

I gave a songwriting course a few years ago, and a lot of people have been asking about it. I don't really have any time to give the course, but here is the Syllabus for those interested.

Songwriting Syllabus:

Teaching the Novice how to Think:

The primary concept of this course is to teach the novice how to think rather than presenting a few limited concepts that will allow him to only progress toward a relatively finite ability. It is easy to present a few simple tricks that will allow the writer to think he is progressing, but in actuality is just giving a false sense of accomplishment that will ultimately stifle true growth as an artist.

To be a writer you have to commit to a lifestyle and develop the tools and concepts that will allow you to evolve and develop over a lifetime. This type of program is more difficult and takes longer to master, like most disciplines.

Note:

I am here to teach you how to think. It doesn't matter how advanced you are, if you learn how to think and where you are in the history of music, you will be able to write.

There is roughly 40 years of pop history before you, and you have to have good habits and developed skills because you are not going to come up with anything original. On the contrary, you will be revisiting what has already been done thousands of times by artists who had much stronger and provocative influences. So you have to develop your skills just to try and approach their level of art.

You are not developing or inventing any new style, on the contrary, what you are currently exposed to, and what most of you have grown up with, is an ever devolving and diminishing scope of art. It is homogenizing and diluting in scope, so you must learn from the giants who have proceeded you.

Society is pretty comfortable, and most of the wars concerning the evils of society have been fought and largely won. Make no mistake, we must remain vigilant and continue to fight against these evils, but the western world is fairly politically correct and prosperous.

The cultural battles of racial and sexual equality are behind us, Vietnam is behind us. The *Establishment* is no longer the enemy to rail against, the music business is the *Establishment*. The artist war fought by pop music in its beginnings has now turned upon us, and we are now the enemy. Music has embraced what it once abhorred. It now strives to be what it once despised. Big Brother is us.

Being of the Echo Boomer Generation, most of you grew up materially fairly well off with parents who no longer suffered from the generation gap. You may even like a lot of the same music, TV, art etc. So with the social ills vanquished, the well fed, pampered Western man has little oppressive forces spurning him to create great art. Great art comes from suffering and sacrifice. So we must learn all we can, and develop all we can just to try and gain some motivation of the spirit to find the Undiscovered Country.

The Lifestyle:

I. Routine:

Songwriting is like any other discipline. You have to practice to become accomplished. You have to develop the muscles that allow you to become a proficient writer. That means:

1. Musical Proficiency:
 - a. Musicianship

- b. Harmony
 - c. Rhythm
 - d. Melody
2. Lyrical Proficiency: there is also music in words and you have to become adept at the manipulation of this music.
 - a. Meter
 - b. Rhyme
 - c. Assonance
 - d. Alliteration
3. Master of Form: Components that make up a song:
 1. Intro: this is the introduction at the beginning of the song if it has one. It can be a musical or rhythmic or lyrical theme, an instrumental portion of other music in the song, etc.
 2. Verse, (can have an A and B section):
 3. Pre-chorus
 4. Chorus
 5. hook
 6. theme
 7. Interlude
 8. Bridge
 9. Solo
 10. Tag, (on verse or chorus)
 11. Turnaround
 12. Codas
 13. Vamp

Your own facility will limit you as a Writer:

If you do not develop your facility as both a musician and lyricist, you can only limit your own potential as a writer. Generally your

writing is limited by your ability to conceive a concept. Therefore, if you have no experience playing an instrument, it is difficult to conceive complex musical ideas and incorporate them into your writing. Also, it more generally manifests itself in that if you can conceive and execute complex ideas it is much easier to create sublime, elegant and simple creative solutions. With any creative work, the consumer only sees the tip of the iceberg, and the deeper your foundation, the more tips on the iceberg.

Also, the more facility and foundation you have, the easier it is to deal with a leap of imagination when you run into them. If you have limited facility, when you encounter a creative leap, you will:

1. not be able to hold onto or access it because it will demand ability you do not possess.
2. you will not be able to execute or quite get to the idea you have encountered.
3. you will not be able to understand or adequately develop the idea, and it will exist in a less than optimum form.

All this leads to frustration and blockage of the creative process.

II. Tools:

Journals: Personal reservoirs of Ideas

1. Word Journal: get a bound note book

Keep all written ideas here, and music notation. Can be prose, poetry lyrics etc. This is a reservoir for all you ideas. No matter what form you write them down, whether lyrics, events, stories, poetry, observations, etc. It is a personal library to draw upon for ideas, and in times of low output.

