



THE PERSONAL SONG

Recently my musical partner Lou and I played for the retirement party of Wisconsin Appellate Court Judge Charles Dykman, who happens to be a fan of our music, poor chap. At the request of his fascinating wife Bonnie, we wrote a special song for this amazing fellow.

We have written many personal songs over the years, and are often asked how we go about it. I'm reluctant to give songwriting advice because, as Yip Harburg said at age 80, "Every day I'm an amateur when I start working." But if you promise to take it with a grain of salt, here's a glimpse of how I wrote Judge Dykman's song, and how you can write something of the sort too. This won't cover the infinite aspects of songwriting in general, but only a few hints about my own imperfect approach to writing a personal song.

Gathering

Gather from friends and/or family as many facts as you can about the person of honor. Sometimes it helps if you prepare a questionnaire: What are the person's pet peeves? Hobbies? Favorite musics? Without prompting, Bonnie provided plenty of facts from important to silly, but if, when writing, you find you need more goodies, ask for more. Keep an eye peeled for rhymes.

All the tidbits should make sense to the person of honor; most should make sense to family and close friends, but all of them needn't make sense to the rest of the world. "Mel" and "Anne", in the verse shown, are Judge Dykman's parents; not everyone in the room would know this but that's okay.

Lumping

Though the lyrics can follow a loose chronological order, it isn't necessary to follow a timeline strictly, which would require a lot of extra work and fact-checking. Instead, concentrate on thematic groupings: facts about travel; facts

about food; facts about siblings.

Introducing

Put yourself in the song as the befuddled narrator trying to deal with this towering stack of data. I did this in two ways with the song for Judge Dykman:

Firstly, I wrote an introduction -- to a separate melody -- about acquiring the facts. (I used "we" instead of "I" because there are two of us in the band). Note that without the intro, the song would be in the third person (he), but with the intro, it all becomes a song in the first person (I, or actually "we"). Pull back and look at your OWN reactions as you're trying to figure out an angle. I ended this intro with "...this is what we found" to tie into the coming verse's

Intro:

A couple days ago Chuck Dykman's wife
Dropped off sacks of facts about his life
Which we took & shook & tossed around
Reached inside & this is what we found...

Verse (there are 8 verses):

Something about Wisconsin, and the capital of the state
Something about St Mary's, in nineteen thirty eight
Something about Ruth Anne; Something about Mel
Something about hollyhock seeds and bags of plums to sell
I'd get all philosophical, but really what's the use?
It all boils down to vegetable juice.

first words, "Something about..."

Secondly, This "Something about" phrase is sprinkled throughout the song. This was my actual reaction to the pile of facts: *What am I going to do with all this? There's something about selling hollyhock seeds, something about Texas...Wait! That's it! That'll be a recurring phrase in the song: Something About!* ...and by forming the song around this reaction, it gives it a personal air and also explains to the listener why things may seem jumbled.

I should mention that such an intro is unnecessary when this information is in the body of the song. For example, in a song I once wrote for a woman whose husband, Don, had provided me with all the facts, the refrain was "At least that's the way Don explained it to me." This provided the same sort of description of the narrator's position found in Judge Dykman's introductory verse.

Tuning

I chose a traditional, loose blues melody for the main body of the song. By "loose," I mean a melody that is relaxed regarding how many syllables appear per line. If your writing time is limited, this makes it easier to squeeze things in without struggling, as you would with, say, a Gilbert and Sullivan melody.

Refraining

Each verse ends with the refrain, "It all boils down to vegetable juice." A refrain is an ending line that is repeated at the end of every verse, like the line "The answer is blowin' in the wind" in the Dylan song. This means that the second-to-the last line has to rhyme with the refrain,

so it's a good idea to try for a fairly easy-to-rhyme refrain. "Juice" wasn't an ideal choice and I had to reach for a few rhymes.

The refrain I used here is obviously a sarcastic overview, using the Judge's true passions for gardening and for creating vegetable drinks as

a silly analogy for his life. I'm always concerned that such sarcasm will go too far and be hurtful or embarrassing, so you have to be careful. Since the Dykmans already were fans of our oddball songs, I was pretty confident they would be okay with this goofiness. At any rate, the best refrain for this kind of song poetically summarizes the person's universe, one way or another.

Infringing and Thanking

Note about copyright: The US Copyright law says that stuff written for family and/or a "circle of friends" does not need to comply with copyright law. Anything goes, unless there's a chance Aunt Berta's Blues might go platinum.

My sincere thanks to Judge Charles Dykman and Bonnie Dykman for giving me the okay to talk about their song.

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