

The basics of songwriting

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This long article covers lyric writers, songwriting collaborators, non-performing songwriters, songwriting methods, demos and tip sheets

I write lyrics only. Is there any market for lyrics or words on their own, without music?

There is no certain market for lyrics on their own. Publishers are usually only interested in complete songs - that is to say words and music. They are usually not interested in words on their own, and indeed are very rarely interested in music on its own, although there is a specialised market for good instrumental music.

Will the publisher arrange for you to work with a music collaborator, if he likes your lyrics?

Rarely. It is most unusual for this to happen in real life. The publisher is not in the match-making business. He is not in business to pair you off with suitable partners, nor is he in business to provide you with a melody for your lyrics. Indeed, you should be extremely wary of any person calling himself a publisher who offers to provide a melody for your lyrics, as you may find that he will only do so for a fee.

What you are saying seems to suggest that lyric writers have very little value in today's music industry.

No, that's not what I meant. Indeed, I was recently looking at some comments made by various music publishers about songwriting in the nineties, and one of them, Dennis Collopy, one of the most respected music publishers in Britain, said that whatever about non-performing songwriters, good lyricists will always find work, and I think that is perfectly true. But the point I am making is that lyrics on their own are not songs, and publishers usually only deal in songs.

So what can a lyric writer do if he cannot write music? Surely, he will have to pay somebody to write a melody for him?

First of all, avoid like the plague anybody offering to write melodies for cash, irrespective of how the offer is framed. Some of these melody for-cash merchants will write music to the local bus timetable, as long as they get £10 or \$20 or whatever, but once they have your cash, you can kiss your chances goodbye. Some of them frame their offers very cleverly, but the simple facts are these... if anybody offers to turn your lyrics into a complete song in return for any payment whatsoever, run a mile!

But some firms offer "free" melodies if you buy a demo recording of the finished song. How about these services?

You will occasionally see offers of so-called "Free Melodies", if you purchase a demo recording of the song. Naturally, the melody is not "free" - the cost of having it written is simply built into the cost of the demo. Anyway, if you want to see how genuine their offer is, ask them to let you hear the melody before you pay for the recording. If they refuse, then you can rest assured that you have saved yourself a lot of money. We do not know of one hit penned by this method. If any operator of a demo service has penned such a hit in the last 50 years, would he like to tell me about it?

Well if these advertised services are of no value, what am I, as a lyric writer, to do?

First of all, how about writing a melody yourself? Many lyric writers have a rough tune in their heads, but are put off by their inability to "write down music". In fact very few top songwriters can "write down music" either, but as services exist which will copy down your rough song onto paper for around £20, being able to "write down music" is certainly not an essential pre-requisite to being able to write a song. So initially, why not try and see what you yourself can come up with in the form of a melody, and sing, hum or whistle the results, into a tape recorder.

Fine, but supposing what you come up with is simply not good enough?

Most writers contemplate collaboration and most hit songs are written by partnerships. Ideally, you should try and work with somebody you know in your own area. Collaboration is best done on a face-to-face basis. Now, if you don't know another songwriter locally, perhaps you know a local musician? He is bound to know some other musician who writes tunes, if he himself doesn't write. Most musicians would like to be songwriters, but sometimes lack the enthusiasm, or the inspiration, to get started. You can supply your skills and start a new songwriting partnership.

If that doesn't work out, you will probably have to seek out some total stranger to work with. Again, try a local approach. A small advertisement in your local newspaper might work, but it's a long shot. You would be better off approaching your local musical instrument shop and asking them if you can put a card on their notice board looking for a collaborator. You might also print a small leaflet setting out your requirements, and ask your local music store or record shop to leave it on the counter for you. In particular, pay the closest attention possible to new bands or groups. Many of these find lyric-writing a chore - we know because in the ISA, we get lots of requests from bands looking for lyric writers.

If all your local approaches fail, then you will probably have to turn to postal collaboration, which is harder to operate. Back in the sixties, Elton John is supposed to have met Bernie Taupin through an ad in the NME. Pop papers like the NME often carry ads from musicians seeking lyric writers, but beware of the shark operators who also infest these waters trying to extract money from foolish lyric writers.

You should also turn to your songwriting organisation for help. In the ISA, for example, there is a section in every Songwriter Magazine devoted to ads from lyric writers and melody writers seeking collaborators. These ads are published free of charge by Songwriter Magazine. Then, for lyric writers only, ISA has the Register of Composers, which lists the names of members who will compose melodies to lyrics. In fact, there are more ISA composers looking for lyric writers than vice versa. Usually, collaborators divide their income and expenses on a 50-50 basis, but that is not always the case, and any division you both agree to is acceptable.

