



DOUG ASHDOWN

INTRODUCTION TO SONGWRITING

There are numerous books and instructional courses on songwriting on the market. These range from basic to complex.

Here in a dozen pages I'll share a few tips I have learned in my forty or so years in the songwriting business.

Almost anyone can write a song. Whether that song is great depends on of course how skilled the writer is.

There are, as in all crafts, rules of the game to help you in your quest for the next big hit.

1. Get Organised

Before we put pen to paper let's get organised.

I find a legal pad is most useful for writing down lyrics but you'll soon accumulate an assortment of notes etc, jotted down on the run.

Nowadays I also use a computer and a word processor for long sessions but am careful to back up everything.

You should have a special place for your song writing goodies. A special drawer or better still a portable paper file with alphabetical compartments so you can sort your notes into titles, lyrics in progress, song ideas, copyright info, contacts, bits and pieces, that half finished sandwich or whatever takes your fancy.

The most important thing is to be able to access all your information when the moment of inspiration occurs rather than go through the house hunting for that title, idea or lyric until it's time to cook dinner or walk the dog and the writing time is gone.

A small portable recording device is also a handy tool.

Some writers keep a notepad by the bed in case they dream of a song and can get it down quickly when they wake up. Don't laugh. Hits have been written that way.

Comfortable? Got a legal pad and pen, a guitar? Hey, even, if you aren't a musician we can still have some fun.

2. Ideas

Start by writing down a word or few words that you think might be able to be made into a song idea. By this I mean leave out artichoke or zebra. Well ok, go right ahead use them if you really want to write about these things.

What kind of mood are you in, are you leaning toward a romantic ballad, rock, country. Doesn't matter.

Draw yourself a tree with branches and leaves.

Let's start with a word, say, Moonlight

Okay write moonlight at the base of your tree. On your branches write a different word or phrase that your imagination brings to mind regarding moonlight. Hopefully your words will be different aspects or ideas that Moonlight brings to mind. Words may be *stars, reflection, bright, shine, silver, clouds*, etc. Phrases may include *her/his eyes, saying goodbye, meeting for the first time, going for a swim or sitting around a campfire drinking beer*. It doesn't matter.

It's just to get the wheels turning. Now take those words and on the leaves hanging from your branches write more words that those words or ideas conjure up. Campfire might lead to singing or playing the guitar, joking, sharing stories etc.

If by chance any of your words rhyme draw a red circle around them.

A thesaurus sometimes helps with the process here by giving you more expressive words.

Whatever theme you are trying to write about use that as the trunk or base of your tree.

These trees can be a forest of references now and in the future.

By the way, you might be thinking: "Why can't we start with the music"? Well, you can, but I'm not going one-on-one with you so there is not much point in me saying "start strumming a C chord". Lyrics and music often come simultaneously when I'm writing, but for now we'll stick to lyric ideas and song structure. Harmony and melody are a whole other lesson. A good book for getting into the musical side of a song is *Writing Music For Hit Songs* by Jai Josefs published by Schirmer Books.

You Now Have An Idea And A Few Words

Let's say you think you now have a good idea and some words for your song. Remember: To reach the largest possible audience your idea should be about believable subjects or persons in a universally recognisable situation. You might be into stamp collecting but a song entirely about stamp collecting is only, in the main, going to interest stamp collectors. Don't use words or phrases that might be familiar to you but not to the listening public in general.

You have to grab the listener right from the starting gate. Your first couple of lines are so important because this is where the listener decides to keep on listening or change the station. You've seen those annoying ads on TV that rattle off a flurry of in-your-face words and

images, but hate them or not, they get your attention and believe me they sell the product in around 15 seconds. This is what you have to do, but in a less abrasive way.

Be colourful as well as descriptive. Instead of opening with "I'm smoking and drinking too much" That's too prosaic. It would be better to say, although far from perfect, "The ashtray's getting crowded and the level in the bottle's goin' down".

Your story should be strong enough to be able to sustain the listener's attention and interest through a journey of time and space from beginning to end - like a mini novel or a movie. But unlike a novel or a movie you only have in most cases around 3-4 minutes to completely express yourself.

