



CASE STUDY: THE LYRICS BOARD

👤 Kristin Brzoznowski ⌚ 6 hours ago 📁 Top Stories

The music-infused game show *The Lyrics Board* originated in Ireland in 1993. The format was created by its owners Andy Ruane and Philip Kampff, who were working in entertainment at Irish pubcaster RTÉ.

"*The Lyrics Board* is the most successful and longest-running music game show in the world," says Ruane, founder of Like It Love It Productions.

"The concept was simple," he tells *TV Formats Weekly*. "Take a line from a well-known song and guess the song. In the pilot, a board was used to write the line of six words and each word was covered with a number sheet. To play the game, a team had to pick a number, thus revealing the word. To keep control of the board, the team had to sing any song with that word in it."

Ruane continues, "In studio, six monitors were used to display the line behind the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6. This formed the backbone of the studio set and became known as 'The Lyrics Board.' Instead of sitting behind two panels like a panel show, the two teams were sat behind two baby grand pianos, completing the dueling piano triangle set with The Lyrics Board behind and the host in front. The team captains were then introduced into the format as piano-playing team captains who anchored every week and were joined by four celebrities—two at each piano completing each team of three. It generally takes about three reveals before the team can guess the song."



The house band was introduced in the second season, and the 'skip' word was introduced in season three. If a team picks a skip word, they lose control of the board to the other team. "This introduced great jeopardy because you don't know if it's a skip word until after the number has been picked!" Ruane explains. "It prevents one team from dominating the round and keeps the game moving. We allow ten rounds per one-hour show and usually use about seven or eight."

According to Ruane, what differentiates *The Lyrics Board* from other prime-time shows is the game itself.

"We have a truly original game," he says. "No game, no show. Talent, quiz and elimination shows tend to run out of steam quicker than game. An original game will play forever." A testament to this: NRK in Norway has had 26 seasons running in prime time and SVT in Sweden is on season 24. Both are still going strong.

"Any format that can go for 25 seasons is format royalty," says Ruane. "You can count those examples on one hand."

The show got its start as a summer series on RTÉ One and then moved to prime time, where it was discovered by Tony Gruner and Paul Talbot, founder of the New York-based Fremantle Corporation, which brought most of the big U.S. formats to the U.K. and Europe, including *Play Your Cards Right* with Bruce Forsyth, *Blind Date* with Cilla Black, *Family Feud/Fortunes*, *The Price Is Right*, *Deal or No Deal*, *Jeopardy*, etc. "They said it was the most original game show they had seen in 20 years and offered a deal then and there on the spot," Ruane recalls. "The rest, as they say, is history. Fremantle Corp was bought by All American and All American-Fremantle was then bought by Pearson, which merged with CLT-UFA to form the RTL Group, which changed the name to FremantleMedia [now Fremantle], which did a fantastic job and rolled *The Lyrics Board* out all over the world."

The format "took off like wildfire around Europe," he adds, starting with Norway, then Sweden, and then the rest of the world. Other countries that have the show on air at the moment or regularly come back to it include Belgium, France, Holland, the U.K., Italy, Ireland, Czech Republic, Poland, Latvia, Estonia, Iceland, Denmark, Finland, South Africa, Vietnam, Indonesia, Lebanon, Turkey and Russia.

"We got 74 percent share in Norway about ten seasons ago—the highest ever in the history of television for a game show!," Ruane says. "The great thing about *The Lyrics Board* is that it sells itself. We don't have to prove that the format works, which is every broadcaster's nightmare. There's no 'will it work?' It works. Period. And we only do prime time."

The gameplay of *The Lyrics Board* has changed "very little" over the years. "It's a classic game show. Viewers at home love to play along with the celebrities in the studio. It's one big home viewer game!" The hosts, celebrities and sets have, of course, changed, and the staging of the show has got "bigger and bigger," says Ruane. "It's a big, big show now. Celebrities love doing the show because they always shine."

He adds, "For years, we were the only music show in town. Then along came the other music shows like *Idol*, *The X Factor* and *The Voice*, which concerned us at the time. However, these shows have been great for us because they create an ongoing stream of new celebrities, which we mix with existing celebrities. Know that when you win *The Voice*, *X Factor* or any other music show, the next show you will be on is *The Lyrics Board!*"

Ruane says that through the adaptation process, the format owners are “very strict” about adhering to its original core concept. “We always insist that the two teams playing the game are behind two pianos and led by two great piano-playing team captains, a big host and a big house band. The actual game of guessing the song from hidden lyrics is the backbone of the format. The mechanics of production guarantee prime time. It is a well-oiled machine at this stage—a juggernaut, as it’s known as in the business. There are two fantastic moments in each round. The first [involves] the skip words. If you pick a skip word number, you lose control of *The Lyrics Board* to the other team—it’s a great TV moment! And the second is when they guess the song—a fantastic, real TV moment. Plus, of course, there are great performances in between—TV gold.”

Regarding how *The Lyrics Board* has been scheduled in various markets, Ruane says: “It’s always prime-time family viewing. The demographics are similar, for example, to *Dancing with the Stars*. One week the celebrities are singing; the next week they’re dancing. Same audience. It’s probably a bit more flexible as it can age up or down weekly depending on the guests and the music each week, and it’s a stand-alone show, so it’s a scheduler’s dream. It’s actually called *Singing with the Stars* in some territories.”

The format is bigger now than it ever was, he says. There is a spin-off of *The Lyrics Board* coming out next year as well as a new app. “*The Lyrics Board* is a global worldwide brand, but Netflix, Apple and Amazon are game changers for music television—watch this space,” Ruane teases.

He has his sights set on the U.S. market next for the format. “Its natural home in the U.S. is a prime-time broadcast network,” Ruane says, envisioning eight shows a year, team captains like Elton John and Billy Joel, a big house band (à la band leaders like Kevin Eubanks, Max Weinberg, Paul Shaffer, Questlove or Brian Setzer) and shooting for a week in Vegas. “International tape sales would be huge,” he says.

“It’s definitely an NBC, CBS or ABC show. We’ve had lots of offers but they’ve never made financial sense for us; for others, yes, but not for us. [Not making a] deal is better than a bad deal, so we’ve kept the rights very clear for the U.S. In a lot of Europe we license directly to the broadcaster, so we’ll probably use that model for the U.S.”

Ruane continues: “We get compared a lot to *Wheel of Fortune* in the U.S.—[both are] similar, very long-running game shows. We don’t have to prove it can go 26 seasons in continuous production with one broadcaster. We’ve already done it in Europe, and counting. So we know when it does land in the U.S., it will be a very long runner. Actually, Lady Gaga would be a great team captain!”

Now more than ever, viewers want something that is authentic and not over-produced, Ruane adds. “The joy of *The Lyrics Board* is watching big artists step out of their comfort zones and have fun with the game.

It's also great having music in prime time—no judges, no elimination, just singing and playing the game for the joy of it with the comfort of a 26-season safety net underneath you. Celebrities love doing the show because we always make them look good. It gets an average rating of 40 percent-plus. You just cast it and the format does the rest.”

