

***Great Songwriting Techniques*. By Jack Perricone. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 379 pp. ISBN: 9780199967674**

Great Songwriting Techniques is a long-awaited follow-up to Jack Perricone's previous practical songwriting text, *Melody in Songwriting* (2000). In this new book, the Chair Emeritus of Songwriting at Berklee College of Music retains his characteristically simple, readable pedagogic tone and his focus on practical suggestions and exercises. This time however, he attempts a more comprehensive overview of a fuller range of songwriting techniques. The book contains helpful reference to hundreds of specific examples of songs drawn from a wide variety of genres and eras of songwriting. Songs from the 'Great American Songbook' sit alongside more varied modern examples from artists such as Nicki Minaj, Lady Antebellum and Zedd as well as the expected Beatles or Bob Dylan. These are all notated within the book and some are illustrated on the accompanying website of audio examples.

This book is a welcome addition to the rather limited field of high-quality technically focused songwriting texts. On the whole, it avoids the 'How to Write a Hit in Three Easy Steps' approach of many other books on the subject, despite the use of the word 'great' in the title and reference to 'hopes of creating a smash hit' in the synopsis. Such a focus on ease and speed with relation to commercial success can make other books problematic recommendations when looking for well-rounded reference texts for academic programmes in songwriting.

Some of the most valuable aspects of *Great Songwriting Techniques* lie in its masterfully clear descriptions of techniques and vocabularies of melodic and harmonic development, perhaps covered many times in literature relating to classical music theory, but usually lacking in practical songwriting texts. Perricone provides lots of important vocabulary for commonly required distinctions in songwriting, particularly with regards to characterising melodies and understanding their effects, for example distinguishing between: conversational and declarative melody types (p. 25-7); matched and inexactly matched phrases (p. 34-7); dependent and independent melodies (p. 57); back-heavy and front-heavy phrasing (p. 265-8). His focus on functional harmony (p. 108-120), modal environments (p. 123-149) and useful chord alterations or additions (p. 217-223) are all very welcome for students wishing to enrich their harmonic vocabulary. He also collates some helpful points of reference by providing tables demarcating the relative instability of tones (p. 67-9), others relating to the harmonic stability of triads (p. 106-9) and one further laying out supportable nonchord tones over various triad types, useful for selection of melodic dissonances (p. 251). These are crucial when understanding tone tendency and its importance for shaping and controlling melodic progression in a song. His clear descriptions of the different effects of placement of phrasing within meter are fundamentally important too.

The book is peppered with simple and yet invaluable pieces of advice which are clearly born of many years' experience in the field. This tendency is balanced, on the other hand, with a notable number of advisory statements or proposed activities that seem so simple as to be pointless to suggest e.g. 'Imagine a melody – a phrase, short or long. Sing it again and again; now try to find some words to match it' (p. 14). The contrast between the laying out of very

basic instruction and the inclusion of some quite complex exploration of melody and harmony that requires prior musico-theoretical knowledge highlights an underlying lack of clarity about who constitutes the audience for this book. At one moment the reader seems to require an explanation of what rhyme is - 'a word that rhymes is a word that is similar to, but not the same as, the word with which it is rhymed' p. 33 - and on the very next page it is presumed they know what a poetic foot is ('e.g. an *iamb*, - /, or *trochee*, / - ' p. 34).

The inclusion of a large amount of notated material also limits the field of readership quite considerably, even given the provision of audio examples. And I would question whether this is advisable, given everything we know about the largely informal way in which popular musicians learn (e.g. Green, 2002). Diversity of potential beneficiaries would also have been better served by the inclusion of a wider range of songs credited to female songwriters. The examples are heavily male dominated - only 18% of the songwriting credits in the given song examples belong to women (95 out of 517 credits). If songwriting pedagogues are to help redress the gender imbalance in the songwriting field then actions to actively highlight more of the 'great' work of female songwriters is desperately required.

The most fundamental imbalance here however, is between the depth of focus on the complexities of harmonic or melodic work and the lack of similar attention to detail around development of lyrical and thematic content. Perricone recognises himself that grasping the importance of lyrics in songs was a late addition to his songwriting education, and that he often collaborates with lyricists in his songwriting work (p.2). It might have been advantageous had carried on this collaborative practice here too, particularly with relation to the lyrical lines he often produces as examples, which are disappointingly clichéd and predictable. For example: 'You belong to me, like the river belongs to the sea' (p.8); 'I want you for my wife. Out of my dream into my life' (p. 335); 'No-one's to blame and no-one's the same' (p. 338). With the exception of some of the very good guidance around lyric-setting techniques (e.g. p.91-92), the content on development of lyrical material is lacking many fundamentals. So we continue to await the emergence of a songwriting text that does justice to the depth of technical expertise involved in lyric-writing.

Overall this book has much to offer songwriting students and pedagogues alike. In teaching songwriting at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. I will certainly make use of some of the vocabulary provided and draw on some of the more detailed exercises that are presented. However, the reliance on the use of musical notation will limit the number of my students who will engage with the text directly, as will the lack of real depth in guidance on lyric-writing. It should also be noted that the clear aim of the text is not to give any kind of 'academic' introduction to the subjects at hand and in that sense the field is still lacking scholarly contextualisations of songwriting practice from the writer's perspective.

Jo Collinson Scott

University of the West of Scotland
Jo.Collinson-Scott@uws.ac.uk

References:

Green, L. 2002. *How Popular Musicians Learn: a Way Ahead for Music Education* (Aldershot, Ashgate)

Perricone, J. 2000. *Melody in Songwriting: Tools and Techniques for Writing Hit Songs* (Boston, Berklee Press)