

# Take Your Songwriting to the Next Level by Adding a Twist

From surprise endings to modulations and double entendre, songs with twists can really pay-off.

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To grab our listeners' attention we need to separate our songs from the competition, and one way to accomplish this is by including an unexpected twist—an element of surprise. This article examines various ways to incorporate twists into lyrics and melodies.

## Story Songs With Surprise Endings

“Ol’ Red” (written by James Bohan, Don Goodman, and Mark Sherrill, and recorded by George Jones, Kenny Rogers, and Blake Shelton) is an exceptional example of a story song with a lyric that ends with a powerful punch. The lyric tells the story of a prisoner who, while serving a 99-year sentence for a crime of passion, takes care of a bloodhound named Ol’ Red. The narrator devises a plan to escape from prison that starts with having someone hide a female blue tick hound where the prisoner walks Ol’ Red each evening. After the bloodhound has grown to expect those nightly conjugal visits, the prisoner keeps the dogs apart for several days. The

prisoner makes his escape, confident that Ol' Red will lead the prison guards to his blue tick girlfriend—and not to the fugitive. For an added payoff, the song ends with the narrator saying that now, there are red-haired blue ticks all over the south, and that just as love got him into prison, love got him out. Watch Blake Shelton's video [here](#).

This technique of incorporating a surprise ending is found in country songs much more frequently than in other genres. Excellent examples include:

- “[He Stopped Loving Her Today](#)” (written by Bobby Braddock and Curly Putnam/recorded by artists including George Jones, Alan Jackson, and Josh Turner)
- “[Three Wooden Crosses](#)” (written by Doug Johnson and Kim Williams/recorded by Randy Travis)
- “[People Are Crazy](#)” (written by Bobby Braddock and Troy Jones/recorded by Billy Currington)
- “[Wish You Were Here](#)” Skip Ewing, Debbie Moore, and Bill Anderson/recorded by Mark Wills)
- “[To Daddy](#)” (written by Dolly Parton/recorded by Dolly Parton and Emmylou Harris)
- “[A Boy Named Sue](#)” (written by Shel Silverstein/recorded by Johnny Cash)

Surprise endings are not only found in country songs. David Olney's Americana classic, “[Jerusalem Tomorrow](#),” (recorded by Emmylou Harris and David Olney) is a strong example of the use of an unexpected payoff. A surprise ending helped propel Eminem's “[Stan](#)” (written by Eminem, Dido, and Paul Harmon), to the #1 spot in eleven countries and was used in hits such as:

- “[Testify](#)” (written by Angelo Bond, General N. Johnson, Lonnie Lynn, Gregory Perry, and Kanye West/recorded by Common)
- “[We Gotta Get You a Woman](#)” (written and recorded by Todd Rundgren)
- “[Lola](#)” (written by Ray Davies/recorded by the Kinks)

### **Clever Wordplay/Double Entendre**

There was a time when incorporating clever wordplay, such as double entendre and using words that were opposites, was a mainstay of country song lyrics. The following songs exemplify this:

- “[On the Other Hand](#)” (written by Paul Overstreet and Don Schlitz/recorded by artists including Randy Travis, Keith Whitley, Charley Pride, and Alan Jackson)
- “[Cleopatra Queen of Denial](#)” (written by Bob DiPiero, Jan Buckingham, and Pam Tillis/recorded by Pam Tillis)
- “[You Really Had Me Going](#)” (Now I'm Gone) (written by Chris Waters, Tom Shapiro, and Holly Dunn/recorded by Holly Dunn)

While these techniques are no longer as popular as they were in their heyday, clever wordplay can be found in more recent country hits, such as:

- [“The House That Built Me”](#) (CMA and ACM Song of the Year/Song of the Year Grammy nominee written by Tom Douglas and Allen Shamblin, recorded by Miranda Lambert)
- [“It Happens,”](#) (Kristian Bush, Jennifer Nettles, and Bobby Pinson/recorded by Sugarland)
- [“Something in the Water”](#) (written by Carrie Underwood, Brett James, and Chris De Stefano/recorded by Carrie Underwood)

“I tried to do that when I wrote “Let ’er rip” for the Dixie chicks. Nowadays most publishers will say it’s too ‘crafted/contrived’ to do that sort of thing. But I love when a hook pays off. (Sandy Ramos, Hit Songwriter/Founder, The Song Tuner)”

Songs that demonstrate the technique of juxtaposing words that are opposites include:

- [“Sleeping Single in a Double Bed”](#) (written by Kye Fleming and Dennis Morgan/recorded by Barbara Mandrell)
- [“My Strongest Weakness”](#) (written by Naomi Judd and Mike Reid/recorded by Wynonna)
- [“Don’t Tell Me What to Do”](#) (written by Harlan Howard and Max D. Barnes/recorded by Pam Tillis)
- [“You Look Like I Need a Drink”](#) (written by Rodney Clawson, Natalie Hemby, and Matthew Dragstrem/recorded by Justin Moore)

In the above examples note the use of antonyms, words that are opposites:

- single/double; strong/weak; don’t/do; you/I.

