



SONGWRITING

MYB's Guide To Creating Your Own Music

Well it's not rocket science. In fact, it's not a science at all, it's an art. That said, when you are developing and honing your songwriting skills there are a few things you can do to improve the chances of getting the results you are after. Here are a few suggestions from MYB:

Become an ideas factory

"The best way to get a good idea is to get a lot of ideas"

Linus Pauling
(Chemist and winner of two Nobel prizes)

Unless you're an absolute prodigy, one of the best pieces of advice we can give you is to generate lots of song ideas. This will improve the chances of some of your output being truly stunning. Just as a photographer might take lots of shots of a subject before deciding on the final lighting effects, filters, exposures etc, so creating lots of song ideas will improve your chances of getting the results you are looking for. The good news is that whatever you go on to do in life, getting the creative parts of your brain working will help make you more effective and better at problem-solving.

Get organised

However, there's no point generating a great idea to lose it again just as quickly. Get organised to capture your ideas. Scraps of paper will get lost as sure as night follows day. If you want to still have them in a few months' time, put your lyrics, song ideas, chord patterns, tab etc into a hard-backed book. If you like the sound of a new chord sequence, melody or riff, put it down IMMEDIATELY on cassette or straight onto your computer. Even a few minutes' delay can result in your idea being lost forever. And don't forget to label tapes and organise PC files so you'll find the work again.

What comes first – the music or the lyrics?

Answer: *Whatever*. There are almost as many approaches as there are songwriters. You can start wherever you like. In fact, feeling excited about what you're doing is probably as important as anything. Paul McCartney famously woke up one morning with a memorable tune running through his head. He didn't want to forget it but couldn't immediately come up with the lyrics. So

he sang 'Ham and eggs, how I really like my ham and eggs' (or something similar). That tune later became 'Yesterday', one of the most popular Beatles songs. Meanwhile, somewhere on the other side of the planet, Bob Dylan was approaching his songs as poetry. Words first, melody second. He seemed to do all right for himself as well.

So don't get stuck in a rut. You don't need to work to a formula. Just try to get your creativity flowing and ride the wave! You can work alone, in pairs or as a band. Don't rule out collaborating with anyone until you've tried it. People have hidden talents and combining individual strengths can produce amazing results that you'd never have achieved individually. To begin with, why not try working on a song with one other person; many people find this can produce really quick results. Then when there's a rough draft, take it into a rehearsal with the whole band and watch it lift off.

Lyrics - Trouble getting started?

Writer's block. What a bummer. It's not a bad idea to have a couple of techniques up your sleeve for breaking the deadlock.

Tom Hingley, formerly of Inspiral Carpets, and an accomplished songwriter, recently took a songwriting workshop for Amplifier / MYB. In Tom's view, anything can be the subject of a song. His advice was to write your first song about the problems you are having writing a song. Not a bad idea: paradoxically, if it's well written, without being too obvious, people might well think it's about something completely different (– not that listening to someone whinge about their lack of songwriting success isn't interesting you understand).

Another approach is to look for inspiration in books, magazines, TV etc (taking great care not to get too side-tracked by the engaging content of this morning's 'Trisha'). David Bowie, in his most creative phase, is said to have clipped words and phrases from magazines and re-arranged them until a lyric idea emerged. That would then form the catalyst for the rest of the song. This is not as easy as it sounds. If the press cuttings are boring, your songs will probably be boring too and getting something that sounds engaging and original is still down to you.

What issues really energise you? World poverty? Guantanamo Bay? Your lack of job prospects? Someone letting you down? The state of festival site toilets? The best songs arguably come from the heart – so why not follow yours? Just one word of caution though. Most successful songs seem to be written (directly or obliquely) about *lurv*. Some people have argued that pop songs are not the best place to talk about anything else. We disagree. Have a listen to 'Sunday, Bloody Sunday' by U2, 'Smoke On The Water' by Deep Purple, or 'My Generation' by The Who - all songs away from the well trodden path of lovers' lane. You can put almost any subject matter in there so long as you've got a good tune and craft the words with a little skill and dedication.

