Berklee Online

Songwriting

Digital Handbook

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Welcome!

Whether you're looking to jumpstart your career, realize your artistic aspirations, or connect with a musical community, we're excited for you to study with us! Check out the lessons and features in this handbook, and learn how Berklee Online can help you pursue your passion and build your musical future.

All the best,

Sean Hagon
Dean of Pre-College, Online, and Professional Programs

Study Music Online Anywhere, Anytime

With Berklee Online, you can study the renowned curriculum of Berklee College of Music from anywhere in the world, and in your own rhythm. Since 2002, more than 75,000 students from 144 countries have enhanced their creative output and marketability with Berklee Online's award-winning master's degree programs, bachelor's degree majors, certificate programs, and 200+ music courses. Through Berklee Online, you'll receive unparalleled instruction from music industry professionals and the same faculty members who teach at Berklee's Boston campus.

Try Destination Songwriting

By Andrea Stolpe

From the Online Course
Commercial Songwriting Techniques

If I came to your house for a meal, I would undoubtedly compliment the chef on the delicious spread. Whoever cooked the meal would probably smile and generously offer me another helping. But, if I wanted to sincerely thank my host for the outstanding meal, I would be more specific. I would mention how crisp and fresh the buttery corn tasted as the tiny kernels burst between my teeth, and how the golden brown crust on the glistening turkey sealed in all the juices. That would not only get me another helping; it might also convince the chef that my flattery was sincere.

Now, my point is not to make you hungry; my point is to display how specific detail has the ability to intensify an experience. Detail allows your audience to step into your shoes, know what you know, and feel how you feel. No doubt, whoever cooked that meal would have appreciated my keen attention to their cooking. They would have believed I was telling the truth and not just making sure I'd be asked back another time.

Effective songs paint rich images for the listener. Imagine your songs as paintings. Are you the proud creator of stick figures scrawled on construction paper, or does your palette of texture, color, and light capture the desires and deepest wanderings of those gazing upon it?

Destination Writing

To make sure that the answer to that question on the previous page is the latter, we'll use a writing process called destination writing. In destination writing, you begin with one keyword—a place—as the momentum for your song content. You may be familiar with a similar writing technique, called object writing, in which you use your senses to expound creatively on a topic. For more information on object writing, I encourage you to refer to the book *Writing Better Lyrics*, by my Berklee Online colleague Pat Pattison.

The key to utilizing these songwriting tips for both destination writing and object writing is to use all of your senses as springboards for creativity. When senses are involved, the writing springs to life.

The difference between object writing and destination writing is your starting point: your keyword. For destination writing, we'll write from a place, a person, or a time, instead of an object. This way we not only practice the specific detailed writing needed to draw our audience in; we also discover phrases and topics that become the central ideas of our song lyrics. Destination writings need not be perfect. Do NOT edit your paragraphs.

Below are two paragraphs written about the same place, "**motel room**." The first lies flat, while the second actually intensifies the experience of being in that motel room, making you feel part of the story.

Destination Writing 1: Motel Room

I put my card in the slot and the light turned green. As I opened the door, cold air came out. With my luggage behind me, I walked into the old-smelling room. It had a small kitchen and drapes, and I could still smell the food from past guests. The hallway had the same smell. The air didn't move out there, either.

Destination Writing 2: Motel Room

I swiped my card and waited for the little light to turn green. The door stuck slightly and exhaled as I unsealed the vacuum and rolled my luggage behind me into the room. It smelled musty and old, even though I could still smell the nauseating scent of lemon cleaner that had been used to disinfect the bathroom. Nursing homes have that same smell, mixed with the tang of perm solution and instant coffee. I thought about how much I missed you, how this would all be bearable if you were here. But you're not. The sour smell made the hairs in my nose curl. I felt the cold rush of

air-conditioned air that had undoubtedly been cranked on high to dispel the mold in the carpet and the smell of grease that flecked the drapes from the residents who had cooked there before me. Those were the same smells I caught rolling down the hall, breathing in the stale air that hung in the hallways from lack of ventilation and the owner refusing to spend money on heating and cooling these transitional areas ...

By involving *all* the senses, the event becomes an experience. The effectiveness of that experience is not contained within the idea itself, but in the way that the details connect with the reader's emotions.

At this point you may be thinking, "These songwriting tips sound good, but I just can't write like that." Well, I'm going to let you in on a secret. Ready? You *can* write like that. The answer lies in your use of tiny powerhouse words called verbs and adjectives. You remember those from grade school, right? Very simply, verbs describe movement. Driving, hopping, thundering; those are all ways in which a person or an object could move. Adjectives describe the characteristics of a person or object. Wicker chair, tattered quilt, hopeful eyes; these words give personality to everyday nouns. Those powerhouse words mean the difference between a bored audience

and one that is hanging on your every word. Below are some examples of more colorful substitutions.

Walk: Wander, stroll, march, step, strut, shuffle
Put: Lay, set, store, place, plant, fix
Say: Utter, breathe, blurt, pronounce, stammer, stutter, mouth
Shine: Glint, glare, sparkle, radiate, shimmer, flash, blaze, beam
Realize: Discover, find, determine, unravel, interpret, unearth

PRACTICE:

Like anything dealing with music, the most effective way to improve your craft is to practice. Let's begin practicing by choosing a destination to focus on. It doesn't have to be that motel room with the stale air. It can be a bus station, a carnival, the back seat of your grandmother's car, or just about any place that you can think of, as long as you're able to lock in and lose yourself in the place you are remembering or imagining. Okay, once you have the destination in your mind, answer the questions on the following page in as much detail as possible.

- What are you standing or sitting on?
- What do you smell?
- What do you taste?
- What around you is moving?
- What do you hear?
- What clothes, jewelry, and hairdo are you wearing?
- What are you feeling?

Look over your descriptions from the exercise. Compare your verbs, nouns, and adjectives with those listed below. If you find duplicates, you may not be getting specific enough. Try replacing those generic placeholders with some alternates and compare the results. Also, locate any nouns standing alone without the help of descriptive adjectives and give them a friend.

Examples of Generics: good, bad, food, walking, sitting, sad, smell, taste, hear, big, small, pants, shoes, shirt, dress, earrings, necklace, suit and tie, smile

External and Internal Detail

Your highly compelling destination writing will consist of two types of detail: external and internal. External details are words and phrases that describe what is going on around your main character. Internal details are words and phrases that describe what is going on within the heart and mind of your character. These two kinds of detail have another characteristic as well. External details evoke a concrete image. Internal details do not.

If I told you that "I feel so bad now that he's gone," you might be mildly concerned. But if I told you how I felt by saying, "My eyes are red and swollen from salty tears sliding down my cheeks now that he's gone," you'd be more attentive. By using external detail describing taste, sight, and movement, I intensify the experience. You picture my tears, my swollen eyes, and the salty streaks on my cheek. Just telling you that I feel bad isn't enough. You've got to feel it yourself. Use the short lists on the following page as simple tools for differentiating the two:

External Detail

- actions and objects surrounding the main character
- concrete
- provokes an image

Internal Detail

- thoughts and emotions within the main character
- abstract
- does not provoke an image
- often metaphorical

Listen to “Dancing on My Own” by Robyn. Notice how the lyrics conjure images of scenes that are easy to visualize: we see things like a big black sky over the narrator’s town as well as “stilettos and broken bottles” on the dance floor.