You should convey a clear attitude or emotion. Once you've got the idea going on the main highway of your song, I don't recommend taking a sudden turn down a dirt road with a whole new train of thought. You can try this but it takes skill, so be careful. The lines should relate to each other like beads on a string. The subject matter should be interesting enough to be set to music. It should express enough new thoughts to keep the listener hooked for the three minutes or so of the song. By all means repeat your title, but this in turn must be surrounded with strong lines to back it up. The title is most often the lynchpin of the whole idea and most likely the first thing I'll think of when I'm writing. If your idea can't be developed it's likely it wasn't that good in the first place. If your idea is strong enough you should be able to express it in more than a few lines. Your song should also put the singer in a favourable light. Not many people want to hear a song full of doom and gloom and self-pity unless it's balanced with something positive.

Your idea should strike a common chord, that is, make the listener say "Yeah, I can relate to that".

3. Structure Song Form

If you are primarily into writing pop, rock or country your song will most likely be made up of verses, a chorus and maybe a bridge.

Generally speaking a verse is that section of a song where the melody and harmony repeat but the lyric changes.

A chorus usually repeats musically as well as lyrically.

The bridge usually appears only once in a song both musically and lyrically.

These sections are referred to as A,B and C.

This means you build up your plot line or story idea with the verses, deliver the punch line in the chorus or bridge and then recap on the idea and bring your song to a satisfying conclusion.

Nowadays a pre chorus, set up or climb is becoming fashionable. This is a different musical section of, on average, two rhymed lines that seem to pull out of the verse and rise toward the chorus. The climb increases the song's emotional tension by delaying the arrival of the chorus.

Putting these pieces together is called the form of the song.

MOTTO

TELL THEM WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO SAY (THE VERSES)
SAY IT (THE CHORUS OR BRIDGE)
TELL THEM WHAT YOU SAID (THE PAYOFF)

There are many song forms the most common being *verse chorus*, *verse chorus bridge*, *verse verse bridge verse*. Less common is the *verse verse verse* form.

The HOOK usually contains the songs title and is the part of the song that is repeated frequently and therefore tends to remain in the mind of the listener.

The simplest song form is the AAA structure. For example "The First Time I Saw Your Face" or "By The Time I Get To Phoenix". These two examples are songs consisting of three musically repeated sections or verses if you like with a slight variation at the end of the song to conclude.

Some verses of songs with an AAA structure end with a two-line statement, which is termed the refrain.

Sometimes the title is built into the refrain as in "Blowin' In The Wind".

A word of caution; A refrain is not a chorus.

A refrain musically and lyrically resolves the AAA verse and therefore ends it. In contrast a chorus begins a distinctively new musical section of the song. Have a listen, if you can, to these songs with refrains and you'll get the idea. "Harper Valley PTA", "I Walk The Line".

There is also the AABA form. The main musical idea in the opening eight bar A section is repeated and then is followed by the B or bridge section, its last phrase preparing for the return of the final A section or tag.

The title generally can either begin or end the A section or even be included in the bridge. The bridge is there to act as a contrast to the A section. To make your bridge stand out use harmonic variety, rhythmic contrast, melodic movement and modulation etc. Lyrically, the bridge should contain a fresh, but still related contrasting idea to the verses.

Then there is the popular verse chorus form, usually one or two verses and a chorus. This ideally suits a song where the title phrase screams out to be repeated over and over such as Bruce Springsteen's "Born In The U.S.A".

A chorus usually embodies the lyric's title and main message. The verses are set-ups to the chorus' central idea. Occasionally a song starts with a chorus. Once again to make your chorus stand out use harmonic variety, rhythmic contrast, melodic movement and modulation etc. By the way when it comes to melody it is good to remember *up happy, down sad*

Don't ramble on with umpteen verses before getting to the chorus. Two should be about the normal number.

A good motto to remember is *Don't Bore Us, Get To The Chorus*.

On average, a verse consists of eight lines. Depending on the length of the line and the rhythmic feel of the words those lines will translate into eight or sixteen bars.