In any event, the message seems to be - if you write lyrics, then you have to start thinking in terms of the complete song.

Yes. Writing your own melody or collaborating with somebody to produce a complete song is not just an exciting and fulfilling experience, it is also quite simple. However, remember the cardinal rule of the music business....never pay out money for a melody to be written to your lyrics, nor pay out money for a demo recording which includes a so-called "free" melody. Hit melodies to hit lyrics are written by composers, not by songwriting services. Indeed, in the fifty years that these services have been busy

writing perhaps two million so-called "free" melodies, we have never heard of one of those melodies becoming even a minor hit.

What is the difference between an arrangement, a manuscript and a lead sheet?

Well technically, an arrangement is the term given to the parts played by all the musical instruments on the recording... a manuscript is the vocal part with full piano accompaniment, while a lead sheet is simply the vocal part plus the accompanying chords. Most writers mix these up in conversation, so that what they call manuscripts are often only lead sheets, and vice versa.

40 years ago, very few recording artists wrote their own songs. Nowadays, most of them do. Is there any future for the songwriter who is not also a recording artist?

Absolutely. Actually, I find those type of statistics somewhat bewildering, because I've been hearing the exact same thing all my life! For example, back in the late 1940's when country music started becoming popular in the United States, people pointed to Hank Williams and Marty Robbins and Hank Snow and singers like those, who wrote some of their own songs, and said -well that's the end of the line for the non-performing songwriters. They were dead wrong - nowadays, country music uses more songs written by pure songwriters than it ever did.

Similarly, when rock and roll started in the fifties, all we heard was that since Fats Domino and Little Richard and Buddy Holly and Roy Orbison and Del Shannon and Neil Sedaka were all writing their own songs, pure songwriters were as good as dead. Then along came Carole King and Barry Mann and Mike Leiber and Mike Stoller and countless other pure songwriters, and that prediction fell by the wayside.

Then when the Mersey Sound arrived in the mid-sixties,, the prophets of gloom were saying that because the Beatles wrote their own songs, and the Stones wrote their own songs, and the Dave Clark Five wrote their own songs and so on, that pure songwriters were over the hill, and they were wrong because it was during that period that you saw the emergence of writers like Mitch Murray and Tony MacAulay and many more, who wrote songs but certainly never thought of performing them.

There was a singer-songwriter craze in the early seventies, with people like Carole King and Don McLean and James Taylor, and again the so called experts said - if you don't perform, then you won't be able to sell a song... but that was wrong. After all the fuss died down, it turned out that it was the songs written by non-performers that were the most successful during the 70's. They said the same thing again when the New Wave came along - they said the same thing when disco came along - they've always been saying it. They're still saying it, and if they're not, they'll be saying it this time next week again.

The facts are that for every music trend which seems to suggest that pure songwriters are passé, there is a corresponding trend which suggests the exact opposite. For every Hank Williams who writes all his own songs, there's a Jim Reeves who uses other writers' songs for every Buddy Holly who writes hit tunes, there is an Elvis Presley who never writes one...for every Neil Sedaka, there is a Bobby Vee...for every Paul McCartney, there's a Cliff Richard for every Don McLean, there is a Tom Jones. . . for every Elton John, there is a Leo Sayer... I could go on and on.

Think back to when self-penned dance tunes were doing big business and when again, non-performing songwriters were supposed to be finished - who were the biggest and most successful dance acts of the period? Those who wrote their own songs? No - it was groups like Five Star, who didn't write one of their own hits, or all those acts produced by Stock Aitken and Waterman, who themselves never sang a note, but wrote perhaps the best dance hits of the era.

So what you are saying is that a good song will always triumph in the end?

There will always be a market for a good song. I don't care if every glamour kid is penning ten songs a day -the facts are that this is first and foremost a business. If a balding, overweight and totally repulsive-looking songwriter can pen something better - then that balding, overweight and totally repulsive songwriter will have the hit record... the public by and large do not care who writes the songs they buy... they will not buy something simply because the performer wrote it and they will not reject something simply because the performer did not write it - they will buy what they like.

And remember, songwriter-performers do not always write their own best hits. Buddy Holly is always mentioned as being the first rock star to write his own songs... that's true, but at the end of the day, his biggest hits were "Oh Boy", "It Doesn't Matter Anymore" and "Rave On" - and he didn't write one of those. Gene Pitney was a great songwriter before he became a great recording star. He wrote fewer than five of his own thirty hit records. Don McLean wrote some wonderful songs in the seventies... when he was making a comeback in the early eighties, and was finding it hard to get a hit -he used other people's material, and scored with two huge hits -neither of which he wrote himself.