In contrast, listen to ″Love on Top″ by Beyoncé. With details like “every time you touch me, I just melt away,” the narrator is “smiling out from ear to ear,” and providing internal details that leave no question as to what she’s feeling.

PRACTICE:

Are the following phrases internal or external? Cover up the column on the right, before determining how to classify the phrases on the left. Try asking yourself these questions:

- Does the phrase describe what's going on around the main character? If yes, then the detail is external.

- Does the phrase describe what's going on within the heart or mind of the main character? If yes, then the detail is internal.

Lyrical Phrase	Internal or External?
Consider me gone	Internal
Crisp, brittle oak leaves	External
I thought it was love	Internal
Coarsely woven tattered quilt	External
There's no one else like you	Internal

Now that you can tell external detail from internal detail, you are ready to organize those details into pre-song form. One of the exciting results of implementing these songwriting tips and laying your ideas out this way is the ease with which you can recombine them into masterfully written sections. Mastering your destination writing technique will allow you to be flexible about the words you choose, while still retaining your unique perspective as an artist.

To organize your ideas, you'll first write out something like that lengthy passage about the motel that we went over earlier. Then underline the external words and phrases. Underline only the essence of the phrase: mainly verbs, adjectives, and nouns.

Right: in the cold, dank air

Wrong: in the cold, dank air

Your phrases will seldom be longer than a few words. Watch for phrases that can be broken up into two smaller phrases. Omit conjunctions and prepositions like: at, in, by, into, on, until, with, as, so, only, even. Retain only the skeleton of the idea.

After you have underlined the external details, it's time to identify the internal details. Draw parentheses around any word or phrase that details thought and emotion. For internal detail, you'll often find it difficult to omit any part of the sentence or phrase. That is because it is a thought or feeling, and each word plays an integral part in the meaning. Do your best to include the smallest portion of the phrase, while still retaining the meaning of the phrase.

For example, take this passage using the word "library" and look at what I've underlined and what I've put in parentheses:

The long oak table, sturdy and lit with three small study lights seemed to absorb all sounds that might have come from the aisle of books and studying students. Swung my backpack around and let it sag against the leg of the chair furthest on the left, next to the drinking fountain. I felt my low rider jeans sneak further down as I twisted my body under the table looking for a place to plug in my laptop. (All eyes might have been looking at me). (I didn't care). The zipper of my bag caught in the frayed fibers of the seams, overstretched and worn from two years of thick history books and stacks of research.

TRY IT:

Set a timer for six minutes and destination-write using the topic "coffee shop." Once you're finished, underline the external and internal phrases from your piece and divide them into two lists. This becomes your "word library" for the song you are writing. And your lyrics will be richer because of this time that you spent doing this exercise. Happy writing!

Andrea Stolpe is the author of the Berklee Online course from which this lesson comes. Check out her songwriting advice on the following pages, or learn more about the other lessons in this course by clicking the link below.

Want to explore this course even further? Learn More

Instructor Spotlight:

Andrea Stolpe

Andrea Stolpe is a multi-platinum songwriter, performing artist, and educator. She has worked as a staff writer for EMI, Almo-Irving, and Universal Music Publishing. Her songs have been recorded by artists including Faith Hill, Jimmy Wayne, Julianne Hough, and others. Andrea serves as a guest clinician for music organizations around the world.

At Berklee Online, Andrea is the author of the course *Commercial Songwriting Techniques* and teaches many other songwriting courses.

What's one piece of songwriting advice you've held onto throughout your career?

"It's just a song." Too many times I've clung tightly to music I create, suffocating it. Letting go and recognizing it's just a song helps me see it for the impact it can actually make, rather than what I hope it should be.

What do you look for in a songwriting collaborator?

I personally look for someone with a personality I'd want to hang out with for several hours, and who can bring a fresh musical ear to the room.

Can a person be taught to be a good songwriter, or is it just innate?

I strongly believe songwriting is a skill that can be taught, like tennis, or cooking. How far that skill can be developed, however, depends on dedication to practice.

Which is more important, the singer or the song?

There are singers who can pull off mediocre songs and polish them like diamonds. But this, in my opinion, is entertainment, not art. A great song, however, shines despite who expresses it.

Instructor Insights

Peter Bell's Tips for Advertising Music

By Berklee Online

Peter Bell knew that he made it in the music biz when he heard people singing his jingle on the subway in Boston. It was a commercial spot that he co-wrote for a local bank, and featured the Dorchester neighborhood native boy band: New Kids on the

Block. The synth-soaked jingle advertised the bank's new ATM card (a novel product at the time), ending with the band's catchy and quotable exclamation, *What are you waiting for? Get your BayBank card!* Bell says that New Kids, then on their ascent to fame, were excited to contribute their vocals to a Boston establishment.

"One thing that happens as you practice this profession is that you build a contact list of other talented people that you can draw on," says Bell. "That's a wonderful part of the job. It's so much fun to work with talented people who almost uniformly are glad to come into the studio and work on these small form pieces of music—30 seconds, 60 seconds. They put their heart and soul into it."

Bell is a two-time Emmy-winner and author of the Berklee Online course, *Writing and Producing Advertising Music*. He has composed music spots for shows like *This Old House* and *New Yankee Workshop*, and has written countless jingles for brands like Nike, RC Cola, Converse, and the American Red Cross. In addition to the advertising side of the music industry, his guitar performance credits include Bonnie Raitt, Susan Tedeschi, and James Montgomery. He has also has produced tracks featuring Tracey Bonham, Livingston Taylor, Layla Hathaway, Patty Griffin, and others.

Bell says there are five major things you need to consider if you're looking to explore writing and producing music for advertising.

Create Music Outside of Your Comfort Zone

When you start writing music for advertising, you'll find that your clients will request music spots in a style or genre outside of your familiarity. This will help you become a more versatile musician and will also give you the opportunity to collaborate with other musicians with specializations.

"You're the music expert and your clients will assume that you can be all things to all people," says Bell. "So if they want Elizabethan music, or if they want world music, or if they want New Orleans funk music, they'll come to you and expect you to do the rest. So one of the skills you develop is to be able to analyze the music and produce in that style. Another important skill is to develop a contact list where you can involve other practitioners who are experts in particular styles."

Build Your Credibility

Bell says that you can start building your portfolio by doing a few initial projects pro bono. He recommends going to a local business that is already on the air and ask them if they would like a custom-made jingle. Just request that they cover your expenses like recording or hiring musicians. If they put it on the air, then you have some name recognition to help you secure more jobs.

"Then you have proof of concept and you can go to an ad agency and say, 'Have you heard the so-and-so car dealership ad that's running right now? Well, I did that.' And that is a door-opener," he says.

Prepare for Success

Just like the rest of the music industry, writing music for advertising is competitive and hard to break into. Bell says that while you can't control where your opportunities are going to come from, you can be ready when an opportunity does present itself.

"No matter what age or what level you're at, you can work on your own development and prepare for that moment," says Bell. "I always

analogize it to standing next to a brick wall, and there are no doors and all of a sudden you don't know why or when, but a door opens. You want to be ready to walk through if and when it does. That's empowering, I think."