A verse longer than eight lines tends to lose its forcefulness.

The last line of the verse prepares for the first line of the chorus and implies in effect "*And here's why I'm saying*".....Chorus.

Some chorus songs have one chorus lyric repeated but others have another set of chorus lyrics or a part lyric change and sometimes a bridge also.

The important thing is to make your chorus stand out both lyrically and musically. *It's the selling point of your song.*

There are other song forms but the aforementioned are some of the most common in popular music.

Try not to fall into the trap of exhausting everything you can say about your subject in the first verse, have nowhere to go and end up rehashing the same thoughts in the second verse and chorus with different words. More often than not when we start out as writers like to say everything we can think of on a subject and throw it all in the mix at once.

I've seen songs with ten verses rattling on and on to a seemingly infinite conclusion. Ok, so Bob Dylan gets away with it sometimes. But he is skilled at making it work.

The trick is to keep focused.

Most successful songs have two verses, a chorus and / or a bridge and a home run.

From the first line the idea should be really starting to get nailed. You should be involving the listener in the song.

Try to be expressive and colourful. Tell it like it is. Paint a picture.

In my mind when I'm writing I try to see the song as a movie.

Don't just say "I went to work this morning" It's better to say "On the 6.15 to Central, Monday morning a weary working day". You're already creating an imaginable identifiable scene. Visualise, be descriptive.

This is where the real art of lyric writing comes in.

Finding the perfect word for the job can be painstaking but it is an essential exercise.

Important: Get to the who, what, where and why as quickly as you can.

Don't waste words in unnecessary repetition of ideas.

Your verses should develop in a linear fashion one step on the story ladder to the next step, moving through time and space, building in intensity and grabbing the listener.

A rule to remember is your verse is the framework for the killer chorus or bridge.

If you are using a chorus, and in lots of cases you will be, it should be the focus of the whole point of the song.

Some songs may not have a chorus but you will still have an identifiable line or pattern to make the song stay coherent. There are exceptions but that will not concern us here.

As a payoff or closer you can then recap or wrap the song up with a half verse or tag.

Don't leave your song hanging. It should have a beginning, build and resolution.

4. Go Get Em

The old scout's motto "be prepared" also applies to songwriting. Ideas, titles, lines, hooks etc are all out there in the air waiting to be grabbed. As a songwriter it is allowed and indeed a requirement of the profession to be an eavesdropper.

Inspiration is all around you. On the move, in nature and in everyday happenings. It's called life and you have to capture it. The lesson is to never let a good idea get away. Carry a small notebook and pen or pencil at all times to jot down inspiration whenever it occurs.

You might be at a party or at a restaurant and overhear a couple having a bit of a disagreement over the way their relationship is going and you think "hit title, killer line, I'll work on that when I get home".

But after an hour or so and a couple of drinks you've completely forgotten what was said. If you haven't brought your trusty notepad pick up a napkin when the inspiration happens and write your thoughts down.

Words And Rhymes

Words are devious little people. One word can make all the difference. You might want to invest in a small digital recording device that can be carried really easily to get that instant idea down. This is the best solution as you can get the WHOLE song down music and all.

Just the right rhyme in your song can make all the difference. Try to avoid the obvious clichéd done to death - heart / apart etc.

Words that technically don't rhyme but sound good are called near rhymes. I use them all the time. Some purists frown upon this practise. For instance, *now* and *ground*. My friend and great songwriter Allan Caswell and I rhymed *right* and *life* in one of our songs. The "eye" sound makes it work when sung. *Night* and *inside* also work because of this. You can even rhyme two words with one word. In my song *Boothill* I rhymed *poster* with *most are!* Don't overdo this method and be careful with your choices so they SOUND convincing not abrasive. Rhymes don't have to only appear at the end of lines. Internal rhymes also work well as in "*We learned a lot about each other. Caught us turning into lovers.*" Here we have an internal rhyme and also near rhymes to close the lines.

There are devices to make your lines more attractive. Here's a couple.....

