

Song Analysis and Singing in Character

Have you ever listened to a singer who hits all the right notes but there's still something missing?

When you sing, especially in a musical, there are necessary elements. Having proper technique. Being able to breathe is immensely important. But the best singer is not always the one with the most polished technique. The best musical theatre performer is the one who finds the heart of the song. The heart of the character. The one who makes the song mean something. Makes it personal. Audiences connect to the heart. They connect to personal stories. And if the person singing does this, that's far more meaningful than a note held till next Tuesday. It's not just about the notes.

So, how do singers connect to the song beyond the notes?

Ask questions!

Analyze what you're singing. Ask and answer questions about the character and the song. The more you know, the more you can draw from, the more depth you can create. A held note becomes an emotional connection if you can relate it directly back to the character. Start with these questions:

Where is the character physically?

And this doesn't necessarily mean are they in the hall or the kitchen. This could mean:

- Where are they in their life?
- Where are they in relation to the other characters?
- Where are they right before they open their mouths to sing this song?

Example: 'No One is Alone' from *Into the Woods*. The baker has just lost his wife and must deal with raising his child alone. In 'Close Every Door' from *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat* Joseph has just been thrown into prison, with no hope of getting out.

Where is the character emotionally?

Musicals happen because they take characters to a point where they can't do anything else but sing. So what is the emotional 'why' for the character that they have to break out into song?

Example: 'I Feel Pretty' from *West Side Story*. Maria has no choice but to burst out in song because she's so happy and so in love. And even in something as frothy as "You Can't Stop the Beat" from *Hairspray* each character has an emotional standpoint.

Also ask yourself this: Does the character change their physical and emotional state by the end of the song?

What does the character want?

Is your character trying to make a decision? Do they want to share their feelings about another character? Do they want happiness? A new life? Their old life back? This goes hand in hand with knowing the physical and emotional state of the character. Knowing what the character wants and communicating that in the song is the easiest way to connect to an audience.

Example: After a boy runs away from her, Elphaba in *Wicked* sings 'I'm not that Girl' (as in the girl that boys like) but what she wants more than anything is to BE that girl. In 'I could have danced all night' from *My Fair Lady* Eliza wants her spectacular night (and her new turn in life) to go on and on and on. In 'Music of the Night' The Phantom (*The Phantom of the Opera*) wants Christine to love his music and love him.

It's so important to sing the want in the song, not just the notes that make up the song.

What's going on in the song?

What is the story of the song? Make sure you understand what's being said.

What's happening in the story up to this point. Sometimes musical numbers rely on metaphor and it's easy to catch someone who is only spouting words without any thought behind them. Can you write a one-line description of the song?

Who is the character singing to?

Is it a specific person? Is it to the audience? If it's the audience that's fine, but think about what the character is trying to communicate to the audience, or get the audience to do. Be specific, and 'no one' is not an answer.

Example: When Annie sings 'Tomorrow' she is singing to her dog, but also to herself. She is convincing herself and the audience not to give up, there's always tomorrow.

Song Analysis

'Somewhere That's Green' from *Little Shop of Horrors* is a song that has some very funny lyrics and traditionally Audrey has a very funny voice so it's easy to get trapped into focusing on those aspects when singing the song. It's easy to play Audrey simply as a dope. But that's pretty boring for you, and certainly boring for the audience.

There is a lot of character in the song, and more importantly a lot of heart. There is a lot for a singer to connect to, and in turn, bring that connection to the audience.

At this point in the musical, we know Audrey works at Mushnik's Skid Row flower shop and has met her abusive motorcycle-riding dentist boyfriend Oren. Right before the song, Audrey reveals she might have feelings for the main character Seymour. Seymour is the complete opposite of her boyfriend.

[Click here to read the lyrics to the song.](#) Based on what you read how would you answer the following questions?

- Where is the character physically?
- Where is the character emotionally?
- Does the character change their physical or emotional state?
- What does the character want?
- What's going on in the song?
- Who are you singing to?

Where is the character physically?:

Audrey lives in the city, in 'Skid Row.' She is as far away from somewhere that's green as humanly possible. She is in the middle of an abusive relationship (black eye, arm in a cast) She reveals that she likes Seymour and dreams about being with him in an ideal place. She's never shared these thoughts before.

Where is the character emotionally?

Audrey is unhappy but doesn't think she deserves better. (She sings about this in 'Suddenly Seymour' – Nobody ever treated me kindly, daddy left early, mama was poor. I'd meet a man and I'd follow him blindly...) coupled with this is a belief of how happy she'd be in her dream. Pure unhappiness and pure happiness all at the same time, that's what makes her sing.

Does the character change their physical and emotional state?

Yes. She goes from the reality of her situation to the dream of the white picket fence and then back to the reality of her situation. At this point in her journey, she can't believe that she'll ever escape.

What does the character want?

Audrey wants the white picket fence. She wants the suburb, the green grass, the TV dinner, and most importantly, the guy who will treat her right.

What's going on in the song?

Audrey describes her ideal life. It highly contrasts her real life.

Who is the character singing to?

Crystal, Ronnette, and Chiffon are in the moment with Audrey as are her audience. Audrey is also singing to herself. She needs to convince herself to keep up this dream of hers, despite her reality.

I know Seymour's the greatest
But I'm dating a semi-sadist
So I've got a black eye
And my arm's in a cast.

Still, that Seymour's a cutie
Well, if not, he's got inner beauty

And I dream of a place
Where we could be together at last

A matchbox of our own
A fence of real chain link,
A grill out on the patio
Disposal in the sink
A washer and a dryer and an ironing machine
In a tract house that we share
Somewhere that's green.

He rakes and trims the grass
He loves to mow and weed
I cook like Betty Crocker
And I look like Donna Reed
There's plastic on the furniture
To keep it neat and clean
In the Pine-Sol scented air
Somewhere that's green

Between our frozen dinner
And our bedtime, nine-fifteen
We snuggle watchin' Lucy
On our big, enormous twelve-inch screen

I'm his December Bride
He's Father, he Knows Best
The kids play Howdy Doody
As the sun sets in the west
A picture out of Better Homes and Gardens magazine

Far from Skid Row
I dream we'll go
somewhere that's green.