Great Lyrics – Small Packages

In the context of songs, people often talk about 'the need for a good hook', by which they invariably mean a memorable bit of melody. But how much better is the song that combines strong melody with strong, memorable lyrics?

Some examples:

Oasis - Wonderwall

Kaiser Chiefs - I Predict A Riot

Queen - We Will Rock You

Robbie Williams - Angels

Bon Jovi – Livin' On A Prayer

You may not want to be as blatantly commercial as this, but if you can package a whole song concept in a snappy, easily remembered phrase, preferably forming part of the chorus...well, you're on to a winner. In a world of massive over-communication it's a bit ironic that we can only remember things if we distil them down to a few words, but that's exactly what the advertising and marketing industry realised a long time ago. If you are looking to make a career out of songwriting, you'd best take on board as many marketing techniques as you can handle. In the pop industry, success is almost always driven by marketing, not creative integrity.

Rhyme and Metre

As you start writing your lyrics, think carefully about the pattern you are setting up; chances are you'll have to follow that pattern for the rest of the song. If the last words of the first two lines rhyme, you've already created a very strict pattern to follow later. This kind of restriction can lead to some terribly forced lyrics. So ask yourself, do these lines really need to rhyme? Rhyming just two lines (say 2nd and 4th) in a verse can allow a lot more freedom for expression than rhyming throughout.

Music

In an ideal world your song would have both strong lyrics and strong music. Most songs don't seem to be written like that though and bands get away with weak lyrics much more than weak music. Great rock and pop music comes in through the ears but hits you somewhere near the solar plexus rather than in the brain. It's not really a cerebral activity, it's much more about feel and emotion. And it's the feel of the music that 'gets' you. If there's something for your brain to work on as well, then great, but without a great soundtrack your song ain't going very far.

So how to create a stunning piece of music?

Rhythm – Start With The End In Mind

It seems most successful bands and artistes work, at least to begin with, in a fairly narrow field rhythmically. They set out to play in a certain genre. If the genre is punk, chances are there aren't going to be many samba rhythms in there.

So the point is – and some people might balk at this – you can set the feel of your song from the beginning by picking a speed and rhythm that hits the spot. Sooner or later you'll have to start nailing down the various instrumental parts that make up an arrangement. Why not start by fixing the one thing that will have most impact on the feel of the song?

Don't forget that rhythm is not just about drums. The interaction of drums and bass is crucial and other instruments such as rhythm guitar can have a massive impact on the feel of a song. Try to avoid sounding just like some other band but be prepared to learn from songs you rate for whatever reason. Listen out for chunky rhythms that lift your heart, or subtle ones that get you playing air drums. You can safely borrow rhythmic ideas from other people because by the time you've put your own melody, lyrics etc on top those ideas will be unrecognisable. The overall song is your own unique work, but importing a solid rhythm as the bedrock gets you pretty much straight to where you wanted to be when you started. There will always be time to get more experimental as your musicianship develops.

If you want people to dance to your music in nightclubs, the conventional wisdom is that you should stick closely to a groove and speed for the whole song. But if you want to get the mosh pit jumping you might want to vary the rhythm to create an exciting dynamic within the song. Take a look at 'Take Me Out' by Franz Ferdinand.

Melody

There is nothing quite like the buzz you get from hearing someone else hum a song you've written. But 90% of songs don't have a catchy melody. Of those, a few songs get through because they've got a great arrangement or solo performance, but the majority just sink without trace.

One successful composer said his approach was to make up a little bit of melody, then sing the rest as if it already existed. Now that sounds a bit unhelpful, but it's worth a try. You get the first bit, then try to 'remember' where it went from there. This is perhaps best done by just listening to your head in a quiet room. If you have an instrument in front of you, you can quickly work out the actual notes you've come up with and write them down or record them. But listen first, then play.

The fact that Beethoven wrote some of his best stuff after he went deaf is perhaps evidence that this 'imagining' approach is extremely powerful. Melodies don't have to be created by playing around on an instrument. If you want the girl on the checkout humming your tune, start by creating it in your head rather than on an instrument or on paper...it's much more likely to be a melody with 'stickability'.

