

THE SONGWRITER'S ADVOCATE PRESENTS

FIVE STEPS TO WRITING BETTER SONGS

by Matt Stinton

EVERYONE WANTS TO WRITE GOOD SONGS.

No one (probably) sets off to write a bad song. But, some songwriters don't know how to make their songs better than they are. There are several traits that all good songs have in common and, if you know what they are, you can implement them into your own songs. You can't bake a cake if you don't know what the ingredients are. In the same way, you can't write a good song if you don't know what goes into it.

STEP ONE

Ask yourself: What am I trying to say?

You don't necessarily need to know the answer to this question before you start writing, but you definitely need to know it before you finish.

So many songwriters get stuck because they've never stopped to ask themselves about the purpose of their song. For every song you write, you should have one central theme or message. More than one theme will confuse your listeners and will bury your message.

Have you ever been in a conversation with someone who jumped from topic to topic without taking a breath? Somewhere in the middle of that steamroll, I can almost guarantee that you stopped listening (or at least had to fight to be attentive). Your brain burns calories when you concentrate. The harder you have to concentrate, the more likely your

brain is going to want to tune out and conserve energy.

Confusing songs are the same way. Your listener will have to fight to pay attention if your message isn't clear. That's a bummer for you if you care about your lyrics.



pro tip:

Your theme should be easily discernible in your chorus. It's the dominant part of modern songs, so save your main thought or statement for this section.

STEP TWO

Support your theme.

Once you've figured out what you're trying to say (aka your theme), you need to support it throughout your song. What this means is that all of your lyrics need to line up with your main thought. This doesn't mean you repeat the same things over and over again (that would get really boring), but it means that you need supporting language that helps your message make sense.

Think of this as the evidence for the claims that you're making. If your message is that God is good, your evidence would be *how you know* he's good. Simply making a statement isn't as impacting as

providing a complete, cohesive picture with evidence to support it.

The more you dig into the "why" and "how" of your message, the more convincing your message will be. Not only that, but you'll also find a wealth of lyrical depth by not settling for the first thing that comes to mind. Don't force it but don't give up too early.

Helpful things to ask yourself:

What evidence do I have that shows what I'm saying is true?

What have I experienced in my own life that supports my claims?

pro tip:

Even great lyrics can be in the wrong spot or maybe in the wrong song altogether. Move them around or save them for another song.

STEP THREE

Diversify your melody.

A good melody can cover a multitude of mediocre lyrics. You don't have to listen to the radio for very long to realize that's true. (Of course, if you can have a great melody and great lyrics, that's preferable.)

So what is it that makes a melody great? Having a great hook is a big part of it. The hook, typically found in the chorus, is the main melodic "riff" that repeats so perfectly that it lodges itself in your head for hours (even days) at a time. Nothing will ever get stuck in your head if it isn't catchy and a good hook is always catchy.

But, there's another important aspect of melody that people don't always talk about and that's melodic diversity. Or, simply put, distinction between sections. When you transition from one part of your song to the next (ie. from your verse to your chorus), your listener needs to be able to tell.

Think of your melody as a house. You need a foundation (something you can build on, typically the verse), a main floor (where you spend most of your time, like the chorus), and an attic (the highest point in your song, often the bridge). A good song needs all three of these distinct sections to be dynamic and interesting.

pro tip:

Listen to some of your favorite songs and pay attention to where the low, mid, and high moments are. Listening with intention is a great way to learn.



STEP FOUR

Step back and assess your lyrics.

When your song feels like it's nearing completion, take a look at your lyrics. Is your theme or message clear? Have you used language that supports one theme or are you trying to fit more than one theme into your song? It's really common for us to have out-of-place lyrics as we figure out what we're trying to say. However, don't forget that it's important for your song to be about one thing and one thing only.

A very practical way to assess your lyrics is to literally go line by line and explain how those thoughts support your theme. If it's easy to do, awesome. If it's a complicated explanation, then that thought might be out of place.

During this process, you may find that lines that seemed right when you started don't seem so as you've progressed. Trust your gut here. If it feels out of place, it probably is. Often lines that bother us do so for a reason.

That being said, sometimes you have to know when to let a line go. Your inner perfectionist will keep you from ever finishing songs if you let it. Besides, the "perfect song" doesn't exist because perfection is subjective.

pro tip:

Give yourself permission to not be perfect. You can't attain perfection so give yourself a break. It's better to write an imperfect song than no song at all.



STEP FIVE

Stay the course.

Songwriting is work. If you give up after your inspiration runs dry, you'll never finish. There's good news, though, and that is the more you write, the easier it becomes. Objects in motion tend to stay in motion and objects at rest tend to stay at rest. It's not just physics, it's a fact of life that applies to so many things.

Most people don't realize that writer's block is a self-inflicted struggle. We get frustrated about it and complain about it, but we never stop to figure out how we found ourselves there. In my opinion, 99.9% of the times that we find ourselves stuck is because we've set unrealistic expectations on ourselves. We tell ourselves things like, "I can't write a bad song or people will think I'm a bad songwriter." Or, "I have to write only in this style. Nothing else is okay." Or maybe even, "If I can't be disciplined enough to sit here and write for an hour, I can't call myself a songwriter." All of these things create stress and stress is scientifically proven to shut down your creativity.

Creativity is a muscle. The more you exercise it, the stronger it gets. Celebrate the small things. Even if you don't write anything you like in a session, you still showed up and seeing that as a win is an absolute must if you want to grow in your craft.

pro tip:

Stuck on a song? Don't sweat it. Write something else. Even if it's not a song, writing and creating will get the "juices" flowing and will help your future writing sessions be more productive.



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