Set up Your Studio with These Seven Essentials

Times have changed since Bell initially set up his recording studio, after taking out a loan for tens of thousands of dollars. Now we're in what he calls the golden age of production, where you can set up your own studio for a few thousand dollars with these seven items:

- Computer
- Software
- MIDI Controller
- Audio Interface
- Microphone
- Headphones
- Audio Monitors

"The means of production are now available to the proletariat," says Bell. "Just about anybody can scrape together a few thousand dollars

eventually in order to get up a small production studio and then you're ready to roll."

Know That You're Solving a Problem

When you're first starting out writing music for advertising, you want to present yourself as someone who is experienced and capable of getting the job done. It's easy to feel like a client is doing you a favor by hiring you, but it's important to remember that you're solving a problem for them.

"I would say to someone starting out, remember that you're not calling to ask for a favor; You're calling to partner with them," says Bell. "You're calling to offer them a valuable asset. So you don't want to get confused about what's going on here. You want to partner with them with a common goal."

Instructor Spotlight:

Rodney Alejandro

Rodney Alejandro is a musician, songwriter, producer, and an associate professor of songwriting at Berklee College of Music. He has contributed to four Grammy-nominated and two Latin Grammy-nominated projects in various genres, and to the 2004 Billboard Latin Pop Album of the Year, among others. He has sold more than 10 million units of his original songs.

At Berklee Online, Rodney authored the *Topline Songwriting* course for the Songwriting Master's Program.

Can a person be taught to be a good songwriter?

Yes, I do believe so. Having innate sensibilities to melody, harmony, and rhythm helps, but like most things in life we all have to work at, grind out, practice our craft in order to compete at a high level.

What's one piece of songwriting advice you've held onto throughout your career?

Done is better than perfect, and good enough is the enemy of great!

Which is more important, the singer or the song?

Without a song there is no singer.

Is there such a thing as a perfect song?

Yes, perfect to the one whose soul is touched by that song.

What does hearing a well-written song do for you?

Moves me in some way either to think and/or feel. Makes me stop and listen.

What does performing a well-written song do for you?

Performing a well-written song feels effortless and timeless all at once.

How to Lay the Foundation of Your Arrangement

By Bonnie Hayes and Sarah Brindell

From the Online Course
Arranging for Songwriters: Instrumentation and Production in Songwriting

Once you have a song developed to a stage where you'd like to flesh it out a bit more, and take it beyond simply being a voice memo on your phone, it's time to think about documenting it with a recording. The first step in this process is to lay down the basics, which usually include the main rhythm part and a reference vocal track. The main rhythm track is usually the instrumental part that the writer uses to create the tune, demonstrating the harmonic and rhythmic structure. If your tune was written on guitar, the main rhythm part/track may consist of a basic guitar strumming pattern that accompanies the vocal throughout the entire tune. If your tune was written on a keyboard, this track could be a piano or synth part that provides a simple harmonic rhythm under your voice.

In cases of hip-hop or electronic music, the main rhythm track might be a sample of an old record, looping a pattern of sound, or an instrumental loop—a recording of a bar or two of a line, loop, or riff. In these songs, often the vocal, flow, or "top line" is created in response to the beat. This track is replaceable—eventually, you may want to change or even omit your original rough idea. As other instruments support the rhythm, this first accompanying track may become too busy or may no longer be required to create the rhythm. Conversely, sometimes the main rhythm track becomes

the “backbone” of the entire tune—it can be a constant rhythmic foundation from which all other instrumental parts are built. That said, you will continually refer to the main rhythm track in the process of deciding how the rest of your arrangement will play out.

Choosing a Tempo

When deciding on tempo and key, sometimes the key of the initial rhythm and harmony parts isn’t the best choice for the vocal. The vocal might need a faster tempo, which could render the guitar part difficult to play. The key might need to be in F rather than G, which could also complicate the guitarist’s work, since they can’t use simple open chords anymore. Key and tempo decisions should be made in favor of the vocal, since the voice most fully expresses a song’s meaning, while the instruments’ purpose is to support the storytelling.

Most contemporary popular music has a repetitive rhythmic pattern that’s often based on the syncopated rhythms that evolved from Africa and the Caribbean. Feeling the underlying pulse when you sing or play is an important step in determining the rhythmic foundation, by first finding the appropriate number of beats per

minute (BPM), or tempo. Most recordings today are done to a click track set to a specific BPM in the DAW, which helps to keep players from speeding up or slowing down. Setting your BPM is a crucial initial step in building your basic tracks. If the pulse is written on a chart, it's represented by quarter notes (or dotted quarter notes for 6/8 meter), for example, quarter note=120 BPM. In the DAW, you will usually find a metronome where you can set your BPM and create a click track to play along with.

Choosing the correct tempo is an important part of creating the emotion you want for your song. Slower tempos provide more space between the syllables of your lyrics and an opportunity to emphasize their meaning. A slower tempo can make a song feel sadder or more thoughtful. If your tempo is set to a faster BPM, the result could be danceable, energetic, and exciting; or potentially a frantic and out-of-control feel. Consider your song's intent and audience: are your lyrics more of an introspective story, or are you writing a "let's get up and dance" type of song? In short, the tempo will determine the interplay between your lyric/melodic and harmonic conversation, and enhance the overall emotion of your song as well as how accurately the music of the song works with the meaning of the song, which is known as **prosody**.

Another consideration is in the vocal delivery. Can you easily sing the song? Is there too much space? Is there enough time to breathe between phrases? Can the singer make the consonant sounds they need to form the words so that they're intelligible to the listener?

If you decide on a slower or faster BPM because of the vocal, and that makes your rhythm part difficult to play, you may wish to adapt or simplify the original rhythm part that you used to accompany yourself in forming the song.

When preparing to record your basics, it's a good idea to practice along with a metronome or to a simple drum machine groove, and

note the best BPM for your songs. It's also a good idea to map out what meter your song is in. Is it in simple meter such as 4/4, or a compound meter such as 5/4, or does it include time signature changes that alternate between simple and compound meter?

Many songwriters have difficulty playing to a metronome, especially at slower tempos where there's a longer wait between beats and it's harder to feel the groove. This can be solved in various ways. Try using a shaker, hi-hat (unaccented is best) or tambourine loop, which is more likely to articulate a smaller beat subdivision. If you're experienced at making beats, you can program a simple drum beat and use that. Other options are to use a loop that you like, and in Logic, you can use the drummer app, which will make up a beat of varying complexity (which you can control to some extent).

The idea here is to try not to use something that'll cause you to change your basic internal "feel" for the song. If the loop has, say, a swing subdivision while your original idea was straight eighth notes, you may end up with a rhythmic feel that wasn't what you intended. The simpler this basic reference rhythm track is, the better it will be in terms of influence on you as you try to record your main tracks.

One additional point in regards to the basic rhythm: songwriters who tend to focus on groove in their writing will often build from the bottom, using a drum loop or other rhythm bed during the writing process and building the demo as they write. In this case, the characteristics of the loop or element will have already had its effect on the groove of the song, and should probably be included in this initial recording.

Checking the Key

You probably wrote your song in a key that's comfortable for you to play in. Pianists usually like C, A minor, F, and G. Guitarists like G, E, A, and D because most prefer to play using open chords. You may not know enough chords to play in B Flat or F Sharp, or be able to play barre chords easily. If you use a capo, you may not even know what key you're playing in!

