

Unit 34: Contemporary Songwriting Techniques

Unit code:	L/600/6929
QCF Level 3:	BTEC National
Credit value:	10
Guided learning hours:	60

● Aim and purpose

In this unit, learners will explore, analyse and practise the musical techniques required for effective songwriting. At the end of the unit learners will present a portfolio of their own songs for assessment.

● Unit introduction

The art of writing songs is concerned with expression. Whether a songwriter is expressing their own feelings, telling a story, hoping to trigger a response or simply aiming to entertain, the power of a song to inspire or touch an audience is undeniable. This unit aims to develop analytical skills through study of iconic songs and approaches songwriters have taken to reach their audiences. Learners will practise the skills required in combining lyrics and music effectively in a range of contexts, culminating in a portfolio of their own songs.

When approaching a unit focusing on the art of songwriting, it is important to define what the concept of 'a song' actually is. At its most basic, a song simply comprises words and tune. There are, of course, other factors that may be important, for example harmonic implication, rhythmic impetus, stylistic features etc. However, the definitive song is primarily based on the careful crafting of lyrics and melody, possibly with accompaniment. The issue of subsequent arrangement should be tackled separately, and collaborations, band or otherwise will not be suitable. Approaching this unit together with *Unit 3: Arranging Music*, provides the opportunity to develop the song in terms of its setting, eg rhythmic backing, instrumental 'hooks' or riffs, backing vocals, improvised solos etc.

Transmission of a song to others is also an important issue in establishing ownership. For a songwriter, this usually involves one of two procedures: 1) live demonstration or recording by the songwriter, or 2) production of a notated form such as a leadsheet. For the purposes of this unit, learners will submit a portfolio of songs using either of these two methods. The unit is concerned with individual composition and not collaborative arrangements.

● Learning outcomes

On completion of this unit a learner should:

- 1 Know how, in a range of contexts, different songwriters construct songs
- 2 Be able to write or adapt material for use as effective lyrics
- 3 Be able to compose music for lyrics to create effective songs
- 4 Be able to produce a portfolio of original songs showing a range of genres and styles.

Unit content

1 Know how, in a range of contexts, different songwriters construct songs

Songwriters representing a range of genres and styles: eg Burt Bacarach, Kurt Cobain, Elvis Costello, Woody Guthrie, Billy Joel, Lennon and McCartney, Andrew Lloyd Webber, Christy Moore, Randy Newman, Cole Porter, Prince, Rufus Wainwright, Tom Waits, Amy Winehouse, Thom Yorke, Kate Bush, Joni Mitchell, Joan Armatrading, Adele, Lady Gaga, Alicia Keys, Dolly Parton, Cyndi Lauper, Smokey Robinson, Stevie Wonder, Nina Simone, Erykah Badu, Pharrell Williams, Lauren Hill, Curtis Mayfield

Songs: ballads eg Cry Me a River, Halleluiah, Vincent, Yesterday; folk eg Both Sides the Tweed, Dirty Old Town, The Times They are A'Changin'; musicals eg I Get a Kick Out of You, Send in the Clowns; pop eg Grace Kelly, Karma Police, Losin' My Religion, Waterloo Sunset, Wonderwall, Yellow; country eg Stand By Your Man, Mama Tried

Contexts: the historical context of songwriting eg traditional song, the 'golden age' of American show songs, the singer-songwriter tradition, protest songs through time; songs in particular genres or styles; songs written for a particular purpose or context eg special commissions or response to a particular event or situation

2 Be able to write or adapt material for use as effective lyrics

Stimuli: eg newspaper headlines or stories, overheard conversations or situations, personal experience, diaries, TV and films, books and poetry, hooks

Different kinds of lyrics: eg songs about love, protest, a story or situation, parody, inspirational

Rhythmic structure of lyrics: eg scanning, phrasing, repetition, flow

Organisation of material: eg verse, chorus, pre-chorus, introduction, tag, bridge

3 Be able to compose music for lyrics to create effective songs

Melody: eg different scales, phrasing, hooks, structure, shape, word-painting

Rhythm: eg tempo, stylistic feel, syncopation, irregular patterns, accented and unaccented syllables

Harmony: eg implied or realised chord progressions, simple or complex chords, modulation

Structures and form: eg verse form, AABA form, verse-chorus, bridge, middle eight, pre-chorus

4 Be able to produce a portfolio of original songs showing a range of genres and styles

Genre: eg pop, rock, country, blues, folk, singer-songwriter, jazz standards, musical theatre, ballad, protest song

Stylistic considerations: suitability of music for the genre eg melody, rhythm, harmony, structure/form; suitability of lyrics for the genre

Assessment and grading criteria

In order to pass this unit, the evidence that the learner presents for assessment needs to demonstrate that they can meet all the learning outcomes for the unit. The assessment criteria for a pass grade describe the level of achievement required to pass this unit.