Don't worry about the prophecies that songwriters are dead... they've been dying since they were born, and there are more of them around right now, making more money than their predecessors ever did in the glory days of Tin Pan Alley, when no recording star wrote his own songs. Forget the prophets of doom and gloom... write a good song first, and then, you'll find you've absolutely nothing to worry about.

Is songwriting and the music business in general a "closed shop"? Some writers say that their songs are not listened to, and that it is all a fix - it's who you know.

It always helps to know somebody - in any business I suppose. If a good friend of mine wrote a fairly ordinary song that he wanted on a record which - let's say - I was producing, I should be able to persuade a singer (a fairly stupid singer anyway), to slip it onto an album or put it on a "B" side... but I could not - no matter how friendly I was with that writer - make the song a hit.

I mean knowing people helps. The writer knows me, so I help the writer. I know a singer and so the singer helps me, but at the end of the day, none of us know one million record buyers who will do us the favour of buying the bloody thing, so the operation is pointless, and the singer and the singer's management will have my guts if the thing flops, and never trust my judgement again, so that my little favour for my friend would earn nobody any money anyway, and the only result might be that I could end up spending the rest of my life on the dole.

I have no reason to lie when I say this... name me one song in the history of rock and roll that did not deserve to be a hit... and that was simply issued as a favour to

somebody. You can control lots of people, but at the end of the day, you cannot hope to control one million record buyers.

If that's the case, why do people say that it's all pull in the record business?

Sour grapes has a lot to do with those type of stories. I have no time for that sort of rubbish. Write a good song, and you may have a hit. Write a bad song and you won't be able to give it away. It just could be that you are a lousy songwriter - there are lousy songwriters... I even know a few who have managed to get their stuff on record... but I don't know one lousy songwriter who has managed to get a hit... you might be able to fool the manager or the singer or even the record label... but you can't fool a million record buyers, and at the end of the day, it's the fans who really count.

Let's get back to writing that hit song. Which is the most important part of the song -the words or the tune?

That's one of the old chestnuts, but I have developed a very cute answer for that. The most important part of any song is the hook -the part of the song that you remember more than anything else, the part that sticks in your mind when the record is over, the part that makes you want to buy that record and play it over and over again.

Now that hook could well be a catchy melodic segment, or a brilliant title, or a great phrase - but it's got to be there. If for example, you were to think of any particular song in the charts right now, you would probably find that you could not remember all of it from start to finish, but there would be one particular part of the song which you could probably remember better than any other part, and this would be what we call the hook.

Professional songwriters try to aim for one great hook in every song. Publishers listen out for it, and buyers buy it, for without this hook, it may not matter how pretty your melody is, or how intellectual your words are, you may have a great song, but you will not have a hit song.

If you can produce a hook by combining a great song title with a catchy melodic phrase, you are half way towards writing a hit song... in fact some hit songs have been nothing but great hooks - songs like "Louie Louie" for example, where the title is repeated throughout the tune - that is basically one continuous hook - and nothing but a hook.

Should the new writer aim for something simple, or will publishers want something more complicated from the newcomer - something original and unique?

Try and keep it simple. New songwriters do not get long auditions – most publishers will only play a demo once, so if it does not hit them the first time, then it will never hit them. Try and aim for simple straightforward catchy material - nothing too intellectual - nothing too complicated. Apart from the initial problems that new writers have getting their work published, it is good training to keep things simple from the start.

Anyway, you are aiming for the Top 40, and most Top 40 hits are simple, particularly Top 40 hits by new acts. There is a good commercial reason for this - new records by new acts get very limited airplay, unless they start to sell fairly quickly. You need a song which will start to sell after a few national plays -otherwise the radio stations will drop it from their playlists - so you need something which is simple, straightforward, and instantly catchy. More complex songs may be suitable for albums, or for singles by already-established artists, but for a newcomer, it is almost impossible to have material

considered for albums, and even more difficult to have material considered for an established artist.

Some books on songwriting advise writers to ignore the charts, and to aim for originality. Others virtually say you should copy what is in the charts. What do you think?

No professional writer ignores the charts and since that is the case, no newcomer can afford to ignore them either. The professionals are your competitors, and the charts contain their songs. In order for you to make it, you will have to replace one of those chart songs with your own tune.

Now you might feel that that the best chance of doing this is with something completely original, something which is so unique that it has to make the charts, but this is unfortunately not what usually happens. 90% of the chart is not very original - in fact you will realise that follow-ups to hit records invariably sound like the original hit, so there is very little room for really unique or original material, particularly by newcomers.

