February 8, 2012

Three Chords and the Truth

One of the ways I like to tell stories is by writing songs. I was a piano major and voice minor in college, and I picked up songwriting toward the end of my formal education. But it stuck like glue and throughout my adult life I've written hundreds of songs. Songs are a great way to practice telling stories because you have to jump in quickly, paint an accurate picture of the situation, and give the listener some emotional context as well. Then tie up any lose ends. Oh yeah, and somewhere in the middle you have to write a musical hook that's hum–able.

Telling a story in such a short space and time - just 3 minutes – can be a great way to practice your writing skills, your story telling skills, or both. Comedians do it all the time... "A guy walks into a bar…" and three minutes later we're all laughing. I think we're all willing to give up a few minutes to listen to someone tell a good story. I know I am. But in that few minutes, there has to be something of interest and some sort of payoff to make it worthwhile. That might be a heart-warming ending that makes you cry or a gut-splitting hysterical joke. But it has to be worth it to stick around or the next time you see this storyteller at the water cooler, you'll pass him or her by.

When I was studying songwriting at BMI, one of my teachers said, "Writing a song is like making a 3-minute movie." Simple enough concept, but let's break that down. Songs have verses that lay out the story premise. Who's doing what where, or to whom, and why? You use one song verse for your story's beginning, another for the middle, and another for the end. With a song, you also get to have a chorus that repeats the major point of the story. The challenge of writing a song is that you only have a handful of words to tell your story – and they typically need to rhyme. No easy task.

You don't have to be a songwriter or even be musical to appreciate or utilize this concept. In my "Effective Storytelling with Final Cut Pro X" course at Lynda.com , I talk about organizing your video assets into beginning, middle and ending sections. And full-length movies have an Act 1, 2, and 3 to organize a story's beginning, middle and end. So as storytellers, we're all on the same page here and have the same goal – to tell a succinct story that has a beginning, middle and end.

While these different approaches to storytelling may have the same goal, there are some advantages to telling the story in verse or song form. Now you don't have to rhyme your story

just to practice telling it in 3 minutes! And that's my point. If you could condense your story into 3 minutes – maybe use the songwriter's three-verse structure, or write a poem in three stanzas, you could share your story idea more easily with others. Watch people's faces as you tell the story. See if your story holds their interest. Does your 3-minute movie come alive in their faces? Or drive them anxiously away? Do they have follow-up questions about the characters and what happened to them? Maybe your story needs clarifying in those places.

I was talking to the amazing guitarist and songwriter, Vicki Genfan , about writing songs. She told me about a country western songwriter, Harlan Howard , who had a formula for writing hit tunes. He wrote greats such as "I Fall to Pieces," "Busted," "Heartaches by the Numbers," among others. He once said that to write a great country song you just needed 'three chords and the truth.' I love that concept – three chords and the truth. That quote has been used quite a bit since Harlan said it, and singer Sara Evans released a country song by that title.

But I'm not sure the truth by itself is enough. I think you have to tell the story in such a way that your listener wants to hear the truth. You have to lay out the reasons why the truth is important. Set up the line or the moment in the story where the truth might actually "set you free." You can think of the "the truth" as the chorus in a song. What is the main point you want your listeners to walk away with at the end? What melody line do you want them to walk away humming? That's your truth.

So when you want to take your story out for a test drive, take a lesson from songwriters and use their simplified structure, just three simple verses or short paragraphs that outline your story into the shape of a 3–minute movie with a beginning, middle and end. And make sure you add a healthy dash of truth to make your story authentic. Listen to Diana's Blog