Sometimes, writing in the most comfortable key to play means that the voice is not necessarily in the best range for expressing the emotion of the song. It's a good idea to know what you or your singer's most comfortable notes are, and to experiment with playing the song in different keys until you find the best one.

Remember, it's hard to change the key after you have recorded the basic track audio parts.

In order to find the best key, first, you'll want to find your vocal "sweet spot." If you wrote your song in C, your high note in full voice may be around A above middle C for women, or around D above middle C for men. You probably can feel where your best note is—where your voice feels the fullest and strongest.

Writing Main Rhythm Parts

When we begin writing a song, often we start with an instrumental rhythm part. This sets the rhythmic stage for the star performer—the vocal! This can be as simple as playing basic quarter notes and eighth notes or strumming the harmonic changes (think "Knockin' on Heaven's Door"), or as complex as a two-handed rhythmic interplay that includes a bass part and chords (think any fleshed-out song you know). It might also be a bass line, a single-note guitar riff, a sample or loop, or a drum beat. Sometimes, rhythm parts also function as an instrumental hook, as in "Day Tripper" by the Beatles, or riff-oriented tunes like "Seven Nation Army" by the White Stripes.

Main rhythm parts are not always “riffs,” per se, and these varied rhythmic foundations are developed in many ways. You can write on piano, bass, or guitar. You can write a loop by stepping in the notes. You can write from melody and sketch in the minimum harmony needed to get the song across. You can write or refine the main rhythm part during or even after creating your main tracks, or remove it altogether. If you’re creating tracks to release as an artist, the idiosyncrasies of your playing style should be incorporated into and even highlighted in your main rhythm parts, to make them unique and distinctive. But always remember that the primary function is to give listeners what they need to understand the mood, rhythmic framework, and tonal bed for them to orient themselves.

The best rhythm parts are clear, simple, and they create a conversation with the vocal. An over-complicated rhythm part is not only difficult to execute correctly, it’s also often not memorable, and the vocal will have to fight for the foreground. Rhythm parts that keep changing rhythmically without creating a repeated pattern can also distract from the vocal.

Of course, rhythm parts can change from section to section in songs, and in fact, this is often used to create sectional contrast.

The part for each song section should be consistent and clear, and played precisely. Generally, the most effective rhythm parts for most popular music will:

- Be two measures at most before the rhythm repeats
- Rhythmically fit together with the vocal
- Not distract from the vocal
- Harmonically support the vocal melody notes
- Be easy to play while singing

Planning the Journey

Once you get the tempo, key, and rhythm parts conceptualized for your song, the last element to consider is the order of sections, or what we refer to as the horizontal arrangement. How long should your intro be? Should you have a break between sections? Is there a bridge? And if so, where's the best place for it to happen? How long is your song with all the parts you want in it?

Luckily, when we're working in the DAW, we can edit horizontal arrangements of songs. Figuring this out in advance is less of an issue when constructing arrangements in a DAW, as you do not necessarily need to play all the parts in the right order perfectly to create a recording of your song. It is, however, a good idea to be able to play the song down from beginning to end, if only for live performances or situations in which you're asked to perform the song live for session musicians, vocalists, etc. In general, effective arrangements (for most popular song styles) will do the following:

- Short intro (at most 10 seconds), or right into the song
- Intro that grabs attention and is memorable and unusual
- No instrumental breaks between verse and prechorus, or between the prechorus and chorus
- "Don't bore us, get to the chorus": the chorus should take place at some point between 50 seconds and 1:10
- After second "cycle" (verse-chorus), something else needs to happen: bridge, instrumental, breakdown, alternate third verse
- Entire song 4:15 or under

While most rules are made to be broken, you may want to take into account what we could call "popular wisdom" of arranging. While they're not hard and fast rules—and there's at least one huge hit that breaks each of these conventions—these tips will generally help your song have the utmost effect on the listener, and as a songwriter, that's exactly what you want.

Bonnie Hayes and **Sarah Brindell** are the authors of the Berklee Online course from which this lesson comes. Check out Sarah's feature (next page), and Bonnie's interview (page 57), or click the link below to learn more about this course.

Want to explore this course even further? **Learn More**

Instructor Spotlight:

Sarah Brindell

Sarah Brindell is a songwriter, arranger, producer, musician, and associate professor at Berklee College of Music. She has shared the stage and recorded with many renowned artists including Norah Jones, Carole King, and Raul Midon. Her original songs can be heard on many television shows including MTV's *Made*.

At Berklee Online, Sarah co-authored *Arranging for Songwriters: Instrumentation and Production in Songwriting*, and teaches *Songwriting: Melody* and *Songwriting: Harmony*.

What advice have you held onto throughout your career?

If you think there's a better way to say something, there is. Over time, if you keep returning to the song, you'll eventually find the right words. Also, it's about what the song needs, which might be different from what your ego needs in any given moment of writing. Treat the song as if it has a life all its own, separate it from yourself, and ask the song what it needs. Make choices for the song's sake.

What song do you hold as the gold standard of songwriting?

So many answers here, but I'll go with the first one that popped into my head, which is "Redemption Song" by Bob Marley. His lyric rhythm and melody are both lessons within themselves. The song makes everyone feel something, and it spurs social change and unity.

What was the first song that you ever realized was expert songwriting at work?

"Overjoyed" by Stevie Wonder.

What do you look for in a songwriting collaborator?

I look for "yes" people—those who are naturally excited by any ideas and ready to try them.

Student Stories

Writing Songs with Class … Literally!

By Talia Smith

In non-musical classroom settings, some students shudder at the thought of group projects, especially those who always end up tasked with most of the work. This is not the case in Neil Diercks' *Collaborative Songwriting* course at Berklee Online, where group

projects are the norm, and have been the catalyst for numerous successful music partnerships. This includes a group comprised of students Danielle Collavino, Jamie Dickinson, and Billy Henry, who took Diercks' course last year, and have decided to keep their remote songwriting dynamic going. They recently released their first EP under the name Future Perfect Sound.

"We're different people from different parts of the world and we really just enjoy making music together," says Danielle. "What's really great is the fact that everyone has so many different skills. There's such a versatility in the team that someone could come up with an idea, someone will come up with a melody, someone a groove, someone lyrics, and it changes as we write a song."

Danielle, who lives in London, has been a musician for two decades with piano as her primary instrument. A performing artist for most of his life, Jamie is an Interdisciplinary Studies major at Berklee Online, living in Northeast England. Billy, from Austin, Texas, is a composer, professor, NPR radio host, and before the shutdowns of 2020, he was a touring musician with the Chicks and Shakira.

Billy had just performed on *The Ellen Show* with the Chicks, and as

he was about to board a plane to New York for *The Colbert Show*, he received a call from his road manager telling him to go home. His life as a touring musician shuddered to a halt, which prompted him to enroll in Diercks' class to stay accountable for his songwriting.

"I'm terrible without deadlines," he says. "If I have a deadline, great. It's like, 'Okay. Write a song this week. Excellent.'"

We're different people from different parts of the world and we really just enjoy making music together.

- Danielle Collavino

The group of three were familiar with each other after previously having Diercks as their instructor for the *Songwriting: Writing Hit Songs* course, but first collaborated as a trio about halfway through the *Collaborative Songwriting* course when students are allowed to pick their own groups.