The key is radio airplay. Complex material, or really original material that stretches the listener too much, is not much liked by radio stations, because they feel that it can be a tune out factor, in other words, a factor which causes listeners to switch stations. For that reason, you have to listen to the charts - that's what's making it right now, and that's what you should be writing. Above all, it's the first thing a publisher will think of when he opens your demo - could he place this, and could it get airplay? He is more likely to think he could place it, and get airplay, if it sounds like something which is getting airplay right now, rather than something totally different.

So charts are essential reading for the new songwriter?

Yes - they are essential reading (and listening) material for not just the new songwriter, but for all songwriters. Indeed, studying the charts can be an eye-opener. We all know about the Top 40 or Hot 100 listings, which tell you what is selling across the board, but there are also charts for country music, MOR music, black music, Latin American music, dance music etc., areas where songwriters are placing songs outside of the mainstream of rock music, and making good money doing it too. So, don't ignore the charts, and do not presume that the entire songwriting business revolves around the Top 40 - there are plenty of writers who make a lot of money without ever reaching the Top 40, because there are plenty of very lucrative markets out there in other styles of music.

How many hours per day or per week should you spend actually writing songs?

The professional songwriters who had offices in the Brill Building in New York were proud to boast that they worked regular office hours, writing songs every day of the week from 9am until 5pm. The Hollywood version of the songwriting business portrays a genius who spends about fifteen minutes a week writing songs, and the rest of the time pursuing beautiful blondes around the swimming pool. I think that the former job description, the 9 to 5 one, might be slightly more accurate! Songwriting is a business, and has to be treated as one would treat any other business.

If that is the case, surely the amateur is up against it?

I thought that would be obvious to most people already! Professional songwriters treat the game as a business, which is why they are professional songwriters. The amateur

songwriter faces many problems. First of all, he is up against professionals who are always going to have better contacts than he has. Secondly, he is up against professionals who can spend their entire day working on the craft of writing a hit song, whereas the amateur may be trying to squeeze it into a few hours at the weekend. Thirdly, he is up against the pro who knows just how hard it is to write a hit song.

It often amuses professional writers when they hear some amateur sounding off about the dozens of songs he writes every month. The professional will be the first to tell you that he can only complete perhaps one song per week, or even per month, and yet there are amateurs who claim to be producing hundreds of songs in that same period! You see, the amateur can write a song in ten minutes - which of course is why he's an amateur. The professional knows it takes time, and he is willing to give it the time it takes.

Finally, the professional is confident. He knows he can write a hit song- he's already done it. The amateur, deep down, is not that sure of his talent. Somebody said once that many good amateurs could write albums full of hit songs, if only they could come up with the first hit. That's very true. If you had a song, in the charts right now, and the singer came in that door looking for a follow-up, do you believe you could not write it? Of course not – your self-confidence to write it, would be enormous. The professional already has that self-confidence. The amateur has to develop it.

Would it help the amateur to have some sort of timetable or plan?

Pressure is the great incentive. If you have a hit song on the charts, and you're told that you must have a follow-up ready by 4pm Thursday, you will have it ready. And, it will be good. If you are not under any pressure at all - there is not the same incentive, and therefore, no hurry, which usually means, no song. So why not put yourself under some sort of artificial pressure?

Decide that you are going to write a song for a specific artist, and that you will have it in the post to him by a specific date. Then work out a timetable to meet that scenario. So many hours per week working on new material, so many hours revising and polishing finished material, so many hours promoting your material.

Don't forget to put in some time listening to the radio and checking trends, as well as examining the charts, particularly the new entries. However, make sure of one thing. Do not spend too much time on the supplementary activities - writing songs is the main task. There is no point in promoting songs that are no good, and of course, you cannot even start to promote songs you haven't yet written, so the main aim must be to write songs.

But surely writing a hit song should be mainly down to inspiration?

Well you've heard the old cliché about success being 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration, and I think that applies to songwriting as much as any other business. Might I reminisce? Back in the sixties, a new vocal group, made up mainly of previously successful songwriters, released their first record on the American market. The song was called "Bermuda". You never heard of that one, and the reason you didn't was that it flopped.

Afterwards, the songwriters in the band got together - they analysed every hit song of

the period, picked out its most prominent feature, and came up with a number of interesting factors. The biggest hits had an unusual title or else a girl's name as the title: they had a wide-ranging melody, utilising both falsetto and bass voices prominently: they had a medium-paced beat with drums and handclaps prominent.