Assonance:

Uses a repeated vowel sound as in "play with the day"

Alliteration:

Uses repetition of accented consonant sounds in successive or closely aligned words as in "Tied up tight"

If you have a couple of good rhymes but are having trouble constructing lines using them try working backwards from the rhyme to the start of the line.

Don't get bogged down letting rhymes dictate what you really want to say. If you are having trouble rhyming a word, substitute it or place it elsewhere in the line. And remember there have been some big hits that have no rhymes at all!

A rhyming dictionary can be useful but I generally only use one as a last resort.

5. The Vital Title

I find ideas flow easier when I have a title to build upon.

There is a motto "vital title" which is a good one to remember.

Titles must convey the meaning of and speak for the whole song, kind of like a commercial for your product. I know there are songs out there where the title is not even in the song such as *The Weight* but we'll ignore that. To emphasise the importance of the title in relation to the song let me tell you of my own experience.

I had co-written a song and my writing partner and I titled it *Leave Love Enough Alone* which happened to be one of the lines in the song. I recorded it and not much happened. However we soon discovered everyone related to the chorus with the line *Winter In America*. A year later, re-released, the recording with the title changed to *Winter In America* was a big hit.

Titles can come from a book, magazine or newspaper article you might read. Lines in movie can suggest song ideas or titles. You see those glossy magazines at the supermarket checkout? These have purpose built eye-catching headlines for stories to make you buy the magazine and sometimes those stories can trigger a title as they're often about relationship problems etc. Television shows can contain great titles if you keep your ears open, soap or talk shows especially. Ok, your TV's broken; the computers on the fritz and you're sick at home and can't go out. Don't let that stop you. Look around the house. There's a coffee cup. Let's see "I'll Have One More Cup Of Coffee With You" not bad? See it's happening already. Look at your pillow on the bed and remember someone made a lot of money out of the title "Send Me The Pillow You Dream On". One thought can lead you to another on the subject of beds. From the pillow to the "Satin Sheets", another big hit.

Willie Nelson might have just glanced at the clock on the wall and thought "Funny How Time Slips Away". In your wardrobe there may be some song titles lurking. For example Mary Chapin Carpenter's "This Shirt", Dolly Parton's "Coat Of Many Colors".

A simple chair can become a bar stool and we all know how many songs have been written about bar stools.

You've probably got a pack of playing cards around. There are titles hiding there. "From A Jack To A King", "The Gambler" were all big hits. Look at a photograph album. Any old memories stirring there that might lead to a song?

Got some flowers in the garden? Well here come more titles. "I Never Promised You A Rose Garden" is a country standard.

Get the idea?

There are other ways of getting titles. Colours and plant combinations, "Red Red Roses", "Tie a Yellow Ribbon 'Round The Old Oak Tree". Place names and professions, eg "Tenterfield Saddler", even place names combined with animals, "The Goondiwindi Grey", or in the case of Lee Kernaghan's song "Goondiwindi Moon", place names coupled with heavenly bodies. Colours and place names as in "Blue Moon Of Kentucky". One song consists almost entirely of place names; "I've Been Everywhere"! Also useful are days of the week, months of the year or hours of the day, as in 24 Hours From Tulsa. Book and film titles can all suggest ideas. Jim Webb's "The Moon's A Harsh Mistress" is from the title of a Robert Heinlein science fiction novel. Using or twisting cliches around can sometimes yield interesting titles. "Long time no see" might become long time no love. Get the idea?

Advertising slogans have been made into song titles as in "What Made Milwaukee Famous" alluding to the campaign of the American beer brand, Schlitz. I'd like to say at this point that you should, as always, beware of copyright or trade mark infringement in the use of titles. "The beer that made Milwaukee famous" is the line in the jingle and you can see how the writers of the song carefully steered clear of using that exact line. There are many popular songs with the same title but each song tells the story of that title in its own unique way.

You could even use the title "Yesterday" if you must but make sure it doesn't resemble Paul McCartney's masterpiece or you could be in trouble.

Detective, adventure, romantic and all kinds of novels have titles for the taking if you can learn to recognise them in the course of your reading.

