



Jesse Winchester's Studio

 We here at Jesse Winchester's Studio have been supplying fine songs to our customers for over thirty years. These songs have been sung in showers, on long trips in the car, in quiet churches and loud bars, and they still sound as fresh and beautiful now as they did on the dark night of the soul when they were written. So we often find hopeful young tunesmiths at the door, asking the same questions:

1. *How do I sell my songs for big money?*
2. *How the heck do you write a song, anyway?*

The first answer is easy - consider real estate. The second is harder - writing a song is an internal process that's almost impossible to describe. So why don't I just knock one off for you quickly, to show you how it's done? You can watch while I pace the floor, sip tepid coffee, and make real aesthetic decisions. Maybe we'll both learn something.

 I think I'll write this one about my baby - it's a subject people never tire of, and since you haven't met her, I can say pretty much whatever I want. Of course, I can't sing for you over the internet, so I'll have to borrow a familiar melody - "O, Susanna" will do fine. (It's a good idea to borrow from a composer who's been dead for a long, long time.) Now let's empty our minds and wait humbly for the Promethean spark, The First Line:

Well, my baby's got the cutest little...

Ok, stop right here. My baby has a *lot* of cute things - which one should I draw attention to? Focusing on her figure, say, could push the song towards hip-hop - is that what I want? And after I rule out all her cute things which can't be described in five syllables, there are even fewer choices. So, with an eye on the Nashville market, I'm going with:

Well, my baby's got the cutest little dimple on her chin

Good. A body part, but a clean one. I'm liking this already. Let's finish the phrase with:

It mostly sticks out normally, but one place it sticks in

Again, good. It's only the second line and only a dimple, but already I've introduced faint sexual overtones - the sign of a master's hand. Now the next phrase:

*O, the first time I laid eyes on her
It looked so out of place
I swear I thought she had a belly button on her face*

With a few subtle strokes, I've painted a picture with words, bringing my baby to life in your mind's eye. (You're right - it *does* look like a Picasso.) Now we come to the chorus, or refrain, which should encapsulate the song's main idea:

*Ooo, my baby
Snuggly as can be
Put that banjo down and bring your dimple here to me*

Notice I said "banjo", even though, in fact, my baby can't be in the same room with a banjo. I did that because I thought it made a nice circular reference to the one on the man's knee in "O, Susanna", and also to underline a point: the truth is a minor annoyance to the troubadour - it's the gnat in his coffee cup, the eraser crumbs in his keyboard. Of course, you can take out "banjo" and substitute any trochee you like, anything your baby might be holding: "whiskey", "shotgun", "poundcake", whatever.



Great. Let's step back and see what we have:

(To "O, Susanna")
*Well, my baby's got the cutest little dimple on her chin
It mostly sticks out normally, but one place it sticks in
O, the first time I laid eyes on her
It looked so out of place
I swear I thought she had a belly button on her face
Ooo, my baby
Snuggly as can be
Put that banjo down and bring your dimple here to me*

Wow. That one kind of wrote itself. You inspired me. It just needs two more verses, which I will leave to the student as an exercise. Be careful to maintain a consistent point of view.



Well, it looks easy, doesn't it? It is. And your baby doesn't have to be cute - tell us about her lowdown ways or his heart of stone, if that comes more naturally to you. If you don't have a baby to write about, make one up - who's going to know her lips aren't sweet like cherry wine, or his eyes aren't dark as night? You could also write songs which aren't about your baby at all - songs about God and earth and war, about profound feelings and soaring ideas. Those are good, too. So get a pencil and paper and start panning your memory for nuggets like these, and I'll look for your name in the charts, up in lights, and on new housing developments all over town. Hang on to your copyrights.

Thanks for the visit,

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