

20 Tips On Songwriting

Every songwriter goes through times when the inspiration just seems to dry up, and the perspiration doesn't seem to be working. **Debbie Poyser** offers some guidance.

Songwriting is a skill that is rarely taught: musicians more often than not tend to write instinctively, absorbing their ideas about form and structure from the music that's around them, and relying on inspiration for their melodic and lyrical direction. For many this works perfectly well, but there's no harm at all in trying to make a good thing better. You can improve your craft as a songwriter relatively easily if you accept that your work isn't just the result of some mystical process over which you have no control: certainly you need some talent to begin with, but you can hone your songwriting skills just as you can work on your playing or mixing skills. Here are a handful of simple ideas to get you thinking about how you write, and, if you're stuck in a musical rut, perhaps to help get you out of it.

1. If you've already got a chord sequence you're happy with for part of a song but are struggling with where to go next, try reversing the chord order of the part you already have and using it for the new part. It often works, but if it doesn't, try reversing just a section of the chord sequence and repeating it. Also, try doubling the length of time for which each chord plays and see where that takes you. For a bit of variation, halving note values for a chorus creates the impression of an increase in tempo even if there isn't one.
2. If you always write with a keyboard, pick up a guitar for a change and see if that sets you off in a different direction. Get a capo and put it in a stupid place on the neck - really high up, for example - and see how different that makes chords sound. Even the most basic chords take on a new resonance and generate new harmonics which your ear can pick up, maybe giving you an idea for a melody. Conversely, if you always write with a guitar, make a point of sitting down at a keyboard with a piano sound and picking out interesting tunes that wouldn't normally occur to you. You could even consider writing the verse music at the keyboard and swapping to a guitar for the chorus.
3. Keep a list of prospective song titles on your wall. Whenever you hear a good word or an evocative phrase, add it to your list to use when you're trying to come up with new material.
4. Try a different time signature for a change. If you never use 3/4, for example, try and write a song in 3/4. To vary your rhythmic range, try strumming a guitar along to a selection of records, just trying to extract their rhythmic feel in a natural way.
5. Listen to as many of other peoples' songs as you can. Focus especially on those songwriters whose works are considered classics, and don't neglect the best of what's happening now. Always be thinking about what makes a classic song so good while you're listening to it. Try to pick up on arranging tricks and song structures, and remember them; even make a note of any you particularly like. This isn't stealing -- it's studying. Film makers have been doing it for years and make no secret of the fact.

6. Analyse your favourite songs and construct exercises around them -- writing a new set of lyrics for a favourite song, for example, or setting the existing lyrics to a new melody. Write a theme song for a film that doesn't have one, or an alternative theme for a film that does. Listen to a classic song in a genre you don't usually work in and try to write a song which copies its style (but not its content).

7. Always carry a notebook when you're out, so that you can jot down any song ideas that occur while you're going about your daily business.

8. If you usually write songs with a lot of chords in them, try restricting yourself to just three and see what you can squeeze out of a limited set of options. Conversely, if your songs never have more than three chords in them, try writing one with six.

9. Try 'free association' when you have something to write a song about but can't think how to start the lyrics: sit down with paper and pen (or a word processor) and write down every word and feeling that comes into your head about that subject: the process can give you a push in the right direction, and the resulting words are the ones that you'll need to work in if the song is to make a genuine impression on the listener.

10. Though some people find it hard to construct lyrics that rhyme, rhyming is important and is worth persevering with. As highly successful songwriter Janis Ian says in *The Songwriters Workshop*, "A rhyme scheme helps to hypnotise, to force its way into our listening selves." Others have observed that a good rhyme scheme gives the listener a pleasant feeling of resolution and security. Not every song has to rhyme, but so many of the good ones do that there must be something in it! Don't overdo it, though -- a bad or over-extended rhyme scheme can be irritating to the listener and can distract attention from what you're trying to say. If you have to make a line sound stupid in order for it to rhyme, throw it away and start again.

11. To help with the above, get a rhyming dictionary. This will save you from mentally running through the entire alphabet one letter at a time trying to find a rhyme for 'existential'. A thesaurus, which will give you a list of different words that mean the same thing, is also a good resource for a songwriter and could help you add more interest to your lyrics.

