



# ARRANGING YOUR MUSIC

## *MYB's Guide To Producing and Arranging Your Own Music*

### **Song Structure – Creating Dynamics**

We have some great musicians playing at MYB gigs. The level of skill some young musicians have achieved is quite amazing. But somehow, it usually gets lost in the band context. At the risk of making enemies, here are three criticisms of the typical approach:

1. Too many bands are making the same type of sound – there's not enough risk-taking
2. There's not enough emphasis on original material. Everyone starts out playing covers, but most bands should push through that stage pretty quickly
3. Lack of dynamics in the arrangements – volume knobs all start on 9 and finish on 10 (or sometimes 11) by the end of the set

Let's look at this last point. It's partly about performance, but it's also about the way songs are arranged. If all instruments play loud throughout, the song goes along all at one level and it becomes really dull for the listener. In a live setting, having, say 10 songs that go along at the same level is about as stimulating as watching grass grow. There's an easy way to build dynamics – control the volume and intensity of your playing. e.g. play softer in the verse and louder in the chorus. This needs co-ordination and discipline. One local band which shall remain nameless has a drummer who smashes cymbals with his full body weight throughout every song. This means there's very little room to 'lift' the high points of the songs. Boring!

If you are writing original material, give some thought to the structure so as to reach a crescendo at the appropriate part of the song – usually the chorus. There are several techniques for doing this:

1. Most fundamentally, when you first assemble the song you should identify the most catchy bit as the chorus and write a memorable lyric into that section.
2. Secondly, you can create a sense of anticipation leading up to a chorus. How? Well, try the use of 'chuggy' held back rhythms, letting loose as you go into the chorus. If doing this, it can be quite effective to get the drummer to stick to the floor tom for a couple of bars before hitting a crash cymbal as you enter the chorus. Or try suspended chords; these are the ones that give an unfinished feel and sound as though they need to be resolved by moving into another chord.
3. Thirdly, vary the interval between chord changes – one chord per bar, two per bar, one every four bars etc.

4. Finally, layer-in instruments progressively as you go through the song. Let the listener get the idea of the main structure before you start throwing in the kitchen sink.

Songs can start with a drum part, a riff, verse or chorus. There's no fixed rule, just go with what feels right. There are some bands that can go along on three chords for 10 minutes and hold your interest. These are the exception. Usually songs have several parts with 4 or 5 chords forming the backbone. Why not consider the use of bridge passages between verse and chorus or seeing if you can create a 'Middle 8' where an instrument plays a 'solo' (very rarely solo in reality) to provide added interest two thirds of the way through the song.

Why not discuss these ideas with the rest of the band? Have a talk about light and shade. See if everyone agrees that 'less is more' if it helps make room for some real high points. Most important, if you agree to go this way – make it happen! Stop playing if anyone's not toeing the line in rehearsal. Get discipline into your act and you'll blow away the competition.

## **Vocals –Where Are They?**

Let's not forget that songs are supposed to be sung. Most amateur bands seem to treat the singing part of things as a bit of an afterthought. Everyone's so concerned with playing their own instrument nobody notices that the vocals are lost in the mix. Yet the audience spends 50% of it's time looking at the singer, trying to work out what the song's about, hoping to catch on to the melody.

So please spend some time on vocals – from the beginning of the writing process right through to the arrangement and performance. Here are some things to think about:

- ♣ Pitch – in which range is your lead vocalist strongest? Be prepared to change the key. Often a higher key works better to get the vocal cutting through.
- ♣ Falsetto – creating a falsely high voice may seem an odd concept, but just look how effectively Chris Martin of Coldplay applies it.
- ♣ Harmonies – if you are blessed with two or more people who can sing, experiment with vocal harmonies or backing vocals. Look no further than the Tamla Motown recordings of the sixties for a masterclass in vocal arrangements.

## **New Instruments and Effects**

It is very easy to get stuck in a rut playing every song with the same instruments, same sounds, same effects. Why not think about switching things around a bit. Try guitar effects pedals on bass and keys. Try echo on the lead vocal and experiment with backing vocals. Use additional percussion. Programme some keyboard sequences and play to that as a click track. Bring another musician on stage for just a couple of songs. The end result of such experimentation will be to make your band stand out from the less adventurous bands around you.

## **Creating An Overall Sound**

You should be aiming to build a set of material that sounds as though it comes from the same source. One band that plays MYB is split down the middle because two members love a particular band – let's call them Band X. Being a democratic sort of set-up, those two people are allowed to choose some of the songs and the other members choose the rest. Unfortunately, this leads to a disjointed feel since the Band X songs are really not much like the others.

It's a fine balance – to sound like your songs have come from the same place without sounding too samey. You'll just have to work on this to find the right solution for you.

## **In Summary:**

- ♣ It's as much about what you leave out as what you put in
- ♣ Try to create peaks and troughs through playing with instrumentation and volume. This will make your high points seem really high!
- ♣ Make plenty of room for vocals and give them as much attention in rehearsal as you would to guitar parts
- ♣ Experiment with new instruments and effects
- ♣ Aim for a set of material that sounds like its from the same band, but with some variety between songs