Always beware of the go nowhere title. That's a title which sounds clever and exciting but in the end is impossible to reconcile into a believable lyric.

A few rules to remember about titles are:

1. Your title should be recognisable after one hearing
2. It should make the listener want to hear the song over and over
3. It should convey and summarise the idea behind the lyric

To sum up the importance of a title, how many out there can remember the verses to Bruce Springsteen's Born In The USA? He repeatedly drums the title into the listener's head.

Working the title into the song can be a craft in itself.

Most likely it will be the strong line of your chorus.

It can be the first line of the song as in the three verse form of Jim Webb's "By The Time I Get To Phoenix". In this case the line is not repeated again.

Just remember a title should sum up and represent the essence and focus of your song.

6. Let's Get Together

As a songwriter I've been lucky enough to have my songs recorded by many artists over the years and most of these songs have been written in collaboration with other writers.

Not everyone can complete a song by themselves, so the answer is to Co-write. Co-writing can be fun but there are some guidelines to make the creativity and the fun flow more smoothly. Most times I tend to write with just one other collaborator.

Try to meet where there are no constant interruptions as concentration is uppermost. Try not to arrive at the writing session empty handed. Endeavour to bring a few pre-prepared ideas, lyrics, melody lines or chord progressions. Try to have some form of recording device on hand to leave running while you're working. You'd be surprised how a lyric or melody line can change from its first airing to the second or third repetition. On playback you might hear a little word, chord or note that can make all the difference.

Don't be shy about sharing an idea even if it's incomplete. Your couple of words, a rhyme or a chord change might inspire your partner to come up with something to complete the line or musical phrase. If your partner comes up with something that you're not immediately crazy about, don't dismiss it out of hand. Try to improve the idea, be constructive.

Last of all - take a break. If you have the bare bones of what you feel is a good song don't rush to complete it but give it some time to breathe. This can even take weeks. Arrange to meet a few days later to work and in the meantime each Co-writer can go over the song in his or her own time to maybe improve your creation before you meet again.

Sometimes, when the evasive lyric or melody just ain't comin' I find it productive just to talk.

Talk about the kind of songs you like to listen to, books you've just read, favourite movies, your songwriting goals, etc.

Ideas can come from these conversations and getting to know your songwriting partner's likes and dislikes can deepen your professional relationship.

You have to find time to get to know, trust and feel comfortable with each other for the most part even if at times you get on each other's nerves when that elusive line just won't come.

Remember, it's the complete song that counts. Don't spend valuable writing time arguing over who wrote what.

Collaboration means working together. You should equally be proud and confident with the whole song.

Try to find collaboration partners who have the same skill and experience levels as yourself whether it be with words or music. You can then both create on an equal footing.

Ideally, collaboration should be based on mutual trust but with human nature being what it is, on a strictly business front, you might want to

make sure you are clear on the “who gets what” of the song even to the point of drawing up some sort of writer’s agreement.

Anyway, I’ll let you get back to writing and leave you with the one word that sums up collaboration for me.

COMMUNICATION.

7. Polishing

When you visit the beach you often find small pebbles and rocks. Some are jagged and sharp and some are smooth, rounded and pleasant to pick up and skim over the sea. These pebbles have been worn down and polished by the elements to reach this smooth condition.

Songs are the same. A rough, partly finished song is like a jagged stone. Not easy to listen to and understand.

Polishing is what makes a good song into a great one. After spending long hours on the crafting of your lyrics and melody you might find yourself saying “ Yeah, this is really great” But is it?

Go back and have another look. I have sometimes worked on a song for months, yes months, to bring it to perfection. There is no rush. Once you are involved with the writing process you can afford to be patient. Your song is not going to disappear. If you are facing a bit of a brick wall with a song let it go, work on something else and come back to it refreshed later.

Ask yourself, are the lyrics conveying what you want to say in the most imaginative picturesque way? Could that line be more detailed, descriptive and colourful? Have I described the scene well enough to make my idea crystal clear to the listener?

Have I included too many lazy ands, buts etc when I could be using more expressive words?

