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Eric Beall

The Song Quality Checklist

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a song's strengths and weaknesses, and make suggestions as to how to fix the elements that aren't working. The Creative Director must have the discipline to send the writer back to the studio (even if the writer is you) as many times as it takes to get it right. You are your publishing company's Quality Control Department. Nothing goes out until it receives your stamp of approval.

Here's a test for you. Put your most recent demo in the stereo and hit play. Now close your eyes, and imagine that you're sitting across from Clive Davis, pitching your song. Are there things you want to make excuses for? Then those need to be fixed. Is there a lyric line that makes you wince? Change it. Any notes in the vocal that make you cringe? Tune 'em up. Is it getting boring halfway through the second verse? Add something to the arrangement. As the song ends, try to imagine Clive's reaction. Is he bouncing out of his chair, waving his arms with enthusiasm? (That's a pretty funny picture actually.) Is he nodding half-heartedly? Is he checking his watch?

The point is simple. When you play a song for anyone in the industry, you should be able to do so with confidence. No excuses, no explanations, no imagination required. Ultimately, a song is going to have to do a lot more than pass your quality test in order to get cut—it's going to have to blow people away. Quality control is the minimum standard.

Of course, the difficulty is that songs can be maddeningly hard to judge. Anyone that's been in the business for long has been fooled at least once, and either rejected a song that became a hit, or recorded a song that was a sure smash, only to see it flop. And of course, everybody who hears a song has an opinion, for whatever that's worth. But if you listen to enough demos every day, you start to develop a pretty clear picture of what's important in a song and where most songs tend to go wrong. With allowances then for a certain subjectivity and gut instinct that is part of the process, I offer you:

## The Song Quality Checklist

(This should be fun, huh?)

### ***1. Does the title sound like a "hit"?***

I can almost invariably tell whether a song is any good simply by looking at the title. Real "hit" songs have "hit" titles—interesting, provocative, funny, and unique. "Genie in a Bottle," "Stutter," "Pass the Courvoisier," "Sk8r Boi"—these titles stand out. Most of the time, it's obvious which songs have single potential just by looking at the titles on an album.

The king of great titles is Mutt Lange. While my general rule is that one- to three-word titles work best, Mutt's titles are so good they can break all the rules. "Man, I Feel Like a Woman," "Pour Some Sugar On Me," "I Said I Loved You

(But I Lied)”—these titles have sold the song before the music has even started. Conversely, titles like “Without You” or “You Are the One” are all but D.O.A. I can tell by the title that I’ve heard this song too many times before.

Fixing a title is tricky—it’s a little like fixing the framework of your house after it’s already been built. But sometimes it’s just a matter of adding or subtracting a word or two, or even changing the punctuation. Britney Spears’ “. . . Baby One More Time” is more interesting than “Baby One More Time.” Try to picture how the title of your song would look on the Billboard chart. Would it stand out?

### ***2. Is there a concept for the song?***

A weak title is usually an indicator of a more serious problem. Songs called “Without You” are not really about anything, or at least not anything very interesting. There’s not an original idea at the core of the song. Take a look at the hit titles. You can see that there’s an idea, a concept behind every song. “Stutter” by Joe is about a girl who starts to stutter when she has to explain where she’s been. That’s an idea worth writing a song about. “Without You” is not. Most songs miss the top drawer because the core idea of the song is simply not compelling. If the concept is weak, it’s very hard to rescue the song, no matter what you do with it musically or lyrically.

### ***3. Is the lyric effective? Appropriate? Convincing? Singable? Appealing? Cliché free?***

It’s the eternal debate between composers and lyricists—do lyrics matter? I’ll settle it for you here and now. Yes. Of course it’s possible to come up with examples of songs in which a banal lyric is redeemed by a great track, just as it’s possible to come up with a lyric that has made something special of a relatively standard melody. There are an awful lot of songs out there—you can find an example to prove almost anything. But as someone who listens to songs everyday, I will tell you plainly, lyrics matter. A lot.