So with this information, the boys then sat down to write a song to this formula, and they promptly came up with a tune called "Sherry" which went to Number 1 in 35 countries, and made the Four Seasons the most successful vocal group of the sixties. Now it may sound like an unromantic way of writing a hit, but who cares... it was not only a hit - it was also a fabulous song. This is a business. Get the product right first. Worry about marketing it later.

So how do I write that hit?

First off, nobody can teach you how to write a hit song. Certainly, there are songwriters who have attended classes in music theory etc., but nobody has ever claimed to have taught a songwriter how to write a hit song. If they could teach somebody else how to do it - they would be doing it themselves. However, you can be taught the technicalities of songwriting, but yet many technically competent songwriters never pen a hit tune, while many technically incompetent writers do.

But leaving all that aside, let's take a brief look at the basics of lyric writing, and the basics of melody - but before we do either, let's look at basic idea itself - the thing that inspires you to get started at all.

Otis Blackwell, facing a drunk who kept shaking a coke bottle until it blew while shouting - "write a song about that", penned the hit "All Shook Up", while Lionel Bart took some lines from The Godfather, to come up with "Gonna Make You An Offer You Can't Refuse". (The same writer penned his biggest hit for Cliff Richard, after seeing a Christmas toy advertisement in the Daily Mirror for a "living doll", and based the entire hit musical "Oliver" on his favourite childhood book - Oliver Twist).

Johnny Mercer took a one line suggestion from a fan named Sadie Vimmerstedt - I wanna be around to pick up the pieces When somebody breaks your heart - to come up with the Tony Bennett smash "I Wanna Be Around". He even gave her a song credit - the only song she ever "wrote"!

Casual conversations, catch-phrases heard on the street, lines and plots from TV soaps, newspaper headlines, book titles, and snatches from movies, have all proved a fertile field for songwriters - and indeed the work of other writers. To be inspired by something does not mean you copy it. You merely use one great idea to create another great idea. As comedians will tell you - there are only seven different jokes. All others are variations of these seven, and when it comes to story lines for movies, novels or songs, much the same is true.

Take notes - and build up a library of ideas. Of course, you too will come up with your own 100% original idea in the future - and hopefully, someday, somebody else will be inspired enough by your idea to create their own great work.

Moving on from the basic song idea and/or title, here is where things have to get a little more personal. Some writers start with a basic idea - or a catch phrase, and then try to

work a melody around it - in other words, create what is usually referred to as “the hook”, and then write the song. Others decide to write the entire lyric, and only when that is finished, pen a melody. Others decided to pen the entire melody, and then put the lyric to it.

Any more than I could not tell you which sock to put on first, I can give no advice on what is the best way of going about things, except to say that that the best way of going about things is to go about things in the way that works best for you.

So what tips do you have if I decide to start off with the lyrics?

First, ask yourself which audience are you aiming it at. Every audience, pre-teen, teen, late-teen, early 20’s etc., has its own language, and its own way of expressing itself. Mix these factors up and you have a song fit for no audience. If you cannot get inside the mind of a teenager, what makes you think you can write songs for them?

Incidentally, if you want to know how kids talk and think - watch TV shows written specially for them, or read the type of magazines they buy. That is an education in itself, even if you never write a song! Then start writing down your basic idea.

Song lyrics do not have to be mini-stories, with a beginning, middle and end, but we need a theme, which is credible, but at the same time, not too ordinary or mundane. Is it boy-loves-girl, but girl-hates-boy, or is it girl-likes-boy but he is her best pal’s boyfriend – or what? There should be some twist - something slightly out of the ordinary. I mean, who wants to hear another story about something perfectly ordinary - even if it is sweet?

Do not worry about rhyme or rhythm at the start - just get the theme or story right. (Incidentally one way of practising this part of the craft is to take an existing hit song’s lyrics, and see can you write the story-line which the songwriters penned before they wrote the final lyric). Also, take an episode from one of those teen TV shows, and write it into your own three minute lyric.

Phil Spector called his songs, “little three minute symphonies for the kids” and if you can perhaps adapt that to “little three minute soap operas for the kids”, you are more than half- way there.

If you really do have problems writing lyrics, then you should read a good book on the subject. The following books are either available at, or obtainable by, any good public library or from Amazon.com

- The Craft of Lyric Writing by Sheila Davis
- The Songwriters Idea Book: 40 Strategies to Excite Your Imagination, Help You Design Distinctive Songs, and Keep Your Creative Flow by Sheila Davis
- Successful Lyric Writing: A Step-By-Step Course & Workbook by Sheila Davis
- Melody in Songwriting: Tools and Techniques for Writing Hit Songs (Berklee Guide) by Jack Perricone
- Writing Better Lyrics by Pat Pattison

How about source books for people who wish to write melodies?

