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your habits? Do you tend to linger on one note, do you write scalically, or do you sing lots of 'leaps'? What direction do your phrases usually take – starting high and descending, staying on one note, or rising from a low note to a higher one as you sing the line? These tendencies help to define your personal melodic writing style, so it's worth listening back to your old demos to see if any patterns emerge.

And pitch is only one half of the melodic story. The way syllables fall against the beat (scansion) is an essential part of what makes the audience listen to a melody. Let's say we were working on the lyric "I'm falling through the sky." One obvious setting of this line would be for 'I'm' and 'sky' to be long syllables, and all the other syllables to be short, much as if we were speaking the phrase in conversation. But that's just one approach. We could 'run up' to the final word with a lot of very short syllables, before screaming the word 'sky' to the heavens on a single long high note. Or we could play around with the word 'falling' so that its big 'fall' syllable descended over several notes, stretched over the vowel. (There's songwriting fun to be had here writing a descending melody over the word 'falling'). There are dozens of other rhythmic interpretations, for this and every other lyric, and the first idea we try may not necessarily be the best.

A strong melody needs to strike a balance between complexity and simplicity, and it needs to sound good when sung with the words. If your lyric is very wordy, with lots of storytelling and imagery, you might want the pitches of the melody to be fairly static. Take the verse of Bob Dylan's *Subterranean Homesick Blues*. Its machine-gun syllables deliver complex lyrics at high speed using a one-note melody. Contrast this with the chorus of Pearl Jam's *Alive*. The lyric 'Oh I, oh, I'm still alive' is sung over a complete octave from E to E, and these six vowel-heavy words are stretched out over two whole bars.

So what happens if you don't like the melody you've written – when you feel you're stuck in a rut? One way out is to try a new method and see what happens. If you usually write melodies by singing over strummed chord changes, and you're finding that your melodies seem a bit static or unadventurous, try using a keyboard to suggest bigger intervals. If vocal improvising over chords isn't working for you, try speaking the lyric out loud without music – the natural rise and fall of the vowels might suggest a melody and its rhythm (my favourite example of this is Paul Simon's 'Old Friends / sat on their park bench like bookends' – say it out loud and you can hear the melody within it). And if you can't get the lyric to scan properly, try singing it over a drum loop to make the scansion more naturally rhythmic. As with all songwriting, process can affect product – so it can be fun to experiment and discover how different starting points might stimulate your creative brain. ●

## MELODY – GETTING IN SHAPE

"If you can't get the lyric to scan properly, try singing it over a drum loop"

**IF** you ask songwriters how they create melodies, you'll get a pretty vague answer. Something like 'well, I just get inspired by the lyric' or 'it's whatever sounds good when I sing it.' Of all the creative decisions we make when we write songs, melodic choices are perhaps the most mysterious. We don't really know where they come from, so we sing whatever feels right and then take it from there.

Many of us, as chord-literate guitarists, come to melody writing in this self-taught way, and on a good day it helps us to write melodies very freely and quickly. But on a bad day this instinctive approach can turn out meandering or predictable melodies, leaving us struggling to write something that the listener will remember. Sometimes, the chords distract us from thinking about the all-important shape of our tune.

Songwriters who create melody are in control of two things: the pitch of the notes and the rhythm of the syllables. Every time we sing a note, the note that follows it can be higher, lower, or the same note. Movement between notes can be adjacent (scalic), as in 'We don't need no education', or a larger leap (intervallic), as in 'Roooooo...anne'. Think about the pitch shape of your songs: what are

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