This is not to say that there’s anything wrong with a simple, direct lyric. In many cases, particularly in dance music or urban music, that’s the only kind of lyric that will be effective and appropriate. “Music Sounds Better With You” is a great lyric—one interesting line, repeated over and over. It’s exactly what the song needs. Conversely, a lyric that sounds false or forced can kill a song on the spot.

The words have to sing. If there’s a line in a song that makes you cringe, it’s usually because the lyrics feel awkward; the melody and words are out of sync with one another. This is a job for Creative Director. Find those clinkers and get ‘em out of there. Also, the singer has to want to sing the words. Lyrics function not only within the song but also within the context of the artist’s image. Songs that put the singer in a poor light are tough to

get covered. Most artists prefer to present themselves as strong and independent, rather than needy and whiny. (They save the needy and whiny stuff for offstage).

Finally, one quick word about clichés. Stock rhymes, like “fire” and “desire,” or trite, predictable metaphors drive A&R people nuts. When you’re writing a song, it’s easy to pass these clichés off—after all, the line sings well and it’s only one line . . . but when you listen to hundreds of songs a day, it’s not just one line. It’s the same stupid, clichéd line that you’ve heard on ten other songs already today. I once listened to twenty songs in a catalog, and found that eighteen had references to birds flying, and nineteen mentioned rivers running. You start to notice that sort of stuff. Spare me. Spare us all.

***4. Is the song structured correctly? Is there a natural build and release within the song structure?***

There are endless ways to structure a song, but only about three that actually work:

Verse/B Section/Chorus/Verse/B Section/Chorus/Bridge/Break/

Chorus Out (?)

Verse (with hook line at the end)/Verse/Bridge/Verse/Break or Bridge  
(repeat)/Verse (or half verse) (?)

Chorus/Verse/Chorus/Bridge/Verse/Chorus Out

The form I see quite often, particularly from singer/songwriters is this one:

Verse/Verse/Verse/Bridge/Verse

Sometimes, if I’m lucky, the title will show up somewhere in there, buried in yet another verse. This is not a structure. This is a stream of consciousness expression. Song structure works on basic principles: use the best parts more than once, don’t take too long to get to the best parts, and have at least one section that comes as a bit of a surprise. Try the Clive Davis test. Note if or when you start feeling bored. You just found the weak part of your structure.

Often structural problems can be fixed with a few simple edits. Cut out that boring part, move the chorus sooner, or go straight into the out choruses after the bridge. As the Creative Director, you should feel free to experiment with any options you feel move the song along more effectively—and help to bring it in at less than four minutes. Fact: if your song can’t be performed in less than four minutes, it’s probably not going to get on the radio. So you might as well make the cuts now. There’s no reason for a five-minute demo.

### ***5. Does the arrangement serve the song? Does it enhance the song?***

People often speak about arrangement and production as if the two were synonymous. I prefer to distinguish between them. Arrangements are concerned primarily with musical parts and structure, while production is centered around sonic and performance considerations. A drum pattern is an arranging issue; a snare sound is a production one. A background string line is an arranging element; the fact that the strings are out of tune is a production problem.

The first rule of arranging is that nothing should detract from the listener's focus on the melody and lyric. Background parts should not clash with the vocal, and the instrumentation and tempo should fit the mood of the lyric. Most songwriters are protective enough of their song that this is usually not a problem. Lyricists particularly tend to be ever-vigilant about anything that might obscure their favorite line. (Every line is a lyricist's favorite line.)

More often, the problem is that songwriters fail to use the arrangement to enhance the song. Too many demos are nothing but drums, bass, some sort of pad laying down the chords, maybe a string part, and a few orchestra hits, repeating the same patterns until the fade.