Riffs and Licks

'NO STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN'

Purists might ask 'why are you talking about riffs in a piece about songwriting?'. Er...because songs like Nirvana's 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' and Led Zepp's 'Stairway To Heaven' are built around great guitar riffs. In many of the greatest songs ever recorded, the riff IS the song.

A great riff – and let's stretch the definition to keyboards and other instruments not just guitar riffs – can be every bit as memorable as a great lyric. If you've written a great riff, it would be a crime against humanity not to at least attempt to write a song around it.

OK so you've probably thought of that already. Here are some things you might not have considered:

- ♣ Try it out in the bass instead of lead guitar (Have a listen to 'Seven Nation Army' by The White Stripes, 'Peaches' by The Stranglers, or almost anything by New Order)
- ♣ Try playing it in octaves on two instruments (or with an Octaver if you have one)
- ♣ Create your vocal melody as a harmony to the riff, following its various ups and downs
- ♣ Create a counterpoint melody to the riff for voice or another instrument
- ♣ Try stopping other instruments when the riff comes in, giving it more space
- ♣ Unless you're Jimmy Page or Joe Satriani keep your riffs short – otherwise you're going to lose your listener

If you're not generating enough classic riffs, try learning some scales and arpeggios, then dart around between the notes and see what happens.

Who needs music theory?

Rock's not about music theory, but even the tiniest bit of the stuff can be incredibly helpful. So it's amazing how some music teachers avoid all the useful stuff. At a minimum, get a tutor, friend or book to show you some of these things:

- How to create a major and minor chord for any note of the scale
- How to create 7ths and 9ths
- How to work out the relative minor to a major key
- Creating harmonies – 3rds and 5ths
- Breaking chords down into arpeggios
- How to make smooth key changes

If you can count to 12 you can master all the above with ease.

Learn the rule book, then tear it up!

Most great songwriters will happily list the people that have influenced them. It can be well worthwhile exploring the songs not just of your heroes but of their heroes too. You can learn an enormous amount from both studying and performing the songs you like. You'll learn about lyrics, song structure, arrangements, key changes and a lot more besides. But if your aim is to be amongst the one in a million true originals be prepared to throw away some of those rules and make up your own. Who says bass lines have to be played on a bass guitar? Who says lyrics have to be sung forwards? Think laterally, you never know where it might lead you!

Make your environment creative

We're not talking about climate change here, but about creating the right conditions around you.

Let's say you've had a busy week but have decided to set aside some time on Saturday afternoon to do a bit of writing. You don't want that precious time to be taken up answering questions from your mum, re-stringing your guitar or going to the shop to buy a new jack lead. So do a bit of preparation. Tell people to butt out for a while. Switch your phone to silent, or better OFF. Get a pen, paper, scrap book, tape machine, PC and whatever else you are going to need in one place. Tuning instruments tends to work the analytical rather than creative parts of the brain, so get that out of the way before you start.

We could say switch the TV/ Radio etc off, but for all we know you may have a brilliant technique that involves writing to silent streaming TV images, or cross-pollinating new keyboard riffs with hits from the 60's. So it's hard to generalise. The message is – do the preparation that you think will make you most creative. Try to learn about yourself and make your sessions most productive. Time is your most precious commodity and success in creative work is largely about making the most of it.

Where do you do your creative thinking? It doesn't have to be a room and you don't have to keep still. You could write a great song in the queue at Tesco or sitting on the toilet of a jumbo jet (might have to be quick though). Everyone's different; some people are at their most creative when on the move in a car, train, or bus. Something happens when the eyes take in the movement of scenery shooting past. It fires synapses – those little connections in the brain – that at other times remain dormant. For someone else, sitting in the dark might have a similar effect. If it's creativity you're after, think about creating the environment that's most creative for you.

In summary:

- ♣ **Create loads of song ideas, then pick the best ones to work on with the whole band**
- ♣ **Try collaborative partnerships with different people inside and outside the band**
- ♣ **Get organised for success and make sure you capture your output permanently**
- ♣ **Use music theory, press articles and other people's rhythm patterns as catalysts**
- ♣ **Learn from great songs – regardless of who wrote them – but be prepared to throw away the rule book if you want to be truly unique**
- ♣ **Make your lyrics and melodies as catchy as possible if you want commercial success**