

# How Songwriting Can Shape Imaginative Experiences: A Critical Reflection

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## Abstract

Songs are a unique medium that can guide listeners through powerful, imaginative experiences. Songwriters, however, rarely know how to approach this capacity with intentionality as the techniques they might use are often hidden within other disciplines, such as psychology. I therefore chose to investigate how deliberately employing interdisciplinary techniques that integrate knowledge from music theory and cognitive science can shape listeners' imaginative responses to songs.

Through an original song I wrote about a long-distance relationship, I thus explore how songwriters' choices can serve as affective cues that guide the audience's imaginative interpretation of the song. In crafting and reflecting on the song, I draw on Csikszentmihalyi's Systems Model of Creativity to see songwriting as collaborative co-creation: the songwriter (Individual) employs musical elements (Domain) to position listeners (Field) to extract particular imaginative potential.

Critical analysis reveals the effectiveness of this approach but also its limitations, such as the methodology's lack of regard for the influence of linguistic and cultural factors on the song's imaginative interpretation. These discoveries changed the way I understand songwriting: less as individual expression and more as a dialogue of co-creation situated within cultural contexts. Testing these underlying assumptions highlighted the need for further research and limited the scope of my songwriting. Yet, such a critical approach also yielded invaluable insights for a songwriter like me, while

demonstrating the benefits of an interdisciplinary approach in understanding such creative processes.

## Introduction

I am a songwriter who has long been fascinated by the power that lies in music, especially with regard to the imagination. I thus aimed to explore the specific techniques available to songwriters who want to produce purposeful songs that shape imaginative experiences. I found this desire to be deeply interdisciplinary, rooted in the intersection of **fields** that songs represent.

Instead of opting for an experimental research design, I wanted to celebrate the interdisciplinary, difficult-to-measure interplay among the various aspects of songwriting by writing my own song and playing with sounds, tempos and other tools in an academically grounded yet creatively open manner. This approach required extensive research into existing scholarly knowledge about songwriting, integrating it with more informal guidelines developed by musicians over time. By delving deeper into the topic, I also came to recognise that most of the academic theory on songwriting, as well as the assumptions I was operating upon, were rooted in a Western musical tradition. This knowledge did more than limit the project's scope: it shaped how I viewed the techniques I employed, especially in relation to Csikszentmihalyi's Systems Model of Creativity.

My findings ultimately suggested that much of the knowledge about affective cues from cognitive science and other disciplines resonated with informal songwriting techniques, but that our ability to shape the imagination deliberately is, in some ways, limited. This is meaningful in understanding the process of songwriting more comprehensively and can help inform future research.

## Theoretical framework

The medium of a song, I found, was ideal for exploring the applied imagination: songs exemplify the power of interdisciplinarity, blending language, sound and psychology to evoke specific imaginative responses. Interestingly, in undertaking this project and engaging with systems of imaginative creation, mainly Csikszentmihalyi's Systems

Model, I have come to rethink songwriting. Indeed, I learnt that ‘what we call creative is never the result of **individual** action alone’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015: 47), but a deeply collaborative endeavour involving the ‘Individual’, the ‘**Domain**’ and the ‘Field’. Here, by interpreting Csikszentmihalyi’s structure within the minimal scope of the songwriter, the music and the listener, I was able to reflect upon how the cultural nature of the ‘Field’ can impact the effectiveness of the other two elements in shaping an imaginative experience. This approach also narrowed down my intended audience to songwriters who wish to craft more purposeful songs with the audience’s experience in mind. For, although my song is widely accessible to any listener, those who could learn most from it are exactly those artists who view their works as tools to guide and ground others’ imagination, and who wish to learn more about the factors involved in that imagination. As such, my project seeks to explore and teach interdisciplinary techniques in engineering these imaginative frameworks so that other songwriters like me can gain greater self-awareness and thoughtfulness in this craft.

## Methodology

I will now discuss a selection of the choices within the ‘Domain’ that I, the ‘Individual’, made to tell the evolving story of a long-distance relationship. As ‘imagined experiences tend to be emotion-laden’ (Cocquyt and Palombo, 2023: 1), I meant these choices to instinctively indicate the plot’s direction to the ‘Field’ through the emotions they evoke. As I and the techniques I used originate from a Western heritage, however, the way they direct the listener’s interpretation is culturally loaded, with the song’s perceived plot likely being more legible to Western listeners. Yet, in listing techniques and intended emotional responses below, I will identify and reflect on the affective cues that serve as the guidelines within which the imaginative ‘poetic [work] of translation’ (Fryer and Conroy, 2021: 124) of that type of listener occurs. Critically, the ‘perceived emotions’ about the story are detached from ‘felt emotions’, and as such do not invoke major ethical considerations, such as distress, to the audience (Kawakami *et al.*, 2014).

I employed these cues from the first note, attempting to create a natural atmosphere through low volume, a slow tempo and monotonous repetition (Juslin and Lindström, 2010). The intended neutrality of these techniques, however, already revealed an

aforementioned challenge involved in songwriting: **cultural reliance**. Indeed, research shows that some sounds may carry more tension depending on listening habits, ones that vary across cultures, so that neutrality in the West may be tension elsewhere (Huron, 2006: 91). I therefore began to understand how my attempt to use the same musical choices across varied groups was deeply flawed.