On any classic record of almost any style, there is some sort of instrumental hook built into the arrangement of the song—the bass line in “Billie Jean,” the string lines in “Yesterday,” the guitar riff on “Johnny B. Goode,” the pan flute melody on “My Heart Will Go On,” the surf guitar and horn lines on “Livin’ La Vida Loca,” the organ part on “Like a Rolling Stone”—these elements support the song and give it a unique identity. They can also add a sense of dramatic development, providing a jolt of surprise when they first appear, a sense of change when they disappear, and emphasis when they reappear.

Listen to your demo and identify the instrumental hooks. If you're not sure your song has any hooks—then the song isn't done. Go back to the drawing board.

### ***6. Is the tempo right? Does the song drag?***

You never really understand the importance of getting the tempo right until you play your song at a pitch meeting. Suddenly, the up-tempo groove that felt so in-the-pocket when you heard it in your office seems to plod, and the ballads seem to run out of gas entirely, stalling to a dead stop somewhere around the second verse. Something must be wrong with the CD player. Take it from a veteran of this syndrome—do not adjust your stereo. There is nothing wrong. Nothing, that is, except the song's tempo.

In my experience, you want to push the tempo up to the breaking point and then pull back just slightly from that. You'll hate me for it until you get to the pitch meeting. You can thank me later.

**7. *Is the production of the demo “dynamic” and “in your face”?***

Production is one of those vague terms that can encompass almost every element of a recording, from the instrumentation to the vocal performance to the mix. My primary concern here is sonic quality and musical performance. Are the sounds fashionable, fresh, and interesting? Are the reverbs, delays, distortions, and other effects used effectively? Is the mix properly balanced (keeping in mind that what constitutes a proper balance differs radically from genre to genre)? Are the instruments and vocals in tune and in time? Does the recording have drive and excitement?

The impact of music is not just emotional or intellectual. It's also physical. If you don't know what I mean, crank a little Nine Inch Nails on your stereo. You get it now? The drums and bass should be a physical force that almost literally pushes the music along. You should feel the bottom of the track in your gut. Snare drums should crack with energy. Demos that have this sort of power immediately set themselves apart from 80 percent of the music that comes across an A&R person's desk, most of which is tidy and pleasant, and also soft and mushy. Don't be timid. Try to blow those weasels right out of their chairs.

**8. *Does the demo fit clearly into one specific genre? Is that the appropriate genre for the song?***

For many songwriters, the creative process is one of complete freedom—an impulsive act of imagination unrestricted by commercial or marketing considerations. That's great. But it's not how it works for the Creative Director. It's your job to figure out where this particular piece could possibly, maybe, hopefully fit in the giant puzzle of the music industry—and then make sure that it fits there. Often it requires more creativity than was used in writing the song.

Sometimes the only way to figure out where a song belongs is to narrow it down, step by step. What type of artist would sing this lyric? How young or old would the artist need to be? What rhythmic feel and tempo works best for this particular melody? I try not to get too caught up at first in chord progressions and the instrumentation on the demo, as those elements can sometimes deceive you. If a song's melody, lyric, and rhythmic feel really fit better into a genre different than the one in which the song was originally conceived, it's always possible for a writer to restructure the chord progression and redo the demo.

For example, if a ballad needs to be sung by an older male artist, it's in three-four time, and it's a lyric about the tragic loss of a loved one—it's a country song, no matter what the writer thinks. That's about the only genre where you'll find an older male artist or in which radio will play a ballad in

waltz time, particularly one with a tear-jerking lyric. Go back to the studio, add guitar and fiddle, and take out the five-note chords.

It's often up to the Creative Director to figure out what a song truly wants to be, then to imagine where it could possibly fit in the market, and then somehow reconcile those two realities. That's why you get to have "Creative" in your title.

***9. Does the song have the potential for mass appeal? Is it the right size?***

No, I'm not talking about the length of the song—that stays under four minutes, no matter what. I'm talking about something much more conceptual, something . . . big.

