

WHY DO MY

**SONGS
SOUND**

CHEESY?

CHARLOTTE YATES



Charlotte Yates

www.songdoctor.co.nz

Why do my songs sound cheesy?

This is a common complaint from beginner songwriters and it can stop them dead in their tracks. The idea of writing down big bald feelings like ***I honestly love you*** or ***I will always love you*** seems about as appealing as standing on stage naked.



Yet, these are topics and ideas that people regularly write about so how come it works for songwriters Jeff Barry and Peter Allen who wrote the 1974 hit ***I honestly love you*** for Olivia Newton John, and for Dolly Parton who wrote ***I will always love you*** that Whitney Houston took to new melismatic heights in the nineties.

"Why won't it work for me??"
cries the newbie songwriter!



I think it's the way that these very successful songwriters use specific details and images that allow us to 'see' a scene, a person, a situation very readily. They let us into their world with little effort needed for us to grasp what's happening. This lays the pathway preparing us for **an authentic, universally understood, emotional message** that anyone, yes, anyone can feel.

Some days more than others, to be sure, but we can all buy in, **because the songwriter made it so.**

There is no obscurity in the lyrics whatsoever. The language used is very simple and direct, conversational.

As developing songwriters, the trick is in understanding and learning how to take your audience from the smaller ‘a’ of your verse to the very big ‘b’ of your chorus, without smothering them in vats of ...




aged
cheddar!

Check out the opening lines of both these songs:

Dolly Parton opens with

*If I should stay
I would only be in your way
So I'll go but I know
you'll be with me each step of the way*



Straight away, we know what's happening.
Two folks in this game and one of them is
going



Or as one commentator wrote
*“There’s no fancy wordplay in
Parton’s lyrics, no
metaphors or allusions. But her
words sound like the
conversation a person would
have in that situation...”*

which leads her to the point,
her chorus.



There’s no arguing. There’s no self pity. There’s no wailing
and gnashing of teeth. The exit is definite but dignified,
future-proofed and hard to beat. And #1 three times in
three different decades in the US of A.

Similarly, Olivia got to sing

Maybe I hang around here a little more than I should

We both know I got some place else to go

But I got something to tell you

That I never thought I would

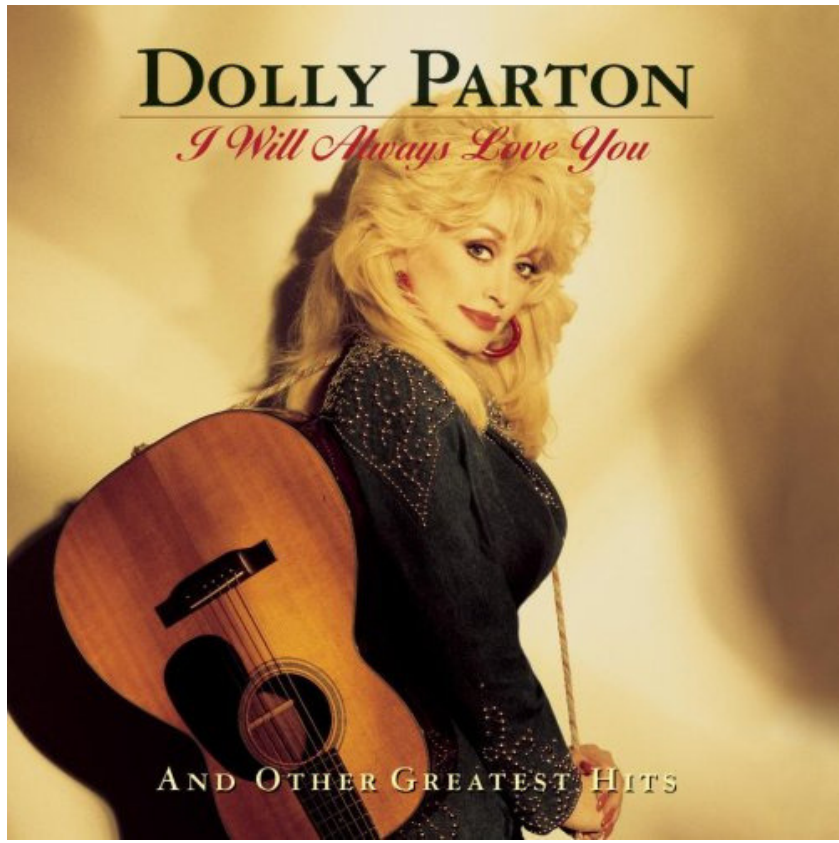
But I believe you really ought to know

Her situation differs because she is
compelled to say something
irrespective of the result,
and her mission is....



If you hadn't had the **backstory** in the verse, you wouldn't perceive the challenge involved for the character to say this but we've been led to the brink by the songwriters and the emotional impact of the lyric has been completely heightened because we've been made aware of the risks involved.

What seems like 'cheese' on first viewing now packs a punch.



In both choruses, there are significant qualifying words that are **emphasized and supported musically**: ‘*always*’ and ‘*honestly*’. They are designed to tug on your ears and make their way to your hearts and memories, most effectively. It’s not that you love, but how you do it, that shapes the song.