"With Billy, Danielle, and Jamie, they got to know each other over that time and they really hit it off," says Diercks. "You see the value somebody else has because you see, 'Wow, that person brings something to the table. They have skills and a sensibility for music that I don't.' When we combine that, you always end up creating something you would never create on your own."

When the course ended, Jamie was able to take the five-hour drive from Northeast England to London to record with Danielle. Billy joined in on Zoom. The session resulted in three songs that appear on the EP.

One of the songs is titled "Everybody's Going Nowhere," which you might assume is speaking to a 2020 experience in lockdown, but is actually written for the HBO series *Euphoria*, which they intend to send to the show. In the last few weeks in the course, Diercks teaches his students how to approach a television show, including how to find the right contacts and how to phrase your message.

"In the last few lessons, students start assembling a list of people working in the industry, from artists to writers to producers to record label people," says Diercks. "I ask them, 'Who's out there

in the industry that you feel would be useful to know and who could help you with your career?' So they assemble that list and I tell them how they contact somebody in a unique way so that they separate themselves. Rather than asking for favors, they're asking for advice. I've seen just contact after contact made this way."

While "Everybody's Going Nowhere" was not written with the pandemic in mind, the trio can agree that their collaborations have extended some of the needed structure from the class into their lives, which is welcome considering all three of them were sheltering in place during the time of this interview.

"Being able to write with Billy and Danielle on regular occasions, and work with lots of other people around the world, is allowing me to just cope and makes it feel like there's something going on, because obviously in lockdown it doesn't feel like that a lot of the time," says Jamie. "That's the main thing, being able to talk and just share my passion with other people who are just as passionate about it."

Instructor Spotlight:

Neil Diercks

Neil Diercks is a songwriter, song coach, musician, and an award-winning educator. He served for many years in various capacities at Warner/Chappell Music, Inc., in Nashville, eventually becoming Manager of A&R Activities. He worked with songwriters who penned hits for Tim McGraw, Ricky Martin, Christina Aguilera, and more.

At Berklee Online, Neil authored the *Collaborative Songwriting* course and instructs *Songwriting: Harmony* and *Songwriting: Writing Hit Songs*.

What's one piece of songwriting advice you've held onto throughout your career?

If you want to write great songs, you've gotta start noticing what's making great songs great . . . then write a whole lotta songs so that your writing starts becoming that great.

What does hearing a well-written song do for you?

Hearing a great song makes me feel connected to, understood by, and more understanding of, the other souls on this planet.

What was the title of the first song you ever wrote?

It was called "Chasing Spirits," and it was about realizing you'd been caught up pursuing "shiny things."

What do you look for in a songwriting collaborator?

Somebody who I enjoy being in the room with; who brings out the best in the other writers in the room; who is passionate about collaboration and creating great songs with others; who has complementary and different skills, tastes, and perspectives.

Which is more important, the singer or the song?

Which part of my body would I rather have removed, my brain or my heart?

Making Your Melody Work

By Jimmy Kachulis

From the Online Course
Songwriting: Melody

Melody is one of the most important and immediate aspects of a song. It's the element that the audience sings along with. It's the thing that most intimately brings out the emotion of the lyric story. The melody also exists alongside and on top of the harmony. But that relationship can differ depending on the effect you are trying to achieve with your song.

When we're setting our lyrics together with the melody, there are three considerations we need to make:

1. What is the length of each note?
2. What is the length of the phrases?
3. What is the space between the phrases?

These may seem like trivial questions, but the note length, phrase length, and phrase space will determine how your lyrics feel to the listener. Let's start with the notes. Listen to Bob Marley's "No Woman, No Cry." You'll find that the verses—which are conversational in tone, and build the story of the track—generally

have shorter notes. The chorus, where the title of the track is repeated, consists of longer notes. This is no accident. When lyrics are set to longer notes, they are emphasized and are automatically more dramatic.

The melodic phrases you use for your lyric sections can be of a standard or surprising length. Standard two- and four-bar phrases will give a song a steady feel. Surprising phrases—any other bar length—will keep things fresh and draw the listeners' attention. Good songs will have a mixture of both. And those phrases will gain additional power from the spaces in between them. Verses will benefit from having lyrics be more closely packed together with little room to breathe. Choruses, on the other hand, benefit from being drawn out and require more space between the lyrics as a result. Once you have the basic lyrical ideas in place for your melody, try developing them with some repetition or present new ideas as a contrast.

While setting the lyrics to your melody is important, it is the interaction between melody and harmony that will define your song. Let's say we already have a harmony in place, or we have a way in mind that we want our melody to work so we're not thinking

of melodic ideas with no context. So let's develop a pitch. When it comes to the pitch of a melody, there are three approaches:

1. **Melody On Chords**—Where the melody stays on a chord
2. **Melody Over Chords**—Where the melody is in the key, but is only loosely related to the chords
3. **Melody Against a Bass Line** (Counterpoint)—Where there are two melodies and the vocal melody moves against a bass melody

No matter what approach you take, you're going to start on one of the tones in the chord. Starting from the tones will allow you to build a compelling melody consisting of even the simplest materials and development. The example that comes to mind is Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire," a song whose melody would resemble a straight line if mapped out. If you want to decorate a melodic line like this (and you might, considering how flat it could sound), you can zig-zag between the neighboring notes that reside right above and below your original tone. However many chord tones you try to base your melody on, know that each will have an effect, creating a

distinct melodic shape. When we think of melodies, several terms will help us imagine what the notes look (and sound) like.

- **Stationary**—A straight line
- **Zig-zag**—Decorates a straight line with a neighbor
- **Ascending**—Starts low and goes up
- **Descending**—Starts high and goes down
- **Arch**—Starts low, goes up and then down
- **Inverted Arch**—Starts high, goes down and then back up

But say you really want to spice things up with your melody. Counterpoint between a bass line melody moving against the vocal melody might do the trick. But not all bass lines are built equal. The easiest way to determine if the bass melody would make for good counterpoint is if it could be sung. Bass lines that move all over the staff will be useless unless you're going to be scat singing. There are four kinds of standard counterpoint: **parallel**, **similar**, **oblique**, and **contrary**. If a bass line has the same melodic shape as the vocal line, then it is a form of parallel counterpoint. Similar counterpoint features a bass line and vocal melody that move in essentially the

same direction, though not as closely as parallel. Now here's where things get interesting; oblique counterpoint will have either the bass or vocal line revolve around a limited number of notes. The bass line might stay on one note or move around in an ostinato. The vocal line will stay in basically the same place. If you've heard the opening verse of "Stairway to Heaven" then you've heard oblique counterpoint. Finally, contrary counterpoint, as its name implies, has the bass and vocal lines moving in opposite directions.

These are just some of the basics of melodic development, but the simplest methods of developing melody are tools you'll be using for the rest of your songwriting career.

Jimmy Kachulis is the author of the Berklee Online course from which this lesson comes. See what song first got him into songwriting on the following pages, or learn more about the other lessons in this course by clicking the link below.

Want to explore this course even further? Learn More

Instructor Spotlight:

Jimmy Kachulis

Jimmy Kachulis is a professor of songwriting and lyric writing at Berklee. An accomplished composer, arranger, and conductor, he has worked with artists such as George Coleman, Jon Hendricks, John Lewis, and Martha Reeves, and his compositions have been featured on scores from *The Sopranos* to *Touched By An Angel*.

