

Writing Hits, What the Pros Do - Words of Wisdom from 30 Songwriters

Songwriting is a craft - it takes time to develop - it involves trial and error, so the chances of writing something brilliant the first time are unlikely. The problem with sending out your early material is that the person reviewing it could probably write just as well themselves! I think I wrote my first song when I was about 14. I played it for everybody and they all told me it was brilliant. I did nothing with it, because I did not know what happened next anyway, and after writing a few more, I sort of gave up.

I started again when I was 20 - but the first few songs were neither here nor there and I was about to give up again. Then I was in a library one day, and came across a book titled "Old Love in a New Town", and thought it was a nice title. I went home and wrote the song in an afternoon along with my then songwriting partner. We made a rough demo, piano, guitar and two voices - I still have the tape - it was really brutal. I had no idea what to do next, as I knew nothing about songwriting as a business.

I saw a sheet music copy with a publisher's address listed on it, so I sent it to him. To my amazement, he wrote a personal letter saying it was good but not quite right - and making one or two suggestions. He also suggested I send him more stuff. Up to then, I only wrote when the mood took me. Now, after that letter, we wrote every spare minute we could. Without that initial interest, we would probably have given up for good.

*Buddy De Silva once told me that whereas not every writer could be the best, any writer who wanted to could get a reputation for **being reliable**. Many times, I got songwriting jobs over men with superior talent, but who were undependable.*

Randy Newman was one of the first guys that I ever heard talking about getting into a routine, and going down to the office every day - that that helped him get organised and get some work done. And I started going to my office every day as an experiment, just to see could I work there, would ideas come? I found that it's been just a totally enjoyable experience.

I wait until I have a hook - either melodic or lyrical. I do not bother to start a song without the hook - what's the point? When I have the hook, let's say it is the title, then I work on it to get an equally catchy melodic sequence to go with it, and then when I am happy with that, I work on the rest of the song. Usually, I do the melody first, and complete the lyrics at the end. But without the hook - there is no real point in bothering with the rest of the song, because having spent hours or days working on it, you may never come up with a hook anyway, so all your work has been in vain.

The phone rang one night - I don't even remember the name of the guy who called. I invited him to come up to the house and he told me, 'No, I just wanted to call and talk to you for awhile. I think I'll just stay here and drink'. Then he hung up. That line struck me as a good idea so I wrote it down and started working on it. The record company had been after me to come up with a fast song. So I decided that "I Think I'll Just Stay Here and Drink" would be the fast song they'd been wanting.

I spent a small fortune on recording equipment, and a piano. I even had a special chair and table for writing songs on. You do need all of that obviously, but the best return on my investment came from the 50 cents I spent on a pocket notebook I bought in Woolworths. Any time I came across a good phrase, or a slogan, or an idea, I jotted it down in that book. I have perhaps five or six hundred ideas there now, most of them not yet used. When I'm stuck for an

idea, or just mulling things around in my mind, I go back to that notebook and I am guaranteed to find something there to work on.

I need a title before I can work on the song. For me, the title is half the battle, and once I have that, I am in business. I was booked into a Toronto night-club for a week, scheduled to do two shows on Saturday. About the middle of the week, I received a letter from a lady who lived about 200 miles away. In her letter, she said she was coming to town for our Saturday night show, not the afternoon show, because she liked soft lights with her country music. That phrase "soft lights and country music" struck me as a good idea and after playing with it awhile, it seemed better to say "bright lights and country music" instead of "soft lights". After we did the Saturday night show, I mentioned the idea to Jimmy Gateley and he and I wrote the song standing outside the dressing room at the club. We stood there in the hallway and wrote "Bright Lights And Country Music" while some 50 people waited for our autographs.

I was looking out of a hotel bedroom one day when I saw two separate signs - "Rooms To Let 50 Cents" and "Trailers For Sale Or Rent". I reversed them round and that was the first line of "King Of The Road".

We'd been to see the John Wayne film "The Searchers" where he keeps saying "That'll Be The Day". We were practising in my bedroom and Buddy said - let's write a song. And I said "that'll be the day" and Buddy said - that sounds like a great title to me.

Ideas? I listen to people. I think that a lot of country songs mention bars because a lot of songwriters hang out in bars - not just because they like to drink, but because they like to listen, and where better to listen than in a bar?

I have written about marriage, and divorce, problems with kids, and being in jail, but I've never been married, or divorced, nor have I any kids, and to date, I haven't been locked up. So where do you think I got my ideas from? I know they say you can fake it but particularly in country material, that shows through. You have to have been there, done that and bought the t- shirt as it were, and the next best thing is listening to somebody else who has been through the mill.