Laurie Anderson is someone you could never convict of being guilty of writing cheesy songs. She no longer loves the colo(u)r of your sweaters in her ***Sweaters*** song. In the moment of realisation that she’s over it, she starts with the body parts of her other character she no longer loves - mouth, eyes, and moves to **the details** of other domestic apparel. Rather than saying she no longer loves you, she no longer loves **the things** of you, and about you, employing repetition to make the point.

*I no longer love your mouth
I no longer love your eyes*

*I no longer love your eyes
I no longer love the color of your sweaters
I no longer love it*

*I no longer love the color of your sweaters
I no longer love the way you hold your pens
And pencils
I no longer love it*

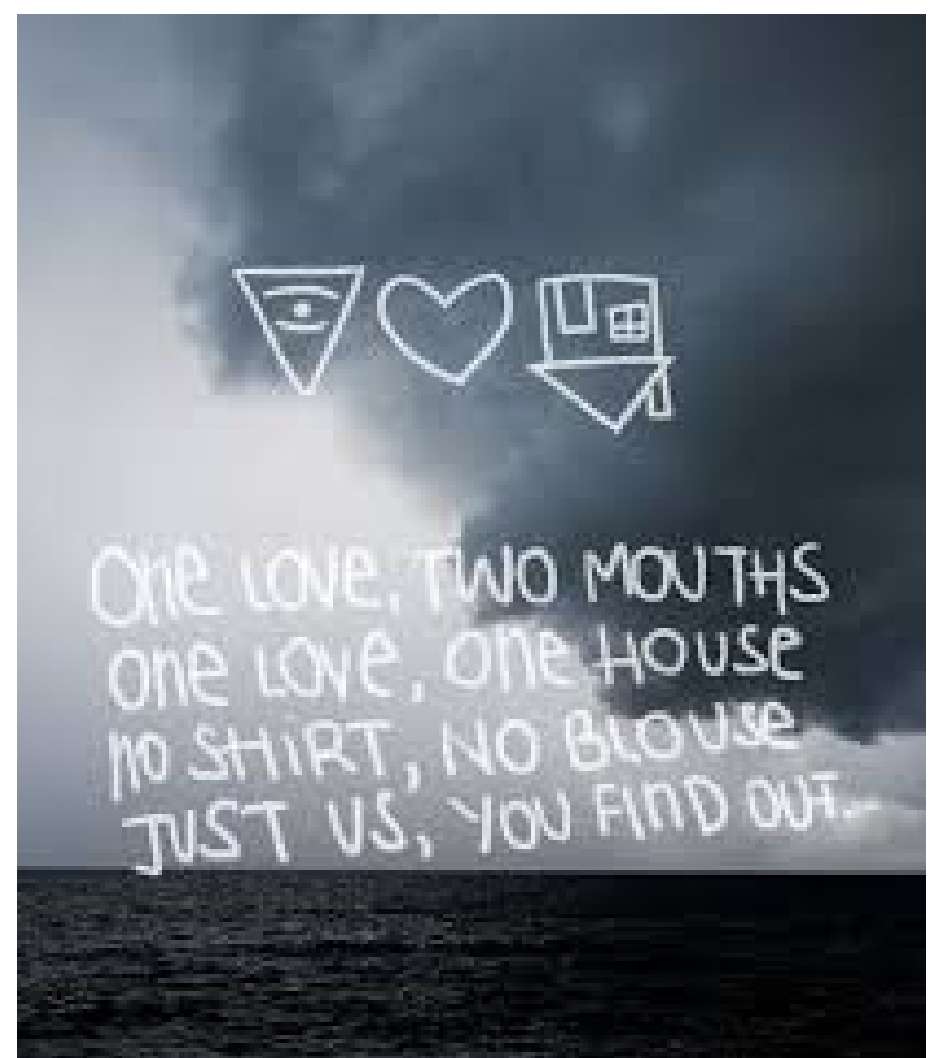
**Again, no word over two syllables.
And nothing hard to understand.**



*One love, two mouths
One love, one house
No shirt, no blouse
Just us, you find out
Nothing that I wouldn't
wanna tell you about, no*

***'Cause it's too cold
For you here and now
So let me hold
Both your hands in the
holes of my sweater***

Meanwhile, indie band the Neighbourhood use virtually the same items as romance enhancers in their 2013 song ***Sweater Weather***. Clothing and body parts are clearly associated with each character – the singer as him, and the other character as her in those *'little high-waisted shorts'* we meet her wearing in Verse 1. The offer of his sweater in the chorus is an offer of affection. Although the singer struggles to articulate what he wants their future to hold, at least he has a sweater!



The language is still direct and simple, but uses very specific details to let us be in the moment, and yet still feel what the singer wants to happen in this scenario.

Takeaways?

No cheese with that?

Try this menu when you write your next song.



1. **Know** what you want to say.
Put **the point of the song** in the chorus.

2. **Show us** quickly and simply.
KISS. (Keep it simple, stupid!)

3. **Lead us** to the chorus line by line with
a forward moving **plot**.

4. **Mean it.**
Don't belittle your audience
or your characters.

5. **Start small** and get big.

6. Musically **emphasize the most
important words** (the title)
in your chorus.

more at
www.songdoctor.co.nz