The books I would recommend reading include

- Melody: How to Write Great Tunes (Paperback) by Rikky Rooksby
- Melody in Songwriting: Tools and Techniques for Writing Hit Songs (Berklee Guide) by Jack Perricone
- The Songwriter's Workshop: Harmony by Jimmy Kachulis
- The Songwriting Sourcebook: How to Turn Chords Into Great Songs by Rikky Rooksby
- How to Write Songs on Guitar: A Guitar-Playing and Songwriting Course by Rikky Rooksby

Are there any books which cover lyric writing, melody writing and making demos?

I can strongly recommend the books written by International Songwriters Association's contributing editor, Harvey Rachlin. These include –

- The Encyclopaedia of the Music Business by Harvey Rachlin
- The Songwriter's and Musician's Guide to Making Successful Demos by Harvey Rachlin
- The Songwriter's Handbook by Harvey Rachlin
- The Songwriter's Workshop by Harvey Rachlin

How do I make some money out of my composition?

You have to get your song onto the market, on record, as it is not going to make any money for you until it is some form of recording available to the public. Songwriters tend to approach a music publisher, as he is traditionally the person who publishes songs, gets a record label to put them on record, collects the royalties, and sends you a large fat cheque every so often.

In the good old days, or so the Hollywood movies suggest, the writer just dropped into his friendly neighbourhood publisher, who wheeled out the piano, so that the hero could play his latest smash hit for the suitably amazed executive. Nowadays, you need a recording of your song, or demo recording as it is called. A demo is just that - a recording of your song for demonstration purposes. You can make a demo yourself with your own voice and nothing else, or you can hire the London Philharmonic Orchestra plus Abbey Road Studios.

Would you advise songwriters not to make their own demos?

If you have the equipment and the ability, then you should produce your own demos. Nowadays, home recording equipment is very advanced, and sounds are possible right now which would have required an orchestra only ten years ago. If you do not have the recording equipment, or the musical ability, then you can hire both. Most towns have recording studios, and musicians are easily (if not necessarily cheaply) come by. The important thing about making a demo yourself is that you are in control of the final product and you produce the best version which you believe possible - or at least a version that satisfies you. It will not be all that cheap, but if you rehearse carefully, and if the musicians know what they are doing, it may not work out too expensive.

You can also use one of the mail-order demo services. These will usually work out cheaper. The disadvantage is that you are not in control - it depends on the interpretation put on your song by some arranger you have never met. Most mail order demo services are able to charge comparatively little because they work with the same tight group of musicians and singers, but often this means that they only have one or two vocalists

available, and if your song does not quite suit their style of singing, you may not be too happy with the results. My advice is to ask for a sample CD, make one demo, and if you are happy with that, stick to that particular firm.

It is hard to be definitive about the best method of producing a demo since a lot depends on circumstances, but you are better off making the demo yourself, unless of course you find a firm which is capable of doing a better job than you yourself can.

How good does a demo have to be to impress a music publisher?

If every publisher was also a musician, then I would say not to worry about the demo, because a musician would recognise a good song no matter how badly performed it was. However, a lot of publishers start life as lawyers, accountants, managers or whatever - anything except musicians, and despite what they tell you, a good demo **does** impress them. They do not have the necessary imagination in many cases to work out what your song might sound like if it had been properly recorded in the first place. Smaller publishers also like well-made demos, because they can use a good demo to promote the song to labels or performers without having to re-record the material, saving both money and time.

Sometimes you hear about demos which are good enough to use as masters. Should I go that far?

It all depends on what type of song it is, and who it is destined for. Obviously, if you are hoping to have the song released by the latest heart-throb, there is no point in recording it to master standard. All you need is a good demo. On the other hand, if you have a local band or singer whose version of your song is really great, and if you can make a master-quality recording of the song using that act, then you can think in terms of not just selling the song to a publisher, but of selling the entire package of recording, song and act, to a major label.

Nowadays, most new product makes its way onto the market in this fashion. To a great extent, the days of the songwriter sending in a rough demo to the publisher, who then makes a better version, and sends it on to a label, who in turn persuades a star to record it, are gone. Nowadays, the package deal is more common...the writer writes a song, finds a band, records the band, and furnishes the label with a finished product.

In other words, songwriters nowadays are basically record producers?

Not all of them by any means - there are plenty of "pure songwriters" about, but of course, with more acts writing their own material, outlets for the pure songwriter are reduced, so more and more writers are thinking in terms of the entire product - from the song to the record - and not just the song itself.