What I do is I first get a key, then after that I try to find a chord patterns, or some kind of chord pattern that I can write a melody to. Then I write the melody. TV programmes are often a good source of inspiration lyrically. They give you situations which are ideal for songs - boy meets girl, boy loses girl etc., but usually with a modern slant, so you can develop story-lines for your songs from bang up-to-the-minute scenarios.

My dad used to talk about this guy who was sent to England to recuperate from injuries he received in Germany in 1944. He met a nurse at the hospital, married her and brought his new bride back home with him. They moved into a little apartment behind our house. He was being treated at the Veterans Hospital and during his treatment he became temporarily paralysed. And during that time, he and his wife Ruby started having problems. Ruby got lonesome and just needed more attention so she dressed up and went out looking for it. In the song, I really put the blame on her - but there could have been more to it than that. When I thought about it some twenty years later, I realised there was more to it than I knew back when I was twelve. I changed the time and updated the war. I believe I wrote the whole song in less than an hour. In real life, by the way, the guy finally killed Ruby and then killed himself - but I certainly didn't put that in the song!

I find that most ideas come when you are not trying. When I sit down at the piano with the intention of writing a song, nothing seems to come, but when I'm driving home from a gig, or on the bus, or in the bath, suddenly an idea hits me. At one stage, I would lose most of those ideas, but some years ago, I got one of those memo gadgets that record about 60 seconds of anything, and I carry it in my pocket at all times now. It is really worth its weight in gold, and I use it not just to sing tunes into, but also to jot down lyrical ideas which come to me during the day.

I was writing for Pamper Music in Nashville at the time and I was living in a trailer house which was only about ten minutes' drive from Pamper's office. I had heard the line "It's funny how time slips away" at least a thousand times and for some reason, that line kept coming to my mind one afternoon as I was driving from home to the Pamper Music office. And I started thinking that it was a good idea for a song and I wondered why there had never been a song written from that line. I started working with the line and had the song written by the time I got to the office. The song was a hit and was one of my most financially successful and most recorded songs.

I sometimes get writer's block. What I do then is quite simple. I sit down and play some music I like and that relaxes me, or else, if it is a lyric I am working on, I read a book or a newspaper, and I find that after a while, I am so relaxed that I can come back with my own ideas no problem. Writers block in my opinion is brought on by tension - tension perhaps that you are not able to think up new ideas or whatever - but tension.

I think up my best melodies in my head. I find that when you're at the piano, your hands follow old familiar patterns. If you're away from the piano, you're freer. Your mind gives anywhere you want. I've written better melodies that way.

I never write a song anymore without knowing who it's for. It seems pointless to me to start work on a song when you have no idea who is going to sing it. I do not sing myself, so I sit down and say - right, this is for Sinatra or Dino or whoever, and then I work from there. Writing in a vacuum is a waste of time I find.

I listen to what people are saying. I find interviews or the TV News can be very useful - you get to hear the way real people are talking, and the buzzwords and phrases real people are using. I don't know if anybody really ever thought "moon" and "June" thoughts, but if they did, they sure don't think that way now. You need to know how the people in the street think and speak - they're the people who will make or break your song.

All the books tell you not to write cliches, and to be original but I notice that a lot of the lyrics in the charts are cliché-ridden and anything but original. I mentioned this to my publisher once, and he said that acts who pen their own songs can get away with anything, as they do not have to satisfy a publisher or a label, or an act! The non-performing songwriter has to satisfy everybody.

Build up a reputation even before you have earned that reputation! What I mean is - be choosy in what you send out. Many songwriters think of music publishers as being huge conglomerates, but in reality they are smallish operations in most cases, and the number of people active in the A&R side is quite small. I met a publisher one evening at a seminar some months before I got my first deal, and to my amazement, when I mentioned my name, he remembered one of my submissions from some months earlier. Luckily, it was not a bad submission, but quite clearly, if it has been terrible, he would have remembered me also. So it pays to be careful with what you send out. It may come back to haunt you.

No matter what they tell you - the song is more important than the demo. I mean a Michelangelo is still a Michelangelo, even if the frame is not top notch. But still, a nice frame helps, particularly when nobody tells you in advance that you are looking at a masterpiece. At one stage, I used to ask the publisher how elaborate a demo he wanted, and usually, the reply would be to keep it simple. I soon discovered that when I sent in the simple demo, they all told me it should have been a bit more elaborate, so nowadays, I do not bother to ask. I do the best demo I can do, and send that in. It saves time, and avoids me getting irritated!

I had worked in a publishing house so I knew from experience that you got about sixty seconds to make your point. They'd put on the demo, play about a minute of it, and if they didn't like it by then, they'd take it off. So you had to get to the point quickly if you were not well known - if you were well known, they probably listened to all the song, thinking that you must know what you were doing but if you were an unknown, they already presumed you did not know what you were doing, so you were lucky to get sixty seconds of their time. I always put everything into the first sixty seconds.

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