Is an idea repeated with different words saying the same thing? Remember..... progression and freshness.

Trim the fat. One word change can make all the difference. That word may convey what you previously took three words to say. Do I really need three choruses? Have I got my pronouns and tenses together (If you start writing in the first person make sure you don’t suddenly switch to the third person etc.)

Are my rhymes as imaginative as they can be or have I stuck with the lazy old *heart, apart*, cliché?

Ask yourself Does my melody ascend when the lyric is light or happy and descend when it is sad or melancholy? Is my chorus melody distinctive enough from my verses or bridge? Is the melody emphasising my most important lyrics or burying them?

Have I explored all the variations of chords that might make my song more interesting? Do I really need a solo?

More and more pop and country songs are exploring new chord patterns and inversions than ever before.

The old I, IV,V staple is being joined by major 7ths, flat fifths, ninths and sixths.

Changing key (modulation) is another way of creating interest in your song if done tastefully.

Polishing and refining is what separates great songs from merely good ones. Have another look at your new song. Is it as good as it can be?

8. Demo Time

Although the internet has opened up many ways to get your songs out there some writers still like to go the record company, music publisher route.

It's almost essential to obtain a formal introduction or door opener to a publisher, producer or record company's A&R person before sending them a demo. In most cases these people are inundated with material daily and just don't have the time to listen to unsolicited material.

When pitching your songs to publishers, producers and record companies, you are competing with hundreds of songs for attention so the commercial potential in your song is primary. Whoever is listening has to be knocked out from word go.

They have to be convinced that your song is worth investing their time, money and energy into.

You have to be convinced that this is the best thing they are going to hear today!

If you have any doubts go back to the polishing cloth and read the rest of this later.

Make the best demo with the best resources you can afford. Certain quality standards have to be maintained of course. Fortunately, there are now available many reasonably priced recording devices that can make a great sounding demo ranging from self contained portable digital 4 track recorders to more expensive full on computer rigs.

An imaginative arrangement can help, and if you're in a band that opens all kinds of experimentation, but I feel a good song, if structured correctly should be able to be pitched with a simple guitar and voice or piano and voice demo. This bare bones approach will certainly further test the song for any shortcomings also. By all means go for the full band studio thing but make sure the song comes first.

Personally when mixing I tweak the voice ever so slightly up a notch from the level I would use on a non-demo recording just to emphasise the all important lyric. I am also careful not to over saturate the track with reverb.

Don't try to second guess the publisher or producer by making your demo sound too much like the style or voice of the person you're hoping will cut the song. If you're lucky enough to get as far as the artist and they pass you are stuck with a restrictive demo. Remember... sell the song!

Too much adornment can also take the listener's mind from the all important lyrics and melody. Try not to have a long drawn out introduction or a zillion solos. Get to the hook as fast as possible. One thing publishers and producers don't have a lot of is time. Most have ears and enough experience (or should have) to imagine what a good song will sound like fully produced. Sing the lyrics clearly and be sure to tune up if you're a guitarist.

Oh, and if you're not a reasonable singer, get someone who is to sing the song.

I recommend sending no more than 3 songs. Place what you consider your strongest song as the first track and try to vary the styles of the songs you include. Remember you have limited time to get your songs heard.

Packaging and presentation is also important.

The most important advice I can give is WRITE. The more you hone your craft and stick at it the more you'll improve your skills. Be objective. Get all the criticism you can from your peers, your family, song writing professionals when you have the opportunity and don't be offended if they find fault with your creation. Also don't be offended if professionals won't listen to unsolicited material. Go to workshops. Join clubs and associations. Play and write with friends.

I arrived in Nashville and was lucky enough to be signed to one of the biggest country music publishers in the world. I sat all day in a writer's room scribbling and strumming away while next door Willie Nelson or John Hiatt was doing the same. At night over a few drinks we'd play each other our songs. I can't tell you how many times I went back to the drawing board until low and behold I co-wrote a top ten country hit.

Living in Nashville and rubbing shoulders with the great writers taught me how to use words and music skilfully and turn them into simple beauty.

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