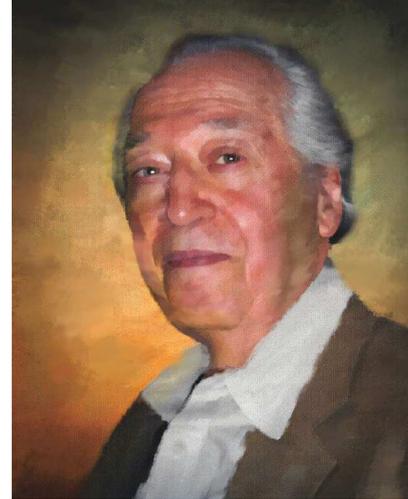


EXPERT TESTIMONY

Berklee's Songwriting Department chair emeritus Jack Perricone talks about the craft of songwriting with Mark Small.



Jack Perricone

In 1986, Jack Perricone joined the Berklee faculty as the first chair of the Songwriting Department. He broke ground right away by developing courses for the nation's first college-level songwriting major.

Among his contributions in that role were courses on the business of songwriting, song survey courses, and designing the MIDI home recording lab facilities. Perricone earned his master's degree in composition at Indiana University and later worked in New York as a jingle writer and arranger and conductor for various recording artists. His credits as a songwriter include titles for Angela Boffill, Lou Rawls, David Geddes, and others.

Perricone penned the book *Melody in Songwriting: Tools and Techniques for Writing Hit Songs* for Berklee press in 2000. Oxford University Press has just released his thoroughgoing 379-page book *Great Songwriting Techniques*. Perricone took a few minutes to share thoughts on trends in songwriting and the importance of learning the craft of songwriting.

Do you believe that melody is the most important component of a popular song?

Melody certainly is an attractive component and often is the most memorable element in a song. The main musical parts in a song are melody, groove, tonal/harmonic environment, and texture. But honestly, discussing each element separately doesn't address the most important occurrence: prosody. Prosody is the way the components in a song—especially words and music—interact and enhance one another. I do spend a great many pages in my new book dealing with the subject of melody because there is a scarcity of material given to this area both in books and in music schools. I spend equal or more time on prosody.

What would you tell people who shy away from learning the craft of songwriting in favor of an intuition-only approach?

First, we must ask, "What place does intuition play in the creative process?" If you use an intuition-only approach you are relying solely on your imagination, feeling, and luck. I believe that your intuition can work in tandem with your intellect and can also be aligned with your intellect. When intuition and intellect are aligned, your intuition is fueled by real knowledge, knowledge sometimes buried deep within that becomes available when your emotions are turned on. These two aspects of your being, feelings and intellect, are often thought to be antagonists, but are, instead, great allies. When you align your imagination with knowledge, you create a flow in your process. You do not get stuck every 10 minutes and aren't forced to add one more to your long list of unfinished songs.

As an observer of songwriting, have you seen a progression from the long melodic phrases of songs in the *Great American Songbook* through the 1960s to a trend for shorter repeated phrases comprising a verse to hip-hop and rap melodies?

Popular songs and the way they are presented reflect the society in which they are born. Popular songs from 1900 to the early 1950s often contained lush harmonies, romantic lyrics, and long-lined melodies. Even during World War II, the popular music America listened to was mainly romantic, full of fantasy and positive feelings to buoy up hope and to keep the American dream alive, much like the Hollywood movies that were popular at that time.

The public's taste for lush harmonies and long-lined melodies has gradually dwindled since the end of the war. During the mid-1950s, teenagers rather than adults became the target audience for the sale of records for the first time. Many teenagers were being given allowances, which was a result of America's affluence provided by the outcome of the war. Early rock and roll heralded this new generation with blues-infused melodies that hit them with the rhythmic ferocity of a freight train in songs like Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode" and Little Richard's "Good Golly Miss Molly."

There are always several streams of styles that run parallel to each other in every era, therefore, it is difficult to pin melodic attributes to any one era. For example, the funk-driven rhythmic melody of James Brown's "Cold Sweat" appeared on the *Billboard* charts in 1967 alongside Jimmy Webb's "MacArthur Park" with its lush harmonies, long-lined melody, and over-the-top arrangement and production.

The most recent major change in style came with hip-hop and rap. They almost completely eschewed any romantic gestures and soon pop songs began incorporating rap rhythms within pitched-melody. The resulting melodies, containing fast moving rhythms, produced a flattening out of the melodic contour—because it is difficult and almost impossible to sing a fast-moving melody with intervals larger than a third and simultaneously enunciate lyrics.

Contemporary pop hits, while using rap rhythms, do rely on melody to seduce listeners, and often contain multiple melodic hooks with unique rhythms and larger-than-a-third intervals to establish their memorability. Short repetitious melodic phrases abound, but phrase lengths vary and the length of phrases within each section is used as a contrasting device in helping to delineate the form.

But there are many exceptions to what I've just said, especially in the contemporary songs written and sung by singer/