At Berklee Online, Jimmy authored the courses *Songwriting: Harmony*, *Songwriting: Melody*, and *Songwriting: Writing Hit Songs*.

What does performing a well-written song do for you?

It shows me that an effective song can be done by a number of artists, in a variety of styles—and it still comes across. Often a different performance/production will reveal an aspect of the song I never heard before.

What song first alerted you to genius songwriting skills?

"The Tracks of My Tears" by Smokey Robinson.

What do you look for in a songwriting collaborator?

Someone who has complementary skills, is fun to hang with, open to ideas, and remains positive in assessing my ideas, even when they want to change them.

Can a person be taught to be a good songwriter?

I've taught thousands of songwriters and the one constant I can attest to is: when we practice we get better—write, write, write!

Which is more important, the singer or the song?

Both are important for a great recording/performance. When these three are present: a great song, a great performance, a great arrangement/production, the magic happens.

Instructor Interview

‘Make Sure Your Main Hook is Crucial’

By Pat Healy

Bonnie Hayes is the Program Director for Berklee Online’s Songwriting Master’s program. In this interview, excerpted from the *Music is My Life* podcast, she discusses writing songs for Cher and for Bonnie Raitt’s Grammy-winning album *Nick of Time*, as well

as providing an honest look at what it was like to become an A-list songwriter. She also talks about touring with Belinda Carlisle, and how that led to going on a luxurious tour with Billy Idol.

What was your first real experience writing a song for a big name artist?

I had written a song called, "Some Guys Will Do Anything for Love." It was on hold for Cher for three years. When I got a deal with Chrysalis, they wanted me to cut that song and I took it back. We had cut the whole song. They flew me down to LA. I did guide vocals, all the background vocals, I played keyboard on it. Then when I took the song back, they dragged my name through the mud.

How badly?

I mean, it was a battle. [A&R executive] John Kalodner called and screamed obscenities at me. It was insane because it was going to be the first single, and guess what record it was: "If I Could Turn Back Time." It was the back side, the B-side. But it was going to be the first single off that [*Heart of Stone*] record.

So that's like '87 or '88?

Yes, '87. It was written in '85 or whatever. They had it on hold, and

I took it back to put it on my record, so I'd have a hit record, which did not happen. So Cher did end up releasing the song on the B-side of "If I Could Turn Back Time," [in 1989] and that was the first cut that I had, and I made like $100 grand.

Okay. So they didn't withhold it forever?

No, but they couldn't release it until after. So my record came out and died, and then they didn't want to have it be her main single because it had already been released. So they put it as the B-side, and it still made me so much money, I was like, "Dang, this works. I'm going to do this."

So you're about 30 at this point?

Yeah, basically. It's the decade of the different career paths. So at 30, I'd had three records that didn't do it in the market. My boyfriend Paul was totally addicted to meth and my band fell apart. After the record tanked I realized that we just needed to do something else. He was a freaking full-on mess. I couldn't continue the band without him. I couldn't replace him. It just felt like beating a dead horse. So I wasn't really playing out, but I was writing songs. I was going to make another record, and I wrote "Have a Heart" and "Love Letter."

This is very emotional stuff that's happening. Were you putting those emotions into these songs?

"Have a Heart" was my goodbye song to Paul. "Love Letter" was my hello song to my soon-to-be husband. So "Have a Heart" was basically a real blend, but [the line] "hey, shut up, don't lie to me" was what you say to any addict who's coming in with a mouth full of bologna every time you see them. How everything's going to

> **You want to write something that people are going to feel like is the song that was missing from their life.**
>
> - Bonnie Hayes

be different, and how they're not using, and you're just looking at them thinking, "you're just the biggest liar I ever saw." ... So I was channeling deep stuff. My band, my vision, and my future was gone, and my vision of love was gone. So then I took the Belinda Carlisle tours. I was in the Belinda Carlisle band. We were in a bar

somewhere in Ecuador or something, and we'd been up all night. We were watching the Grammys. I saw Bonnie Raitt win album of the year for *Nick of Time*. I didn't really know what the Grammys meant. When I got home off the tour, my voicemail was full from the first day after the Grammys. Like hundreds of phone calls. Basically, now I was an A-list writer!

So I edited your course, *Arranging for Songwriters: Instrumentation and Production in Songwriting*, and you included your demo of "Have a Heart." I was shocked to hear how similar it is to Bonnie Raitt's version.

Yeah, when she released that record it was getting played on the radio and friends were calling me, going, "Hey, I heard you on the radio," and I was like, "That's not me." Because she copped my vocal delivery style.

Even the stunted start, which I always thought sounded like an accident!

Well, I did that. It's on there, that little synth. It's on there to give you the first note of the vocal, which was funny because I left it on the demo because, who cares? But she left it on because she liked it. So it's cute. But she did such a great job on that. I mean, my demos

are very similar. She did speed them both up by about 10 BPMs, which is very smart.

So how did you end up in Billy Idol's band?

So I moved to LA with my husband and he was working on films and I was just banging around LA, writing in sessions and hating it. "Can you write a song like 'Have a Heart?'" It's like this weird thing where I was trying to replicate my success by copying myself. I don't know, it was awful. I hated that co-writing scene in LA. I got a call to audition for that gig and Billy hired me and took me on the road.

Had your paths crossed before that?

No.

That's funny, because you had mentioned earlier how you got to see the Sex Pistols play live, and he was in the original punk scene.

Yeah. Exactly. No, we had never met. What they do in LA for the touring bands is they'll just call and say, "Hey, we need a keyboard player." Because I'd been on the Belinda tour, I was on the shortlist of girl keyboard players.

Which tour was it?

It was "Cradle of Love," which was a big hit. So we were on the road for a long time and it was actually really fun. I was 39 at that point. It was like my last rock 'n' roll hurrah. We had a workout guy. We had a chef. We had a wardrobe person. Basically, it was super. We stayed at the Ritz, the Four Seasons. I was making, like $15,000 a month.

Was that the biggest tour you'd been on?

Yeah. By far. Huge audiences. We played Rock in Rio. There were like 90,000 people there. I mean, big, big, big stages.

Having been in so many facets of the music business, and coming back to songwriting, what's one piece of writing advice that you've held onto throughout your career?

Write your chorus first. Start from the title, and then write a great melody for it. Make sure your main hook is crucial—you want to write something that people are going to feel like is the song that was missing from their life.

What does hearing a well-written song do for you?

Usually I want to take it apart, figure out what makes it work, and basically eat it, turn it into part of my body, absorb it into my blood.

World-Class Courses

With Berklee Online, you have more than 200 courses to choose from, including dozens of songwriting courses. Here's a look at some selected songwriting offerings:

- **Collaborative Songwriting**
- **Songwriting: Harmony**
- **Songwriting: Melody**
- **Lyric Writing: Writing from the Title**
- **Commercial Songwriting Techniques**
- **Songwriting: Writing Hit Songs**

Instructor Spotlight:

Erin Barra

Erin Barra is a songwriter, educator, producer, multi-instrumentalist, and music technology consultant. She is a leading product specialist for Ableton and works with artists and bands to integrate digital technologies into their writing, production, and stage setups. Erin has worked with Grammy winners like John Oates, George Massenburg, Kathy Mattea, and Elliot Scheiner.