This is something I was never much aware of as a writer, but it's become increasingly apparent to me as a publisher. Most writers write small, rather than big. So many songs are like lovely little miniature paintings: a melancholy little lyric, with a little hook buried at the end of each little chorus, with a lot of little chords and a melody that never really strays too far from a little six- or seven-note range. In the end, the listener is touched by a little emotion and reacts with a little smile, a nod, and then, in very little time, forgets about the song entirely.

I remember seeing U2 on MTV's *Total Request Live* a year or two ago, when they performed "Beautiful Day" on the balcony of the Viacom building, beamed into Times Square on the giant Jumbotron screen. That's what I mean by BIG. One of the great things about U2 is that they write BIG—BIG, GRANDIOSE ANTHEMS WITH BIG LYRIC IDEAS AND BIG MELODIES AND BIG GUITARS AND BOOMING DRUMS MADE TO BE PLAYED IN BIG PLACES FOR BIG CROWDS. A U2 song can be an event. So can a Springsteen song. The same is true of songs by Jam and Lewis, or Eminem, or Missy Elliott. They are capable of working on a large scale. They can move the crowd.

Now there's nothing inherently wrong with a small song. They can be intimate and touching, and quite satisfying to a coffeehouse full of friends and family. But if you want to reach a large audience and to create a song that has the potential of becoming a classic, you're going to have to think bigger. I recently heard an interview with Eminem, who talked about his primary challenge as a young performer being that of learning to come out of his shell, to lose his self-consciousness, and project the larger-than-life persona that he has today.

This is where the cheerleader aspect of the Creative Director comes in. One of the most important roles a Creative Director can play is to encourage his or her writer to paint on an increasingly large canvas, to move from miniatures, to portraits, to murals. Or to the Times Square Jumbotron.

Obviously this is tougher to do if you are not only the Creative Director but also the writer. Still, the truth is that we all talk to ourselves all the time—writers more so than most everyone else, except for the crazy guys on the subway. Your work as a Creative Director should be reflected in your interior dialogue, and the conversation should be one of a tough but supportive coach—not tolerating any attempt to take the easy, safe way out but rather demanding that you set your sights higher and aim for greatness over mediocrity. Most songwriters fail to leave an impression simply because they think too small and aim too low. Go for the BIG hit.

Wow. A checklist for songs. That felt very creative, didn't it? Sort of like checking a car for defects when it comes off the assembly line. Wouldn't it be easier to just go by gut instinct and decide whether you like the song or not?

Maybe. There's no question that many songs succeed better when listened to than when analyzed. "I Want It That Way" by the Backstreet Boys was probably one of the best pure pop songs written in the last decade, despite the fact that it starts out by rhyming "fire" and "desire," and has a lyric that I still haven't been able to make any sense of. But it also has a can't-miss melody and a brilliant arrangement and production. It just works. Of course, it's easy to follow your first impression and give a song the old "make it or break it" test. No need to dissect the thing—you either like it or you don't.

The problem is that as a Creative Director, your job is not to decide whether you like or dislike the song. It's to figure out how to fix it. Or improve it. Or improve the writer. A quick gut reaction is not going to accomplish that. A writer needs to understand what works and what doesn't, and be offered some constructive suggestions as to what can be done to make the song viable. In order to provide that, a Creative Director has to learn to look at songs in an organized and thorough fashion. "Nah, I'm not really feeling it," is just about the most depressing thing you can say to a songwriter—not because it's negative, but because it implies that the song is hopeless.

As you practice listening to songs in a more precise way, you will also start to find that things are often better than they first appear to be. A few lyric changes, a new drum pattern, or a new demo singer can reveal that there was more potential to a song than you might have initially thought. A careful consideration as to where a song fits in the market may reveal that it has potential in more than one genre. If nothing else, a consistent approach to looking at songs in this analytical way will help you, as Creative Director, to better understand your writer and his or her strengths and weaknesses—even if you and the writer are one and the same person. By maintaining an unrelenting determination to get the music right, you will begin to figure out what it will take to move your writer up . . .