In reality, a lot of this comes about by chance. A writer decides to make a demo in a local studio, and instead of paying musicians, seeks out a local band, and offers them a chance to work in a studio free of charge, recording his song as a demo. If the recording works out better than expected, then the writer thinks in terms of selling the entire package as a master - if not, then he thinks only in terms of selling the song, while the band use the tape to try and get themselves a deal. If either succeeds, then both may be lucky. The publisher who likes the song may also be able to place the act - while if a label likes the act, they may also take the song.

Of course, if a writer produces a master, he is dealing with a record label, and bypassing the music publisher?

Usually that is so, and of course the writer will then think of trying to keep the publishing himself, or keeping at least some of it. On the other hand, I know quite a few writers who produced a master, and instead of going to a label with it, went to a publisher, and used the publisher's expertise and skill to get them a record release on the master.

It seems strange that you should suggest sending a song to the publisher who has published a similar song. Surely he will be looking for something really different next time out?

Oddly enough, publishers tend to regard with enthusiasm songs similar in style to the type of material they have had hits with - I suppose it is a psychological thing - but there is also some hard business logic behind it. If a publisher has had a hit with a particular type of song, he knows the ropes on placing that type of number, and that is half the battle.

Sometimes, it so happens that he will try and place the song with the singer whose previous hit he published, so that the whole thing becomes a Catch 22 situation. The publisher recalls a hit published by him - and now finds you have sent him a similar song. He contacts the act or record label concerned. They would like to stick to the hit publisher who gave them their previous hit - he would like to stick to the hit formula which gave him that hit - and all of a sudden, the singer's follow-up sounds suspiciously like his previous record and frequently ends up missing the charts, which was hardly the point of the exercise in the first place, but it does often happen.

I have heard that there are a number of Tip Sheets available which tell you where to send songs. Are these any good?

Some are - some are not! I hate to recommend any as each issue is only as good as the tips in it, and who knows how good next month's issue might be. However, two I do like are BandIt and SongLink, and they are relatively inexpensive.

Some tip sheets are not good value, printing simply lists of names and addresses of producers, labels executives etc., with no guarantee that any of them are looking for songs at that moment.

Remember with all tip sheets, they are usually trying to obtain and publish information which most of the firms concerned would rather they did not. They usually get it right, but the company listed as wanting a particular type of song may still not have authorised that information to be published, and may not be happy that it has. However, as some publishers dread being flooded by song submissions, getting confirmation that a song requirement is still valid can be next to impossible.

Frankly, you are better off trying to build up your own contacts in the music industry, and when you have something worth playing to them, to contact them with your song. Tip Sheets are the next best thing if you do not have sufficient contacts.

I have often seen song promotion schemes or song plugging schemes advertised. What are these and are they any good?

Promotion schemes basically offer to promote your songs in return for a fixed fee,

rather than a percentage of any income. Although many firms are vague as to how they do the actual promotion, our experience is that most of them duplicate your song onto a CD, along with other songs, and then post it out to publishers or to labels on their list. The writer benefits, because the cost of duplicating 50 CDs, and posting them to 50 publishers would be greater than the cost of using the service provided. You might ask how the companies show a profit. Some of them are putting as many as twenty songs on each disc, and so collecting twenty fees. Some claim to personally visit publishers and labels with your demo, but frankly I would really want some proof that they are really doing that.

Would it not be true to say that most of these plugging companies would have better contacts than most songwriters?

Some of the companies do claim to have good contacts, but do remember that no number of good contacts can sell a bad song, and on the other hand, if the song is good, you could probably sell it yourself just as easily. Again, remember that if your song is being promoted as nineteenth on a CD of twenty songs, I would lay any money that it will never get heard by any publisher even if the disc does land on his desk. Finally, don't forget that if the promotion company does not make a real effort to screen the songs, your song may end up on a CD with nineteen very poor songs, and that won't help your chances either.

Quite clearly, you do not think too much of song promotion schemes?

Not really, although if a company was offering to promote on a fixed percentage of any subsequent income (say 10%), like a writer's agent would, then I might go ahead, simply because I'd have nothing to lose. But most want cash up front, and as I say, they could be putting 20 songs or more on each CD. In any event, if you are interested, ask the company to tell them just how many songs will be on each CD and insist that they send you a copy of the final promotion CD before you agree to it. Alternatively, you should ask them for the name and address of one of their successes and check it out with him. Unfortunately, the modus operandi of promotion schemes lends itself to dishonest practices, as there is never any visual proof of promotion per se. Indeed, sometimes there is no proof that it has ever even commenced.

You read that nowadays, the internet is the way to go for the songwriter - that he should put his music up there and wait for it to be discovered. What do you think?