While this technique is most often found in country songs, the songs listed below are evidence that wordplay can also be effective in other genres.

- [“My Favorite Mistake”](#) (written by Sheryl Crow and Jeff Trott/recorded by Sheryl Crow)
- [“I Hate Myself for Loving You”](#) (written by Joan Jett and Desmond Child/recorded by Joan Jett)
- [“No Good in Goodbye”](#) (written by James Barry, Danny O’Donoghue, and Mark Sheehan/recorded by The Script)

Double entendre refers to a phrase that has two meanings, for example, in [“I Let Her Lie”](#) (written by Tim Johnson and recorded by Daryle Singletary) the word “lie” has a double meaning: 1) to tell an untruth and 2) to recline.

### **Unexpected Changes in Tempo**

Changing the tempo during a song is a surefire way to grab listeners’ attention. In most instances when this technique is used the song begins with a slow tempo and changes to a faster one. For example, in [“Thank God and Greyhound,”](#) (written by Larry Kingston and Earl Nix/recorded by Roy Clark) the verse begins slow as the singer describes an unhappy relationship. But when the chorus starts, the tempo becomes upbeat as the singer celebrates his wife’s departure.

Similarly, in Steve Holy's country hit "[Brand New Girlfriend](#)" (written by Jeffrey Steele, Shane Minor, and Bart Allmand) the introductory verse of the song is set to a slow tempo and has sparse instrumentation as the singer describes his girlfriend leaving him. But the full band kicks in and the tempo rocks when he proclaims that when she left, he got a brand new girlfriend and became happier than ever.

There have not been many recent hits that switched tempo mid-song, but this technique can be effective.

## Unpredictable Melodies and Chords

Unexpected elements in songs are not limited to lyrics. Many songs distinguish themselves melodically with the inclusion of a high or low note, a melodic interval, or a chord that demands listeners' attention. Excellent examples of melodic moments that stand out include:

- the low note in Garth Brooks' classic "[Friends in Low Places](#)" (written by Dewayne Blackwell and Earl Bud Lee)
- the high note in Tal Bachman's "[She's So High](#)" (written by Tal Bachman)
- the octave intervals in the chorus of "[I Know I'll Never Love This Way Again](#)" (written by Will Jennings and Richard Kerr/recorded by Dionne Warwick)
- the high note in the final chorus of "[Taking Chances](#)" (written by Kara DioGuardi and Dave Stewart and recorded by Celine Dion)

## Modulations

A modulation (a key change within the song) can provide a song's most dramatic and memorable moment. Although there are no rules relating to this (or anything else in songwriting), most often, the modulation occurs at the beginning of a song's final chorus and raises the key either a half or a whole step. Notable examples include the chill-inducing final choruses in Whitney Houston's version of Dolly Parton's "[I Will Always Love You](#)" and "[My Heart Will Go On](#)" (written by Richard Kerr and James Horner/recorded by Celine Dion).

Modulations are indelibly associated with Barry Manilow who used them throughout the 1970s and 1980s in hit songs such as:

- "[Even Now](#)" (written by Barry Manilow and Marty Panzer)
- "[Mandy](#)" (written by Scott English and Richard Kerr)
- "[Looks Like We Made It](#)" (written by Will Jennings and Richard Kerr)

The Backstreet Boys also used modulations in songs such as "[I'll Never Break Your Heart](#)" (written by Eugene Wilde and Albert Manno) and "[Back to Your Heart](#)" (written by Jason Blume, Gary Baker, and Kevin Richardson).

While modulations are not currently in favor to the same extent they were in previous decades, some recent popular songs have employed this tool. A notable example is Lady Gaga's recent hit "[Perfect Illusion](#)" (written by Kevin Parker and Mark Ronson). Zac Brown Band's "[Loving You](#)

[Easy](#)” (written by “Big Al” Anderson, Zac Brown, Niko Moon) features an especially memorable modulation in its last chorus, and also includes a wonderfully unexpected note and chord on the word “easy” at the end of every chorus.

Using more than one modulation within a given song is rare, but there are two modulations—one that goes up, and one that goes down—in Keith Urban’s recent #1, “[John Cougar, John Deere, John 3:16](#)” (written by Ross Copperman, Shane MacAnally, and Josh Osborne).

There are quite a few ways to use lyric twists and melodic surprises to separate your songs and engage your listeners. While it is unlikely that you will want to incorporate these techniques in all your songs, by thinking about—and trying on—some of the tools mentioned above, you might be surprised at how you can twist your song into a hit.