Assessment and grading criteria		
To achieve a pass grade the evidence must show that the learner is able to:	To achieve a merit grade the evidence must show that, in addition to the pass criteria, the learner is able to:	To achieve a distinction grade the evidence must show that, in addition to the pass and merit criteria, the learner is able to:
P1 describe, in a range of contexts, how different songwriters construct songs [IE, CT, RL]	M1 explain, in a range of contexts, how different songwriters construct songs	D1 analyse, in a wide range of contexts, how different songwriters construct songs
P2 produce suitable song lyrics with appropriate form and rhythmic structure [CT, RL, SM]	M2 produce suitable song lyrics with appropriate form and rhythmic structure, crafted with reference to context	D2 produce effective song lyrics with appropriate form and rhythmic structure, carefully crafted with reference to context
P3 compose music for song lyrics competently [CT, SM]	M3 compose music for song lyrics using well-crafted musical structures	D3 compose music for song lyrics using well-crafted musical structures, showing creative skill and flair
P4 present a portfolio of original songs showing a range of genres and styles. [CT, SM]	M4 present a portfolio of original songs showing proficient writing for a range of genres and styles.	D4 present a portfolio of original songs showing well-crafted writing for a wide range of genres and styles.

PLTS: This summary references where applicable, in the square brackets, the elements of the personal, learning and thinking skills applicable in the pass criteria. It identifies opportunities for learners to demonstrate effective application of the referenced elements of the skills.

Key	IE – independent enquirers	RL – reflective learners	SM – self-managers
	CT – creative thinkers	TW – team workers	EP – effective participators

Essential guidance for tutors

Delivery

Delivery for this unit is twofold; 1) developing learners' awareness and understanding of the processes behind effective songwriting, and 2) putting that knowledge into practice. The very nature of the business means that much of the actual writing of songs is done entirely independently. Tutors, ideal use of delivery time, is to give learners the tools needed to facilitate the compositional process. An initial approach should be through analysis of the work of established songwriters, representing a range of genres and styles. As well as tackling stylistic writing within particular genres, tutors may also explore the different technical approaches used by established practitioners, eg melodic expertise, chordal expertise, lyrical expertise, simplicity, complexity etc. Tutors and learners will need access to recordings and scores of relevant songs. The examples listed in the unit content give only a very small hint of the huge repertoire of songs that could be used for analysis, and the tutor should choose according to their own expertise and the needs/ability of learners. Learners presentations could be used as stimuli for discussion, alongside more traditional tutor-led delivery. Secondly, learners will need to be set a variety of short technical exercises (for lyrics and music) to practise a range of skills. It is likely that learners will require some theoretical input/revision. Sessions could also be offered for the whole cohort (eg stimuli for lyrics, different song forms, word-painting, stylistic melody, how to modulate etc), and visiting professionals are always an excellent resource to access.

Writing lyrics and music thrives on inspiration and this can be facilitated through a variety of practical workshops, use of visiting practitioners, or even arranging 'inspirational' experiences. Whilst this may sound a little ambitious, ideas as simple as going for a walk in the park, observing people in a supermarket or embarking on a group trip can be extremely effective in generating material for a song. Encouraging learners to keep a notebook or diary to jot down ideas is also a useful resource. Tutors should support learners through regular individual tutorials to gauge progress and to give constructive feedback for songs in the process of composition.

The final portfolio requires learners to show a range of styles/genres. Very often learners have already compiled a bank of songs written at various points in their experience. Whilst it is acceptable to use these as part of their portfolio, learners should be encouraged to revisit their songs in the light of what they have learnt about effective songwriting techniques. Learners also need to be aware that the emphasis is on a range of styles and genres, and therefore four expertly crafted pop ballads will not meet learning outcome 4 (despite each having been awarded a distinction for learning outcomes 2 and 3).

Outline learning plan

The outline learning plan has been included in this unit as guidance and can be used in conjunction with the programme of suggested assignments.

The outline learning plan demonstrates one way in planning the delivery and assessment of this unit.

Topic and suggested assignments/activities and/assessment
Introduction to unit.
Brief history of songwriting and related contexts.
Exploration of a range of songwriters, songs, and their different contexts – combination of tutor delivery, independent research and learner presentation, continuing throughout the unit delivery.
Assignment 1: Landmarks of Song – P1, M1, D1 Analysis of a range of iconic songwriters and songs and the genres/styles in which they operate/d. Material generated through classnotes and independent research: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• collating notes from class• independent research, listening and analysis• writing the assignment• assessment feedback and review.
Writing words and music – series of workshops covering unit content.
Writing music for words – series of analytical/listening sessions covering use of: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• rhythm• melody• harmony• structure.
Assignment 2: Song Portfolio – P2, M2, D2, P3, M3, D3, P4, M4, D4 Preparation of an original song portfolio containing a minimum of four songs showing range of genre/style. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• assignment introduction and discussion• independent work on songs• preparation/recording of songs• consequent editing (recording/notation etc).

Assessment

Assessment for this unit is based on a combination of theoretical and practical criteria. Learning outcome 1 deals with the level of understanding of different approaches; learning outcomes 2, 3 and 4 are concerned with the practical process of actually writing songs and presenting a minimum of four as part of a portfolio.