12. Add extra professionalism to a song with sophisticated background vocal ideas. Don't always slavishly imitate the lead vocal's phrasing and timing. Try extending the end of the odd line in a harmony, then pick up with the lead again when it feels natural and musical to do so. When your lead vocal is singing a long held note, look for something short and contrapuntal you can do with the harmony vocals -- with clever phrasing you can fit an entire line of a song as a harmony line under the last extended syllable of a lead melody. This is one area where arranging and songwriting are very closely linked.

13. Get some books to help you. There are several excellent ones around that will really make you think and tell you things you didn't know. Books I would certainly recommend include the following, which are all available from the SOS Bookshop (01954 789888): *88 Songwriting Wrongs and How to Right Them*, by Pat & Pete Luboff (order code B254, £11.95); *Beginning Songwriter's Answer Book*, by Paul

Zollo (B253, £10.95); The Songwriter's Workshop, edited by Harvey Rachlin and with an excellent chapter by Janis Ian and two cassettes (B260, £15.95); and if you really want an in-depth reading course on lyric-writing, leaning heavily on training your mind and knowing your own thinking patterns as a way to write more effective songs, check out The Songwriter's Idea Book, by Sheila Davis (B250, £12.99). If I was going to buy just one of the above, it would probably be 88 Songwriting Wrongs and How to Right Them, for its straightforward presentation and language. (All the above prices will need postage added to them, by the way -- check the SOS mail order pages on page 276 for details.)

14. Decide where you're going to keep your songwriting notes and keep them there. You don't want to blow a potential gem because you can't find the scrap of paper you wrote it down on. Use a notebook, which you always keep in the same place, or get a folder for loose notes. If you use a folder, keep a pen and some plain paper in it too, so you can always lay your hands on these as soon as inspiration strikes.

15. If you compose with a sequencer, always have it in record mode while you're doodling at your keyboard. Don't assume that you'll automatically remember anything good that comes up, because you won't. As it happens, the latest versions of many popular MIDI sequencing programs actually have a buffer that captures your ideas for you -- if you find that you've just played something that you wish you'd recorded, press a key combination (Option Record in Cubase) places the buffer's contents in a track (incidentally, the next update of Cubase will provide a menu item for this feature).

16. Every songwriter should know that a commercial song has to have a hook. But did you know that it should ideally have several hooks? As well as your main lyrical/musical hook, the high point of the song, try to work in secondary hooks to maintain listener interest -- short guitar, bass or piano riffs between lines of the song, a catchy extra chord change when nothing is happening with the lead vocal or to lead from the verse into the chorus, or perhaps a vocal ad-lib that will stay in the mind of the listener. If you think about these things while you're actually writing the song, when you come to demo it you'll find you've already got a head start for its arrangement.

17. Try to introduce plenty of dynamic and metric interest into your songs, so that they peak and subside rather than plodding along on one level. If a song's verse has lots of short words in a choppy rhythm, try using long, sustained notes for the chorus, for example. Try to make sure that the verse and chorus are not the same length -- vary short and long sections if you can, so that the song's structure does not become too predictable to the listener.

18. Make sure your songs are not all in the same key. It may sound obvious, but it's very easy to just stick with what's easiest for you to write or sing in, and if you don't keep an eye on this your songs could all end up sounding similar to each other.

19. Consider co-writing. Someone else's strengths can fill in for your weaknesses and they can bring unusual melodic or lyrical perspectives that would never have occurred to you.

20. If you've really run out of musical ideas, use technology. Those with computers can try an algorithmic composition or auto-accompaniment software package -- or even an arpeggiator! David Zicarelli's M, the king of interactive composition software, has just been re-released (for the Mac only) and can treat your musical input to predictable or totally weird transformations (www.cycling74.com/products/m.html). PG Systems' Band In A Box is available for various computer platforms, and lets you apply a wide variety of preset styles to whatever chord sequence you input, taking a lot of the strain out of song construction. Even Steinberg's sophisticated Cubase family of sequencing software has a so-called Style Tracks module, and similar facilities are found on many a sequencer-equipped synth.

Published in SOS January 1999

Article Source: <http://www.soundonsound.com/sos/jan99/articles/20tips.458.htm#!>