I then came across another aspect of the cultural factor when I used a musically clichéd upward chord progression to represent a stereotypical sense of joy, and employed **chromatic mediants**, often used in film scoring to convey heroism (Dennis, 2018). Here, indeed, the cultural reliance of these sections was not musical but conceptual: the perceived qualities of emotions and values are not uniform across cultures, so that what is considered ‘stereotypical joy’ and ‘heroic’ may diverge before any of my creative choices are made. As a result, I had to acknowledge that the scope of my research had to be culturally limited, as eliciting similar imaginative responses across cultures within the same song was unrealistic and disregarded the listener’s crucial role as a co-creator.

Yet, these limits I had found were immediately challenged, as the song’s stability stumbled upon a harrowing section marked by the **minor second interval**, a clash between two adjacent notes that creates dissonance and tension. This interval is also a biological signature for distress as it mirrors the acoustic profile of human infant cries (Zeloni and Pavani, 2022). Such a sound triggers a negative emotional response, aiding the imaginative interpretation of a surprising and distressing period of uncertainty. The critical observation, however, is that this technique may not be culturally dependent: it is grounded in an underlying biological process. By engaging these autonomic rather than conditioned responses, therefore, songwriting may reach across cultural imaginative divides in its impact and interpretation. Nonetheless, I recognised that this technique was not widely replicable and could not shape the more complete imaginative experience of a song. Additionally, it did not offset the conceptual and musical cues that must be employed in a musically narrative project. As such, I chose to maintain the boundaries of my research within a Western audience, beyond the meaningful insight that some sounds can be deeply, independently human.

Overall, the success of any of these techniques in conveying their intended plot is determined by the listener and by who they are, with the Western 'Field' being best positioned to do so based on the Western-centric knowledge and research used. This reliance arises for complex reasons, best summarised by the fact that shared auditory environments condition different people to interpret and imagine sounds in similar ways. These cultural differences, yet, are not to be assumed: an increasingly globalised world might blend musical traditions, erode others and render different cultures able to experience similar imaginative responses. However, in my research into songwriting, I set these assumptions aside and deliberately limited the reach of my narrative intentions to the Western listener.

## **Discussion of findings**

Once I had set this scope, my project's findings came into sharper focus: interdisciplinary thinking, such as integrating psychology and music theory in artistic choices, can yield a more purposeful and effective approach to guiding and applying the imagination. Indeed, although the song's specific plot may have been ambiguous, the techniques employed aimed to lead the audience to imagine the narrative as undulating, hampered, but eventually resolved. As illustrated throughout, this outcome can be best understood and shaped through Csikszentmihalyi's Systems Model, which, formulated for the pursuit of widespread and revolutionary creative achievements, has here been constructively applied to humbler artistic work. As a theoretical backbone for analysis, indeed, it allowed me to see purposeful songwriting as a process of co-creation, where the imaginative end-product arises from a collaboration between the artist and the listener. This structure also helped me understand the important role of the listener's culture and how, due to my background as a songwriter and that of much academic work, my ability to effectively co-create with shared intention is greatly limited to my own culture. Within those constraints, this intentionality is ideally enabled by the Systems Model's rigour, which systemises how the listener's imagination will contribute to the story 'with its own particular history of experience' (Iser, 1978: 284), but, if the artist is successful, will remain within the provided boundaries.

Here, I treated language as the indispensable but secondary blank canvas upon which to play with the imagination through auditory contexts. I would explore this aspect of songwriting in more depth were I to develop this project further, as using it secondarily creates limitations regarding its neutrality. Yet, to make the lyrics the best imaginative canvas, I tried to exclude emotionally charged words, create enigmatic verses and add a recurring chorus line, which provided a steady linguistic reference. Most importantly, however, I mitigated this limitation by choosing the song medium, whereby, instead of adopting an experimental design, I celebrated its unique meeting point between language and sound. This type of approach is particularly valuable: although much of the research I referenced already tests the effects of musical choices on listeners, little academic work seeks to connect and systemise those findings into an interdisciplinary framework on creativity. Indeed, precisely because of the framework I used to understand the songwriting techniques, the very reliance on the listener's personal and cultural background became central, and I was able to identify the potential scope of further research.

Ultimately, however, researching songwriting yielded surprising insights for me into the nature of the craft and the challenges that come with it. Crucially, I learnt that purposeful songwriting requires both attentiveness to the conditions we create and humility about our ability to deliberately affect large groups of people. My awareness of these issues, I am sure, will help me be a better songwriter. For, although artistic meaning is a complex dialogue, those who know they are in one will be best placed to shape it.

## **Glossary**

**Csikszentmihalyi's Systems Model of Creativity:** A theory of creativity which approaches creative work not as an individual endeavour but as the product of an interaction between the 'Individual' creator, the relevant 'Domain' and the 'Field' that receives the work.

**Individual:** In Csikszentmihalyi's model, the creator producing the work to be received by others. In songwriting and in this project, the individual is the songwriter.

**Domain:** In Csikszentmihalyi's model, the medium used to produce creative work, as well as the conventions, body of knowledge and techniques involved in the creation of the work.

**Field:** In Csikszentmihalyi's model, the audience or the community that receives the creative work, who contribute by interpreting and evaluating it.

**Minor second interval:** The smallest interval in Western tonal music, occurring when two adjacent notes are produced in quick succession, creating a sharp dissonance and tension.

**Chromatic mediants:** Chords which share one common tone and a shared minor or major quality, but that aren't from the same diatonic scale. Using these chords in a musical progression creates a surprising yet flowing effect.

**Cultural reliance:** The extent to which a particular sound or musical technique depends on culture for its meaning and effect, driven by culturally specific habits of hearing and interpretation.

**Affective cues:** Features that may be used in music or lyrics to guide, suggest or induce a specific emotional response in the listener.

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