

Introduction to Songwriting



by
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Introduction to Song Writing

As a musician, has the thought of writing your own songs crossed your mind before? Some of you might want to write songs for pleasure or casual jamming, while some of you may want to write songs for performances to captivate your audiences etc.... Whatever the reason is, writing songs is a one of the creative outlets for musicians to express themselves and yet, many of them face difficulties in this aspect of making music.

Many musicians had often asked me this question. Is songwriting a skill that can be taught or learnt? As with other skills like playing the guitar, driving a car or swimming, **songwriting is a skill that can be taught**. However, nobody can guarantee that if you sat through the best song writing course, you will be able to write the greatest song in the world. It is just like saying everyone who had been through a driving course will be able to race in Formula 1 like Lewis Hamilton.

On that note, you can STILL learn to write good songs that people will love. Writing your very own original song is not as difficult as it seems to be.

This short course is aimed at helping musicians who are new to song writing to get started. Even if you already have experience in writing songs, I hope that this course can give you new insights or show you aspects of song writing that you might not have considered before.

Cheers,
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Getting Started

The most difficult part in doing something new is getting started. To get you going, you should probably have in mind who you are writing the music for. Ask yourself what is the ultimate goal of writing this song. What do you want to express and convey to your audience? At this point in time you want to have a rough idea or feeling that you wish to express through your song.

Before you proceed any further with a rough idea of the song in mind, I would like to explain the main elements in a song.

A song is made up of 4 elements: Melody, Harmony (chords), Rhythm and Lyrics

So what actually comes first? There are no hard and fast rules of writing a song. These are some simple methods to get you started writing your songs.

1) Start with a set of written lyrics followed by music.

Use the rhythm of the lyrics and sing out a melody. Once you are happy with the melody, then add in the music.

2) Start with a melody of notes followed by music

Come up with a catchy melody that is singable before you add in the rest of the elements. This method of writing songs will usually result in better tunes and catchy phrases.

3) Start with a harmony (chord progression)

This is by far one of the easiest ways to write a song and is a very common approach undertaken by guitarists and pianists. Play a chord progression that sets the mood of the song you want to portray. (I V IV V – Major sounding for happy songs, iv iii IV V – minor sounding for sad songs etc.....) Listen to the chord progression and use it to inspire your melody or lyrics.

4) Start with a music rhythm

This technique is particularly useful to musicians who are writing rap or hip-hop songs. Repeat a music loop; write the lyrics and melody to fit the beats. This will create strong rhythmic sense to the lyrics and melody.

Understanding Song Structures

If you listen to any songs on the radio, you will probably notice that the song has a particular structure. This song structure organizes the song such that it is easier for the listener to hear and connect with the song. Here are the different components of the song structure explained:

- I. Intro:** The introduction sets the tempo and mood for the song and is usually instrumental based. You should treat the intro like a “sneak preview” to the rest of the songs and engage the listener with a smooth transition to your song. Bear in mind the following points:
 - KISS → Keep It Simple Stupid! Like it or not, most listeners are easily put off by a long lengthy intro.
 - Don’t show off too much and try to climax the song in the introduction. The intro is supposed to leave the listeners wanting more after they listened to it.
 - An introduction is not compulsory. You may choose to start immediately with a verse or chorus in some cases.

- II. Verse:** The verse is the part in the song where it is heavily dominated by vocals and lyrics. Normally, the verse runs in a similar melody through the song and basically begins the “story telling” part of the song.
 - Remember KISS! Keep the music and instruments simple here.
 - Don’t go on and on in repeating the verse for minutes.

- III. Pre Chorus:** The pre chorus is used as a connection to join the verse and chorus for better flow of the song. This can just be a couple of bars to build up anticipation of the chorus for greater impact.
 - Not a compulsory element.

- IV. Chorus:** The chorus is the most important part of the song. This is the portion that most listeners are waiting for. You want to make them remember the song with a great melody and catchy chorus.
- Work on your melody here. Write, rewrite until you get a good melody.
 - It is fine to repeat the chorus for a couple of more times. (But remember moderation)
 - Plan for the climax of your song in the repeated choruses towards the end of the song. (e.g. Add in more bulk in the music in terms of guitar solos, heavier drums, harmonizing vocals etc....) Don't plainly repeat and play the chorus in the same manner throughout the song.
- V. Bridge:** The bridge is a part of the song which has a dissimilar melody, lyrics and music from the rest of the song. In short, the bridge freshens up the song and injects a new vibe into boring repetitions of the verse and choruses.



