

SONGCRAFTERS COLORING BOOK

Playing the Field

by Bill Pere

Along with the concrete/abstract balance, one of the most important tools for communicating effectively through lyrics is the concept of “semantic field”. It is this aspect of a lyric that determines whether or not it appears focused and cohesive or diffuse and wandering. Most English words have multiple meanings. The particular meaning intended is clarified for the receiver by the other word preceding and following the key word.

For example the words “set” and “jack” each have more than 20 meanings. The sentences “That set of Jack’s was the best tennis he’s ever played” and “This set of jacks is the child’s favorite play toy” are made clear only by the words *other than* set and jack. Those other words provide context and define the semantic fields being used.

Key words in a lyric should stay with a single semantic field and not bounce around... i.e., if you’re writing about apples as the semantic field, talk about Delicious and Macintosh and cider, not oranges and pears. If you’re writing about fruit (a broader semantic field), write about apples, oranges, and pears, not carrots, celery, and turnips. If you’re writing about edible plants (a still broader semantic field) then you can mix apples, oranges and carrots, but not poison ivy or redwood trees. If you’re writing about all plants...well, you get the idea. The semantic field is defined by the main metaphor of the song, and straying outside that semantic field essentially means you’re mixing metaphors, which generally dilutes the impact of your lyric. So it’s not enough just to balance concrete and abstract references, but they should all be consistent within the context defined by the governing metaphor of the song.

Of course we have exceptions. There is a technique where it is highly desirable to switch semantic fields in midstream... this is the essence of punning, irony, and related wordplay. It can be the source of memorable titles and lyrical hooks. “We live in a two-story house” is an example. By itself, this sentence places “story” in the semantic field of “words relating to houses and buildings”. But the rest of the lyrics, dealing with deception and cheating, create a semantic field where “story” means a lie or deceitful tale. Switching semantic fields can be done locally (within a line or verse) or globally (from one verse to another). In a song about going back in time to change the mistakes in your life, the line “*An hour, a minute, a second chance*” clearly uses “second” simultaneously in two ways, **both of which are embodied in the premise of the song** (time, and correcting mistakes). This is the key point... it is not good writing to use double meanings just to be clever; Both meanings of a word must be fully supported by the song and the lyric must contain words from both semantic fields. This creates a no-lose situation for you-- the listener gets two chances to hear it right, and if they only get one of the two, it still makes sense, because other parts of the lyric are supporting the meaning. If they get both meanings, they appreciate your crafting that much more. Another example:

*Ten thousand faces, I see only yours
I hear your heartbeat over all the applause
You are my shining sun, but everybody thinks it’s me who’s the star
It’s you helped me get this far...*

The word “star” has both meanings clearly referenced in the rest of the verse.

It takes a good deal of practice and craft to do this effectively, and here in its entirety is one of the very best examples as recorded by Men at Work on their album “Puttin’ In Overtime”.

Snakes and Ladders

*I could stand but I don’t like the feeling
I could fall but I’m always on the floor
You can make a million staring at the ceiling
You can break your back and still be poor*

*One for the liar, one for the cheat
One for the man who you’ll never meet
He saw the action and a portion of pie
He’ll be there waiting when your big chance comes by*

*There a snake at the top of every ladder
Who will tell you that he’s your best friend
Everyone important needs an adder,
But subtraction gets you in the end..*

*One for the liar, one for the thief
One for the man who’s time is so brief
He saw the action and a portion of pie
He’ll be there waiting when your big chance comes by*

This whole song converges at that one key word “adder”, which is a kind of snake, and which is also used in the math sense of an accountant who adds up your money. The snake reference is supported immediately before the word, and the math reference is supported immediately after (“subtraction”). Let’s look at some of the craft elements of this lyric: The title immediately sets up the song premise, that when you climb the ladder of success, there are people waiting to prey on you to get a piece of your pie instead of one of their own. The title is a common phrase based on the name of the popular children’s game (also known as “Chutes and Ladders”). The chorus explicitly supports the premise, and sets up both semantic fields for the key word to follow. Notice the technique of subtly changing the chorus the second time around to balance the familiar with the new. The second verse is a shining example of lyric craft. Not only does it effectively switch semantic fields, but the word it pivots on, “adder”, is an unusual, fresh, and memorable word. The “snake” reference is literal and concrete, while the “accountant” reference is figurative and abstract. An excellent lyric.

Thus, once you’ve gotten a handle on balancing concrete and abstract references, you can turn your attention to semantic fields, first to insure consistency of the metaphors you use, and then for seasoning your songs with wordplay that enhances the communication effectiveness of your lyric. And if it all works out, you’ll have to hire an adder of your own...but watch out for adders.

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