The internet has made it so much easier for anybody, songwriter or performer, to get the music directly to the people that really matter - the audience, but at the end of the day, we are back to one factor - if you can write a good song, the internet is your world. If you cannot - it does not help.

However, where the internet really comes into its own is when a songwriter-performer is involved. Here you can bypass the record label (and indeed the music publisher) and do the whole job yourself. (And of course, keep the entire income yourself!). So, if having dealt with a label and a publisher, you end up earning 10% of the proceeds of your first album, how much nicer to bypass these people, and go directly to your audience on the internet. Here you can afford to drop your sales by half, and still increase your income five times over!

How long should it take for me to break through as a songwriter?

I wish I could tell you, but it is like asking, "how long is a piece of string?"

Vance Freeman had been an ISA subscriber for just over ten years before he got a song released on record. Even before he had his first song accepted, he had set up his own studio and publishing firm - but it still took ten years for him to make it work.

In spite of the popular perception that all stars are overnight successes - it ain't necessarily so (to coin a phrase). Carole King was writing for nine years before having her first success. Her partner Gerry Goffin remembers writing 150 songs before a publisher took the first one. And these are just two examples of the thousands of million-selling songwriters whose path to the top was anything but smooth.

Some years ago, a radio producer phoned to ask if we could give him the name of a songwriter who had taken up songwriting and produced a hit song within one year. We told him that if we could go back to the 1960 we were sure we could - just to leave it with us. But we couldn't. Even the teen stars back in the sixties that we were sure had been quickest of the mark, turned out to have been writing songs for several years, before producing their first hit. But successful songwriters did have two things in common. They were very determined, and they wrote songs - lots and lots of songs - before making it.

Take Neil Sedaka for example. Neil was an accomplished classical pianist, who decided that the only way to learn songwriting was the same way he had learned the piano - by practising. And the only way to practise songwriting, in his view, was to write one new song every single day for as long as it took. He started - and stuck to this task for 361 days! Not one of those songs was ever recorded afterwards - but that was not the point of the exercise. He had succeeded in doing what he set out to do - he had learned his craft. And learning the craft, any craft, does take practice.

Can you recall the first song you wrote? It was absolutely brilliant - wasn't it? Your family, your friends, your dog - they all liked it - particularly the dog. Can you bear to listen to it nowadays? I thought so. How did you ever write something so trite - so amateurish - so childish? "You see, practice really does make perfect" my dumb English teacher used to tell me. Perhaps the old fool had a sort of a point after all!

Do you subscribe to the theory that you can make your own luck?

Actually I do. A few years ago, I was lucky enough to meet a legendary songwriter, a man who has had more hits than I have had hot dinners as the saying goes. To get started, I quoted him part of Patricia Knapton's interview in our own Songwriter Magazine with ISA member Don Woods in which Don had said - "There are a lot of talented songwriters who just don't get the lucky breaks, so, sometimes in life you've got to make your own luck."

My interviewee totally agreed. "Writing songs for a living" he said "means two things - making the songs and then making the luck". Once for example, he placed a song with a major publisher whom he "accidentally" ran into in a restaurant. How accidental that was can be gauged from the fact that he had spent three days watching the front door of the publisher's office, hoping to see him go to lunch on his own. On the third day, he "got lucky", and quite literally, "bumped" into the executive as they both entered the restaurant. To this day, that publisher apparently still thinks the meeting was accidental, and tells people how lucky it was that - having started talking about sport - they both

“discovered” that each was involved in the music business!

On another occasion while on holiday, my interviewee was part of a group of tourists visiting a movie set as part of a package tour. While there, he got talking with a director of a show which was being taped at that moment, a show which my interviewee admitted to me, he had never seen. However, he just “happened” to mention that he was a songwriter, and had written a song some time earlier specially for the series. Naturally, the director politely suggested he might like to send it in to the TV company’s office - but my friend demurred, saying that he was sure they had many fine writers available to them - whereas he had written the song purely from a dedicated fan’s point of view.

This intrigued the director even more, and the upshot was that he ended up getting the great man’s home address, coupled with an invitation to drop over with the tape as soon as he could. At this point, he admitted, panic set in, but grabbing some of the show’s publicity sheets from the main desk, he rushed back to his hotel, and using simply some of the character descriptions from the blurb - he wrote the song in a matter of hours, demoed it in a piano-vocal fashion in a small two-track studio attached to a local radio station, and phoned his newly-found director friend.

The result? Not only a song in the series itself, but an invitation to write a number of songs for both that show, and for other shows the company was producing. As he said to me - “being able to make your own luck is better than being lucky. Luck runs out eventually – but your ability to create your own opportunities doesn’t”.

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