In popular music, one of the most commonly used song structure is *verse / chorus / verse / chorus / bridge / chorus / chorus*. For a start, you may want to write your first song using this tried and tested song template.

In a nutshell, the song structure is like the framework of a building. A song structure by itself means nothing. However, when the song structure supports your lyrics, melody and music (analogous to windows and walls of a house), you've a good song in the making.

Songwriting Elements: Lyrics

One of the ways in which a song writer can capture and relate to the listener is through the lyrics of a song. Writing good lyrics for a song does not require the use of complicated and profound vocabulary. On the contrary, simple meaningful words will make it easy for listeners to understand the song. One of the most common pitfalls of writing lyrics is to make the lyrics sound like an unnatural poem. (Ending every single line of the lyrics with a word that rhymes).

Some other tips on lyrics writing:

- Write the lyrics as if you are telling a story.
- Read your lyrics out loud after writing it to pick out any parts which sound unnatural.
- The simpler the lyrics the better.



Songwriting Elements: Melody

The melody of the song is by far the most important element of a song. How many times have you forgotten the lyrics of a song and yet be still able hum its melody? People remember great melodies after hearing them and this is what makes a song evergreen. Think ABBA.

Some other tips on melody writing:

- If you have trouble starting a melody, you can use the harmonizing relationship between chords and melody notes (Using 1,3 & 5 notes of the chord) to build the groundwork.
- For a melody to work, there must be sufficient repetition. A melody with no repetition will sound unfocused and weak. As a result, the song will not be able to capture the listener's attention.
- On the other hand, too much repetition will be boring to the listener.

Songwriting Elements: Chord Sequences and Harmony

Harmony is basically a musical relationship between chords and melody. In song writing, chord sequences are the basis of creating harmony. Before I go further, I want to introduce you to a system of naming and notating chord progressions using Roman numerals. Typically, these roman numerals are notated based of the major scale. To further illustrate this, let us use the C major scale as an example.

I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii *	I
C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C

- Upper case numerals indicate that the chords are major. C major, F major, G major
- Lower case numerals indicate that the chords are minor. D minor, E minor, A minor

*The seventh degree chord is always a diminished chord and usually found in genres such as jazz. (Ignore this chord for the time being)

Example

I	IV	vi	V
C maj	F maj	A min	G maj
F maj	Bb maj	D min	C maj

These are the most fundamental "music rules" that governs most of the songs in any keys. However, these musical rules are broken frequently and we will not cover this area in this course for simplicity.

In the list below are some of the popular chord sequences that can be found in music.

- I vi IV V (C major A minor F major G major) Unchained Melody
- I V vi IV (B major Gb major Ab minor E major) Collide
- I V IV (G Major D major C major) Knockin' on Heaven's Door
- vi IV I V (C minor Ab Major Eb Major Bb Major) Apologize - One Republic

For a start, you can take these chord sequences and come up with your own melodies over them.

****** Do not fall into the danger of being over dependent on song progressions. The pitfall is that many people repeat the exact same progressions over and over again. ******

More Tips for Songwriting



- 1) Try every **different method of song writing** (as listed in pg. 3) and not limit yourself to using a same formula or technique.
- 2) Get your friends and family members to **listen and comment on your song**. For a more unbiased feedback, get strangers to critique your song. One way to do this is to post your songs at online song writing forums.
- 3) Keep an open mind and **listen to more music**. This will broaden your musical horizon. Find out what makes a song a hit or why a particular song is unsuccessful. For a start, modeling yourself with the best and learning from the mistakes of others will greatly propel your song writing abilities.
- 4) **Practice a lot**. Like any other skill, songwriting can be honed through constant practice. Practice writing lyrics, different melodies, chord progressions and etc.....
- 5) **Always carry some kind of recorder** around to capture any sudden ideas. Nowadays, most cell phones have a voice recording function. Make full use of it.
- 6) **Write and rewrite**. Listen to songs that you had written before and rewrite any parts that need improvement.
- 7) **Have fun!**

Conclusion

Get started on writing your first song now. Your very first song will probably not be a chart topping hit but there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. As you get more experienced in song writing, you'll find that the whole process of song writing is not as difficult as it seems. Continue to practice songwriting and improve on your craft. Who knows, you may be the author of the next chart topping hit song.

Remember, there are no hard and fast rules in song writing. I wish you all the success in song writing. May the joy and satisfaction of songwriting be with you.

– End –

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