At Berklee Online, Erin has authored and instructs numerous courses about songwriting and production.

Can a person be taught to be a good songwriter, or is it just innate?

I think you can't teach people to be inspired, but you can most definitely teach them tools and techniques to use when they are.

Which is more important, the singer or the song?

Either can overpower the other.

Is there such a thing as a perfect song?

There are songs for our head, songs for our heart, and songs for our feet—and there are a multitude of perfect songs for all those purposes.

What song do you hold as the gold standard of songwriting and why?

I don't believe there is such a thing.

What does hearing a well-written song do for you?

When I hear a song that's well-written I want to immediately hear it again and live inside of that musical moment. I once heard someone call it "chasing the chills" and that's what it's like for me.

The Art of Setting Your Words to Music

By Pat Pattison

From the Online Course
Lyric Writing: Writing Lyrics to Music

When you hear someone speaking a language that you don't understand, they seem to talk very fast. All you hear is an uninterrupted stream of syllables, and you have no way to distinguish where words start or end. As far as you can hear, each syllable might be a separate word, or maybe there are words made up of several syllables. If you don't know the language, you won't be able to tell.

The purpose of language is to communicate ideas, information, promises, requests, and much much more, as efficiently as possible. To that end, we talk pretty fast, or at least, we don't pause between the words in our sentences. We speak legato—smoothly without stopping. That's why language comes in a steady stream and seems to go by so fast when we don't understand it.

Languages all have strategies to allow speakers to be efficient (speak legato) and yet know which syllables stand alone and which ones clump together to form a single word. In English, we use pitches to create melodic shapes. Pitches give English speakers a second way (besides sound) to identify multi-syllable words.

For example, the word “release” has two syllables. When we learn the word, we learn not only the sounds of the syllables, we also learn a little melody. In effect, we learn to sing it.

The second syllable is higher in pitch. That way, we can say something like, “The release mechanism is opposite the receiver” without pausing, and everyone will understand. It doesn’t even sound like we’re talking fast, since the melodies identify the multi-syllable words. We only “hear” four ideas: release, mechanism, opposite, receiver.

Listeners learn to hear the shape of the language—to pay attention to pitches as well as sounds. That way, when a word has several syllables, we can identify it as one word even though it is embedded in a steady stream of syllables.

Every word with two or more syllables has a melodic shape: one or more syllables have higher pitches than the others. We call them stressed syllables. Let’s break this down a bit further. See the brief exercise on the following page.

Look at these six multisyllabic words:

- unkind
- butcher
- unconscious
- opposite
- consequences
- interrupted

Say each one a few times normally, then pay attention to the pitches. The first two are easy:

un**kínd bút**cher

Un**cón**scious has three syllables; only one of them stressed. **Óp**po**síte** also has three syllables, but two are stressed, the first being stronger than the last. When there are two or more stressed syllables in a word, one is highest in pitch. It is called the **primary stress**. In the word **óp**po**síte**, the primary stress is the first syllable.

Cónse**quén**ces has four syllables, two of them stressed. The first (cón) is higher in pitch than all the rest. It is the primary stress. Say the word a few times, and listen to its shape. **Ín**ter**rúp**ted has four syllables, two of them stressed. Which one is the primary stress?

Stressed syllables in any multi-syllable word are pretty easy to find because we agree on them. At least the primary stress is listed in our book of agreements—the dictionary.

So how about one-syllable words, the staple of English and especially of lyrics? Don't bother looking in the dictionary; it doesn't mark stresses on one-syllable words.

One-syllable words are stressed when they have an important job to do, like delivering a message. Nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs all get sweaty because they work hard, like these:

- track
- list
- risk
- luck
- slick
- hard
- stem
- strip

Because their function is to carry meaning (a cognitive function), they will always be stressed. We learn as children to raise the pitch of our voices on these words to show that they are important.

Other one-syllable words have a different function—a grammatical function. Think of them as sign carriers. Their job is to show how the important words relate to each other. Look at this phrase:

"The days of wine and roses."

It is easy to pick out the stressed syllables, but look at the others. "The" is an article. Its job is to tell us there is a noun coming. "Of" is a preposition showing that the days contain the wine and roses. "And" is a conjunction showing us that wine belongs with roses; they are in the same boat. They are both possessed by the days. These sign carriers are humble. They stay out of the limelight, content with their lower pitches, and help organize things. Without them, sentences would be in chaos. Here is a list of some of these workers. In most cases, they will be unstressed.

- **prepositions** (e.g., of, to, after, over)
- **articles** (e.g., a, an, the)
- **conjunctions** (e.g., and, or, but)

continued on next page

- **auxiliary verbs indicating tense** (e.g., have run, had run)
- **auxiliary verbs indicating mood** (e.g., might run, may run)
- **personal pronouns** (e.g., I, him, her, their)
- **relative pronouns** (e.g., which, who, when)

Of course, any of these can be stressed when a contrast is involved.

"I asked you to throw the ball **tó** me, not **át** me."

"I asked you to throw the ball to **mé**, not to **hér**."

"I asked **yóu** to throw the ball, not **hím**."

You'll be able to tell. Just use your ears and your common sense.

The same common sense goes for putting your lyrics into songs. You want to use melodies that allow you to pronounce these words the way that they were intended to be pronounced.

Yes, popular songs are rife with mis-set lyrics, and it's tempting to think it's all right, just a "style." You might think it's a way of being creative, unique, or cool. It isn't. With remarkably few exceptions,

lyrics that are mis-set lose impact and deliver less than they would have, had they been set properly.

When music and lyrics work together, they can affect an audience profoundly. The lyrics become more expressive and the melody means more than it could without words. Mismatching lyrics and melody can do the opposite. This is our credo: **PRESERVE THE NATURAL SHAPE OF THE LANGUAGE**. If you are writing words to a preexisting melody, you must find words whose natural shape IS that melody's shape. If you write words first, you must find a melody whose natural shape IS the lyric's natural shape. Always keep this in mind when you first try singing your words!

Pat Pattison is the author of the Berklee Online course from which this lesson comes. Turn the page to see what song he considers to be the gold standard, or learn more about the other lessons in this course by clicking the link below.

Want to explore this course even further? Learn More

Instructor Spotlight:

Pat Pattison

Pat Pattison is an author, clinician, and professor of lyric writing and poetry at Berklee College of Music. His students have composed for major artists and written number one songs. At Berklee, he developed the curriculum for the only songwriting major in the country. The books that he authored on songwriting are recognized as definitive in their genre.

At Berklee Online, Pat authored the several courses for the undergraduate and graduate songwriting degree programs.

Can a person be taught to be a good songwriter, or is it just innate?

Anyone can be taught to be a better songwriter. How good you get depends on your work ethic and your willingness to gather tools. We, of course, can't give you talent, but however much you have to work with, we can help you work with it more effectively.

What's one piece of songwriting advice you've held onto throughout your career?

Don't be afraid to write crap. It's the best fertilizer. The more crap you write, the more likely you'll grow something amazing.

What song do you hold as the gold standard of songwriting and why?