Learning outcome 1 can be assessed through an assignment based on the study of iconic songwriters and songs. Learners need to show understanding in a range of contexts and it is suggested that all learners submit analysis of a minimum of four different genres/styles. For P1, learners will provide descriptions of different approaches to constructing songs, in different contexts. For M1, learners will not only explain the approaches used, but also on why they have been used and to what effect. D1 will require a comparative angle as well as an analytical response. A distinction also requires a wide range of contexts, and this should refer to the diversity and not necessarily simply the quantity of analyses offered.

It is very difficult to split learning outcomes 2 and 3, since they cover the two main components of a song and are therefore inextricably linked. Each one will have a bearing on the other and this should be considered in assessment, together with context. Learning outcome 2 is concerned with the crafting of lyrics in terms of context, rhythmic structure and organisation of material. For P2, learners have to show that they can produce suitable lyrics for a song; for example they may present three verses, a chorus and a tag sequence to end the song, all of which scan correctly. For M2 or D2, learners are required to respond to the context, crafting their lyrics more effectively for impact on the audience. Learning outcome 3 focuses on the actual composing of music for those lyrics and the grading levels are self-explanatory.

Learning outcome 4 requires a portfolio of songs, with the emphasis very much on the range of genres and styles presented. Four songs would provide the minimum evidence required for all levels of assessment. For P4, learners need to show that they have written songs in a range of genres and styles. The portfolio should show that stylistic considerations have been explored when writing for different genres, even if the resulting songs are not wholly successful. However, for M4, the songs presented will show proficiency across a range. A D4 portfolio will present well-crafted songs; the learner will show skill and flair in negotiating the stylistic considerations of the genre. The award of distinction also very much depends on the breadth of evidence presented, and learners may find that their portfolios need to be more extensive in order to show a wide range. It is vital when assessing this grading criteria that assessors are certain that the individual learner has generated all of the material for the portfolio. For this reason, evidence can comprise only live demonstration/recording by the songwriters themselves, and/or production of a notated form such as a leadsheet. Collaborations or band recordings are not acceptable, since it is the actual material itself that is being assessed, not the arrangement or, indeed, the performance.

Programme of suggested assignments

The table below shows a programme of suggested assignments that cover the pass, merit and distinction criteria in the assessment and grading grid. This is for guidance and it is recommended that centres either write their own assignments or adapt any Pearson assignments to meet local needs and resources.

Criteria covered	Assignment title	Scenario	Assessment method
P1, M1, D1	Landmarks of Song	A piece commissioned by 'Songsmith' magazine, focusing on five iconic songwriters/songs, the techniques used in different contexts and the impact they had.	Magazine article
P2, M2, D2, P3, M3, D3, P4, M4, D4	Song Portfolio	Original song portfolio containing a minimum of four songs showing range of genres/styles.	Recordings by songwriter with written commentary or notation.

Links to other BTEC units

This unit forms part of the BTEC Music and Music Technology sector suite. This unit has particular links with the following unit titles in the BTEC Music and Music Technology suite:

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
		Arranging Music
		Pop Music in Practice
		Composing Music
		Music Theory and Harmony

Essential resources

Tutors and learners will need access to appropriate recordings and scores of songs to tackle learning outcome 1. Access to network-linked computers is also required at certain points for research purposes, and some learners may need to use appropriate notation software. Recording facilities will be needed to create the material for a portfolio. When running workshops and practical sessions, larger, equipped spaces will be required.

Employer engagement and vocational contexts

Effective original songs are required in a wide variety of contexts. An artist's (or band's) songs are very important in establishing and consolidating identity, in terms of style and content, and there will always be the need for new material. Freelance musicians are also regularly contracted to write songs for theatre, cinema, radio, television, advertising, special commissions etc, providing further opportunities for those who can write to a specification.

Delivery of personal, learning and thinking skills

The table below identifies the opportunities for personal, learning and thinking skills (PLTS) that have been included within the pass assessment criteria of this unit.

Skill	When learners are ...
Independent enquirers	describing songwriting techniques
Creative thinkers	describing songwriting techniques, writing lyrics and music for different contexts
Reflective learners	describing songwriting techniques, writing lyrics
Self-managers	producing lyrics and music for different contexts.

Although PLTS opportunities are identified within this unit as an inherent part of the assessment criteria, there are further opportunities to develop a range of PLTS through various approaches to teaching and learning.

Skill	When learners are ...
Independent enquirers	researching songwriting techniques
Creative thinkers	compiling a portfolio showing a range of genres and styles
Reflective learners	acting on feedback from the tutor
Self-managers	keeping organised classnotes and personal notebooks.

● Functional Skills – Level 2

Skill	When learners are ...
ICT – Find and select information	
Select and use a variety of sources of information independently for a complex task	researching songwriting techniques
ICT – Develop, present and communicate information	
Present information in ways that are fit for purpose and audience	presenting using music notation software
English	
Writing – write documents, including extended writing pieces, communicating information, ideas and opinions, effectively and persuasively	describing songwriting techniques, writing lyrics.