

Arranging Songs for a band

Arranging songs can be a simple or complicated process. As you do it more and more (like most things) you get better and faster. Not only that but you will find that you have more knowledge than you think about how to arrange songs. Let's start with some simple steps but don't think of these steps as rules to obey; if they are rules at all, then they are rules to 'engage with'. We'll go through each of the following steps in detail using a specific example song.

Step 1 Lyrics: Dramatise the song

Look at the lyrics and choose (yes choose) the meaning you think they have.

Step 2 Lyrics to life: assign the roles

Choose the characters and elements and assign a musical identity to each one.

Step 3 Sing the Song: gain inside knowledge

When you sing a song you gain a knowledge you can't get any other way.

Let's use Love Potion No 9 by Leiber and Stoller and discuss this song 'in terms of' arranging that is, to use a **practical analytical vocabulary** not an academic analysis which is meant for a different purpose. Firstly let's discuss why you would approach this song differently from the original by the group the Searchers.

Firstly the original hit single by the Searchers represents a set of rules of the 1960s and these are very restrictive. John McNally the Rhythm guitarist of the Searchers does not arrange this song because of ignorance but because he knows what will work for the market of the 1960s. You should always be conscious of the way that classic recordings of songs have a set of protocols that virtually dictated how they were done. McNally was into skiffle, Soul and R 'n' B but the Searchers' recording of Love Potion No 9 is a very light teenybopper song because this will work for the market.

Leiber and Stoller had a much darker intention when you look at the lyrics and the melody. Wiki informs us that some radio stations banned it because of the line 'I kissed the cop'. The plot of the song is male teen goes to a Gypsy for a love potion to help him with girls but the love potion makes him kiss everything including 'the' cop who breaks the bottle and puts an end to his supply. You can see how you can make this almost comedic or something very much darker and the Searchers' (McNally) went for a middle ground.

Listening to the Searchers the bass is mundane and doesn't really drive the song at all just being there as the lower register. Today (2013) we expect a much heavier bass and a more pronounced role for the Bass. The drums also don't do very much to 'drive the sound' being 'light' and just keeping time. All this fits with the protocols of the time and you find the Beatles changed things with a heavier bass and drums to really drive songs and this was

not because McNally didn't know how to do this but the Beatles just 'broke the rules' that allowed others to do so.

When you listen to the Searchers' and the line 'I took a drink' it's clear that they are using a note an octave higher than written by Leiber and Stoller because they (L & S) meant it to be a darker moment in the song. In the key of G, it is the B below that tonic but the Searchers' go for the high note the B above. Now you can say o'well that is just their interpretation but it is intentional to detract from it being a darker song. If they had made that song as dark as intended by the writers it wouldn't get airplay, it would be accused of being about drugs, inflaming hormones of teenagers to defile authority figures etc. etc. In short it wouldn't be a hit.

In addition perhaps the reason for this arranging blandness is twofold. Firstly the crooner culture of the 50s didn't allow it and you had to break out of that culture and that was hard to do in the marketplace. It kept to a very Classical music kind of arranging and that locked you in to a sort of blandness. Secondly it was a dangerous sound - black blues for the market was always toned down; Elvis made a black sound acceptable but the price was paid for that. So when we look at Love Potion No 9 with a sense of arranging freedom, we'd be inclined to make something heavier, darker and more driven out of it.

Step 1 Lyrics: Dramatise the song

We often have the kind of view that looks at lyrics especially in songs like this of that era, as 'scat' lyrics that is they are just sounds of words and since they are about teenage love in this song they don't mean much but that's the wrong way to think. To dramatise the song you have to accept these lyrics as a meaningful story and take it seriously. Alright it is not a philosophical treatise, but it has its point of view, it has an emotional content. It's a song about drug fuelled manipulation i.e. he has to make it with chicks and needs a drug to help out and authority (the cop a killjoy) brings this to an end.

Some songs are hard to dramatise but this one is easier and it helps you to identify the musical elements that make the song work. By taking the lyrics seriously that is not making them into a mystical cult but accepting them as sincere, it enables you to make further musical judgements.

Step 2 Lyrics to life: assign the roles

The number of roles in a song is up to you. In Love Potion No 9 we can identify various elements that can have a musical equivalent.

- The singer of the song (the teenager narrating the story)

- Madam Ruth, the woman he goes to for help and her ethnic identity

- The Love Potion itself and the effect of it

- The Cop

- The location 34th and Vine, a particular location in Los Angeles; Vine is a symbol for Hollywood, it's very famous (though there are plenty of Vine streets in USA)

- The process of mixing up the potion in the sink

- The process of drinking it

- The Kissing frenzy as a result of taking the potion

- The breaking of the bottle of the potion by the Cop

- The Magic sign that she makes while looking at his palm

etc. etc.

The question arises as to when you stop for clearly you could design a musical equivalent for all of these elements and more and that would mean layers and layers of sound in the mix though you are restricted in what instruments you have available. When you approach arranging of Love Potion No 9 and compare the Searchers' arrangement you find that they didn't assign very much of the song lyrics to musical identities and you come away from that song feeling that they didn't really capture it at all. At the same time you must keep in mind that it was not McNally's fault if he had the greater freedom which we have now, he may have done much more with it. Since he is still on the 60s nostalgia circuit he has to do it the way he did it then; he is kinda locked into it.

We could have the sound effect of a bottle breaking when the cop breaks his bottle or better have the drummer do something with bells. We could have a special Gypsy music scale (to represent Madam Ruth) perhaps Hungarian (though not all Gypsies are Hungarian) or if orchestration allows have ethnic instruments or rip off Bartok. We could have the sound of running water as she mixes it up in the sink. You can see how this all works to bring this song alive and rescue it from the blandness of 60s kitsch.

Step 3 Sing the Song: gain inside knowledge

When you sing a song and take the lyrics as sincere (which is pretty much essential for a successful rendition) you gain a knowledge of the song that you can't generate any other way. If you just sing it to yourself you begin to understand nuances and structures that you didn't know were there, even after extensive academic musical analysis you still don't get that knowledge until you sing the song yourself.

This interior, inside, secret knowledge arises as a result of the breathing and where the breaths take place, the sounds of the words in your throat, the vibration of certain words and word combinations, the movements within the melody, the pacing of the song, the length of certain sections, the dynamic range of a song, almost as if the meaning of the song is more than just the meaning of the words. It's a bit like an artistic genre called 'Magic Realism' that the more visceral elements become manifest the more you do them. You keep looking at an object and the edges begin to disintegrate because the eyes do not see edges the brain compensates by creating them.

In singing songs you find all kinds of things that do not appear on the paper but that add to a performance by your knowledge of them. This knowledge enables you to design soundscapes and accompaniments for songs and gives you the ability to arrange. This is why some musicians do not understand songs and constantly play over the singer (much to their annoyance) because if they sang the song they would not do it, they would have 'song sensitivity'.

Does the quaver rest (at the beginning of Love Potion No 9 matter? Yes but what brings it home as to how much it matters, entails singing the song. Although you see it and may obey it simply because it is there (and people who read music obey) it does actually matter and has a bearing on how you arrange it. Do you get the drummer to do it, leave it out (a mistake really because then the upbeat becomes a downbeat), assume it in the mind between the other musicians; decision decisions. But singing the song will tell you for sure.
