

The Big Fat Lie Most Musicians Believe

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Songs ‘happen’ to songwriters.

No matter how rational they may be, that's the one superstition that almost every songwriter shares, despite all evidence to the contrary. Sure we can read books on songwriting, attend seminars and analyse the classics but deep down we believe that if that song doesn't want to be written there's nothing we can do about it. To paraphrase Tom Waits, we like music but we're not sure that music likes us. The crazy thing is we don't act like this when it comes to mastering our instrument. We know that if we don't put the time in, our playing will never improve. We know progress is rarely quantifiable or obvious but practice precedes improvement like sowing precedes harvest. And we know that emulating the masters will train our stubborn minds and fingers. And yet we disregard all of that when it's time to compose. Resorting to religious terminology for a moment, we believe in free will when it comes to learning an instrument but when it comes to songwriting everything is predestined. Only YOU can make you a good guitarist but you can't write a great song unless you are sovereignly chosen to do so by a higher power.

This kind of ‘inspirational fatalism’ just doesn't make sense. But it does seem to be reinforced every time we fail to make songwriting *work*. Songs may not just happen but it sure seems like it. Why?

We don't practice writing songs

Bill Renfrew says, “What I can’t figure out is why I, a rational, realistic human being, thought my songs should be getting airplay when I probably hadn’t spent more than about 125 to 150 hours writing all the songs I’d ever written in my life. People, I spent more time than that in the first month learning to play guitar. But with my songwriting I didn’t think it should be all that much work. You figure out a lick on the guitar and you write something about your girlfriend, right? Isn’t that all there is to it?”¹

Practising songwriting is tough because there is no single activity called ‘writing a song’. It’s a cluster of many intertwined activities, like building a car on an assembly line or playing a game of football. Footballers don’t spend all their time playing matches. They practice shooting, passing and plain old running. So why not zone in on a particular songwriting skill you are weak in and practice that? If you struggle to finish a song, just drag a few over the line by writing that third verse or bridge without getting hung up on the quality. Maybe your problem is lyrics, chord progressions or writing choruses. Whatever. Put the big picture aside for the moment and make doing that one thing your goal. Once you’ve written ten choruses the eleventh is bound to be better.

There is no finish line

Bill again: “We know you can’t measure songwriting like you can measure a sprinter’s time, or a high jumper’s highest jump, or a linebacker’s tackles per game. Even a guitar player can be ranked in regard to certain things such as speed and licks (‘Dude, he can play Van Halen’s ‘Eruption’ note for note!’). What are you going to say about a song? ‘Dude he rewrote ‘Wind Beneath my Wings’ in ten minutes and it sounds exactly the same!’”²

OK, so you want to write a great song. How great? Does every individual note, line and section have to be great for the song to be great? How do you know when each element is the best it can be? Never. What they say in the movie business applies here: films aren’t ‘finished’, they’re ‘released’. Your song is ‘done’ when you let go of it. Many of the greats would have happily spent another week/month/decade tinkering with that song you deem a classic, but they downed tools because of some arbitrary factor – a tour, another studio booking, the drummer getting arrested. So scratching a deadline on the calendar is always a good move, but there are two other things that might help:

- Don’t compare any song against its perfect imaginary self. Compare it against your other songs. So write ten songs. Then pick the best four or five. It’s almost impossible to assess whether any one song is the best it can be, it’s easy to compare it to your others. As well as being able to see your progress, you’ll also begin to see your strengths, weaknesses and favourite clichés.
- Make it your goal to become a great songwriter not to write great songs. Every song you complete will make you better if you keep learning. As you become a better writer you’ll write better songs. Eventually some of them will be great.

¹ Bill’s post on the American Songwriter website helped crystallise my thoughts here. [Bill Renfrew: American Songwriter: Who’s Ready to Work?](#)

² Renfrew *ibid*.

The longer you go, the worse you get

We've all seen bands who release a groundbreaking debut album and then go downhill. Or legacy artists who tread water for decades while living off their early hits. Aren't we supposed to get better at something the more we do it? Sadly that doesn't happen for most artists because of the way the music business works. The songs that comprised that stunning debut were not the first ten the band ever wrote but the best of the first thirty or forty. So far so good. But then the band went on tour, cranking out the same few tunes night after night. Finally, after three years of van life, video games and zero writing, they went back to the studio to find the magical songwriting tap (faucet) rusted shut. Fingers sleepwalk to the same familiar spots and the inevitable writer's block leads them to resurrect songs that weren't good enough the first time around. The solution? Just keep writing. Try to have the mindset: "I'm training to be a great songwriter, and every day I skip training makes it harder to get into shape". Don't have a fatalistic approach to writing. Make songs happen.