Internal and external detail in your lyrics

All songwriting textbooks will advise you to use specific detail and imagery to create an experience for your listeners, and many will provide you with good activities to build the habit of doing this.

We are going to go a bit deeper into this to understand how the brain of your listeners literally cannot help itself from responding with different degrees of attention and engagement depending on the way the detail in the lyrics is presented

There are fascinating reasons why this makes for a lyric that connects more successfully, and it's to do with what what happens behind the locked door of brain response. For the rare gift of its attention, the model-making brain wants to receive information in a certain way. Research in which people's brains were scanned while they were presented with different items of information in different orders were able to measure the intensity of neural activity - how much the brain was stimulated to respond - with different types of information presented in specific and different orders.

Touches, tastes, scents and sounds can be recreated in the brains of readers as the neural networks associated with these sensations become activated when they see the right words. This bypasses any conscious decision readers or listeners make about what attention to give what they're reading or hearing.

What this means for songwriters is that if you make the most of this response-capacity or model-making capacity of the brain, you can ensure your words engage and connect'

'Brains take information from the outside world – in whatever form they can – and turn it into models. When our eyes scan over letters in a book, the information they contain is converted into electrical pulses. The brain reads these electrical pulses and builds a model of whatever information those letters provided. So if the words on the page describe a barn door hanging on one hinge, the reader's brain will model a barn door hanging on one hinge. They'll 'see' it in their heads. Likewise, if the words describe a ten-foot wizard with his knees on back to front, the brain will model a ten-foot wizard with his knees on back to front. Our brain rebuilds the model world that was originally imagined by the author of the story. This is the reality of Leo Tolstoy's brilliant assertion that 'a real work of art destroys, in the consciousness of the receiver, the separation between himself and the artist.' A clever scientific study examining this process seems to have caught people in the act of 'watching' the models of stories that their brains were busily building. Participants wore glasses that tracked their eye movements. When they heard stories in which lots of events happened above the line of the horizon, their eyes kept making micro-movements upwards, as if they were actively scanning the models their brains were generating of its scenes. When they heard 'downward' stories, that's where their eyes went too. The revelation that we experience the stories we read by building hallucinated models of them in our heads makes sense of many of the rules of grammar we were taught at school. For the neuroscientist Professor Benjamin Bergen, grammar acts like a film director, telling the brain what to model and when. He writes that grammar 'appears to modulate what part of an evoked simulation someone is invited to focus on, the grain of detail with which the simulation is performed, or what perspective to perform that simulation from'.

Storr, Will. The Science of Storytelling: Why Stories Make Us Human, and How to Tell Them Better (p. 29). HarperCollins Publishers. Kindle Edition.

We are going to apply this to reviewing lyrics we've written and writing new lyrics by considering detail in two categories: internal and external.

This is how you can distinguish external and internal detail:

External detail	Internal detail
Actions and objects surrounding the main character	Thoughts and emotions within the main character
Concrete	Abstract
Provoke an image	Doesn't provoke an image-or may be metaphorical

To create engaging lyrics, we can get behind the scenes and consider the balance of internal and external detail. Some small adjustments to the distribution of detail in each category can transform how memorable the lyric is and how effectively it taps into the ways our brains can best make use of information.

The external detail provides a context and sets the scene and the internal detail gives it purpose and meaning. There are lots of ways to toggle around the position of internal and external detail to create the most expressive balance for your lyric.

As well as keeping a balance of internal and external detail, you can retain people's interest by varying how zoomed in you are. Going right into very specific detail slows down the passage of time in a song because the more detail you go into the longer it takes to describe each moment. This is great for setting a scene, but you might need to zoom out to allow the story to develop. One way to think about structuring verse and choruses is to divide the labour – the verses develop the plot or progress it using plenty of external detail, the chorus states or repeats the main idea of the song, the 'why', which is likely to have more internal detail.

Activities: Go through lyrics you've written already that you are willing to edit. Underline the external and internal details. See roughly what the distribution is.

Now create some variations according to how you will group them.

Groupings for four line sections: (you may choose to have internal - dominant detail in choruses and external dominant detail in verses).

IIEE
EEII
EEEI
EIEI
IEII

For six line sections:

Activities: Go through 1-5 of your favourite songs, printing the lyrics out and underlining the internal and external detail, observing how much there is in each category and how they are grouped.

Activities: Destination writing. 5-10 mins. Free write to the topic, then go through and underline the external details, and the internal details. Sort these into columns.
Suggested topics:
- your living room with the lights out
- a wine cellar
- Running through the airport
- Just after waking up
- When taking the rubbish out
- Olympic swimmer
- Architect
- Adoptee
- Priest

To take this further you can also think about how the ideas are distributed.

1. All four lines continue one idea
2. Two lines of one idea are followed by two lines of another idea
3. Six line sections - all six lines contain one idea.
4. Three lines of one idea and three lines of another idea/topic

Usually there will be 1-2 topics per section.

'Without the help of external details, internal details lie flat and remain two-dimensional. But when we precede those internal detail lines with external detail, the thoughts and emotions come alive like a stained glass window in a burst of sunlight.' Andrea Stolpe, Popular Lyric Writing

Activities: Three specific qualities of an object. This seems to be an optimal quantity for effectively building pictures, so if there are opportunities to do this, take them. Go through the lyrics you have written already and see if you have made any images that either possess these or that you could edit a bit. Eg coarse blue carpet. Cabbagey brown sock. Smooth grey stone.