"Still Crazy After All These Years" comes pretty close. Terrific melodic and harmonic journey, and the lyric development from verse to verse keeps raising the bar for each refrain. The refrain contains no verb or pronouns, so it accepts the changing tenses and pronouns the verses supply. The bridge truncates the final line, creating an unsettling feeling that supports the idea. Great prosody.

Celebrity Interview

10 Songwriting Tips from Josh Ritter

Berklee Online frequently hosts live interviews with respected professionals in the music industry. The following songwriting suggestions come from a conversation with acclaimed singer/songwriter Josh Ritter as part of the *Berklee Online Live: Songwriting* series.

1. There are times when you shouldn't work on a song.

"I don't know that any song has ever come to me exactly the same way. When it's really going good, I feel like it's this kind of fine gray sand that's pouring down on my head. It's cooling, it's calming, and it's like I'm standing under the sand of an hourglass. As long as that feeling is there, I'm writing. And when it's not there, I'm done. There's no benefit in sitting there when it's not happening. And I only know that from such long experience, and hours and hours of wasted creative time. There are times when I should just be going outside, and doing something else."

2. Work on songs a little at a time.

"Rather than being the type of person who gets up in the morning and writes a song, I get up in the morning and I do the things I need to do in my day, and when a phrase or a melody jumps in my head, I'll sit down and I'll write it down. But I won't try to finish it unless it's all there. I think there's a few songs that I remember writing all at once, but I think in general, I write best when something accrues, and I start the snowball rolling down a hill. After a while it picks up

its own lines, and its own way of performance, but if I sit down and put my nose to the grindstone every day, it doesn't seem to work out as well for me."

3. When a line jumps into your head, try it in a song.

"There are some lines that are the seed, or the pearl of the song, and they're important because they're the ones that jump into your head. 'All the other girls here are stars, you're the Northern Lights,' that's like a line that, man, I wish I'd thought to use that on a girl, but it never occurred to me. So when it jumps in your head, there's a reason that it's there."

4. The more complicated you make a song, the less powerful it is.

"I find that oftentimes, the things that make a song less powerful is that it's more complicated. That's why some of these old country songs are classics, because they start off with a thesis statement. 'I Saw the Light,' is a Hank Williams song, and it's a super simple thesis: he saw the light, he's had this conversion, he was this bad guy but now he's good, and changing his ways. It doesn't need to get complicated, it's just that one line, and you take this one line

that you've been delivered somehow—that's made its way into your mind—and you can unwrap it like an envelope. You just open it up, and the whole song is inside that line."

5. If you can't fit something into a song, leave it alone … for now.

"I picture a song as being—if this makes sense—you're in a dark landscape, and you have a fire, and you need to go somewhere else, and you have to carry that fire somewhere else. You have to carry a burning branch to the next place you're going to start your fire, so with each song you're carrying a little bit of that original fire with you. The songs that don't have it, the songs where the fire goes out, they're just not right, so there's no sense in keeping them. That being said, there are some ideas which, despite every try to cram them into something, they'll never fit. And those are the ones that are waiting around to become the really good stuff. … Maybe it will be in 20 years though."

6. You are the most important person in your audience.

“All you can really do is write for yourself. There’s all kinds of ways that you can structure a song, and write what it’s about, and all these things that will bring people in, but unless you’re singing something that really truly entertains you, then no one else is going to care. … Write for yourself because you’re the only audience that matters.”

7. Write about what you obsess over.

“I find that writing comes from not a moment of thinking about something, as opposed to a moment of being obsessed with it. … When you have things that you really care about—things that matter to you—they are what make you. And to write as if those things don’t exist is to efface yourself. Then you’re not really an artist anymore: You’re just creating blanks. In the end, you’ve got to say something. Big songs can be about little things, and little songs can be about big things, but really in the end the only thing that really comes out is that you have to put a foot forward, and talk about stuff.”

8. Writing a song is like going to a party.

"Writing a song is like going to a party: You want to show up when it's happening, and you don't want to be the last one to leave. As much as you're describing, you have to be able to go in, and paint a portrait of the thing, and then leave."

9. Be bold and mighty forces will come to your aid.

"Oftentimes the thing that I find sets great art apart from the rest is its bravery and its vulnerability."

10. Writing bad songs helps you write great songs.

"I think about failures as the moment when you're cutting the block of granite, and you've got this big huge piece of rock, and all those songs that never went anywhere, and all those things, that's just part of the stuff you're chipping away until you get to the real songs. And the real songs are in there. There may be like 10 of them in 100 songs. But they're the statue you're trying to get to."

Visit the Berklee Online YouTube channel for more interviews and check out the Music Is My Life *podcast wherever you get your podcasts from.*

Instructor Spotlight:

Chrissy Tignor

Chrissy Tignor is a producer, songwriter, recording engineer, and vocalist. She is a professor in the Contemporary Writing and Production Department at Berklee, and has worked with Alex Clare, Gary Go, Bastille, Lauren Hashian, and Notting Hill Music. Her music has been synced on Discovery Channel and TLC, and she currently works under the pseudonym Data Child.

She has authored several courses in songwriting and production, including *Producing Songwriting Demos with Pro Tools* and *Logic*.

What was the first song that you ever realized was expert songwriting at work?

When I was a kid, I was only allowed to listen to the Beatles, so it's *Abbey Road* for me. It's hard to pick just one song because that album is a work of art. In fact, *Abbey Road* is also the album that made me fall in love with the idea of an album, rather than just singles.

What's a piece of songwriting advice you've held onto throughout your career?

The best piece of songwriting advice I ever received was to always have healthy collaborations. I used to be scared of advocating for myself and my intellectual property, but now I don't enter a creative collaboration without the initial discussion of splits/rights first. If someone doesn't want to have an open, healthy conversation about making sure everyone is happy in a collab, that's a big red flag.

Do you have a set process for songwriting, or does it vary from song to song?

I'm a producer first, so I usually come up with a beat, then build chords or a bass line around it. I'll then start to flesh out the arrangement into a form, and then take a stab at the vocal melodies and lyrics.

Your Career Path

Ever wonder what kinds of songwriting careers exist? You may be surprised to learn that there's more to it than being a singer/songwriter. The opportunities are even broader:

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Instructor Spotlight:

Brad Hatfield

Brad Hatfield is an Emmy Award–winning composer and an associate professor of Songwriting at Berklee College of Music. His musical compositions have been heard in movies such as *Borat*, *The Break-Up*, and *Iron Man 2*, and on television series such as *The Sopranos*, *This Is Us*, and *The Big Bang Theory*, among many others.

At Berklee Online, Brad teaches *Music Supervision 1* and *2* and *Songwriting for Film and TV*.

What's one piece of songwriting advice that you have held onto throughout your career?

For film and TV, simple almost always wins. Clear melodies that can be sung can also be played by instruments.

What was the first song you ever placed in a TV episode?

The first vocal song was a co-write that I did with Crit Harmon called "Lose Control." It was a dance song that was used in a *Melrose Place* episode in 1997, then was used in a few other shows and films.

What do you look for in a songwriting collaborator?

Someone who can fill my weak areas with their strengths. For me personally, I am a music person, so I tend to collaborate with lyricists.

Do you have a set process for songwriting, or does it vary from song to song?

I'm either melodically or groove driven. For film/TV source music, genre dictates the starting point. If it's an old school "American Songbook" style song, then melody always dominates. If it's a smooth jazz style song, then groove and harmony might start things off.

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