimately, on the personal and social impact of our art.

That is the best use of stress I could ever possibly imagine.