2. Musical Journal: portable cassette or minidisk best

This is an idea reservoir, and the most accurate way to document and catalog your musical ideas since we usually can't notate it, and it is more accurate than notation.

1. Reference:

1. Dictionary
2. Thesaurus
3. Rhyming dictionary
4. Song compilation scores, or any musical scores
5. Album collection

III. Nourishment:

You need input to have output. So you must constantly be putting stimuli in to get some out.

1. Personal experience: life
 - Books; poetry, prose etc, just read constantly
 - Movies
 - Music: listen critically

IV a. Culture and the Individual Reality:

Culture: sum total of the attainments and activities of any specific period, ideas, music art, religious beliefs, traditions, language

- Mythology
- Archetypes
- traditions
- generational identity

Everything that can be attributed to the universality of a culture can be attributed to the unique reality of each individual. While there are collective points of view,

usually held by people of specific countries or geographic regions, each individual will hold a unique perspective on each topic relative to his own:

1. Experience
2. subculture
3. age group
4. traditions
5. mythology
6. opinion or point of view

This reality will intersect, mirror and parallel the collective in many ways and deviate in others, and it is in the commonalities that allow the collective to make sense and identify with the individual, and in the differences that can hold the attraction and fascination of the collective.

The writer must manipulate the collective reality and its components and focus it through his own unique perspective and observations to present the collective with

1. a new but universal perspective on a known subject
2. a view into the writers unique world through components of the universal reality
3. a universal but undiscovered truth in the collective reality
4. Snapshots of the unique reality that fascinates the collective
5. Make the mundane a miracle. Take something that has become trivialized, (birth, death, love, family relations), and make it new.
6. Tell the great story

IV. Finding the Undiscovered Country:

The **Undiscovered Country** is inside your head somewhere. You can call it what you want, it is closely related to your imagination, but is:

1. the sum of your experience
2. your true identity/ being/ fundamental self, that you may or may not be aware of
3. your imagination

Lloyd Price once said to me: “ Bryan, you got to be true to yourself” . It sounds like a simple phrase, but it is incredibly profound. To be completely true to yourself, you have to really understand yourself. Some people I know are well into mid-life and still do not truly know themselves. Even when you think you are being true to yourself, you may not be. It is very hard to identify what and when outside forces are influencing you. It could be fashion, music, family, friends, peers, society. It is quite easy to go on living without ever realizing that there are some real gaps in your perception of yourself and the world around you. Usually the more experience and contact with other people, your perception expands and reevaluation occurs. And thus you can become closer to being “ true to yourself” .

It is also a relative concept. You can be “ true” to the self as you now perceive it. And this is the best we can hope to achieve at any given time in our lives. But it is often very hard to enter the **Undiscovered Country** at will. You must cultivate your ability to access this part of yourself. There is a lot of stuff that can get in the way, and it usually takes years of writing before the trip is reliable. It is rarely effortless.

You know things that you don’ t realize. You have seen things you don’ t know you’ ve seen. And you have experienced things you don’ t know you have experienced. It is all locked up in you head, and you have to look at your life and dig it out. These things can be great truths and powerful events that may be

affecting you in ways you don't even know. And they are usually powerful forces in the Undiscovered Country. You must dig them out and try to make sense of them. All that separate enlightenment and ignorance are shades of perception.

In acknowledging and exploring your personal culture and reality and starting to explore the Undiscovered country, YOU WILL DISCOVER SONGS INSIDE YOUR HEAD. You have to start writing from what you know to get something meaningful, and you know more than you think.

- You know things you don't realize you know
- See things you don't know you see
- Been places you don't know you've been

Sleep deprived mystic statement from too many hours in the studio:

“ The mandate of excellence is the invitation to your own destruction.”

A. Clichés and the One True Idea:

The True Idea and Encumberment:

Most times the writer comes up with **One True Idea** and then becomes stuck in developing and expanding this idea. What generally happens next is that we revert to concepts or ideas that we have used before, (our bag of ideas), or clichés. We will term this **Reversion**. When we are faced with the obstacle of expanding the **True Idea**, it is often very difficult to access the **Undiscovered Country**. And this is where most writers break down and capitulate to their own laziness and just hack out what ever will finish the work and get their friends to tell you its great. This is where

Experience, Musical and Lyrical Proficiency, and Well-Developed Tools will aid the writer in getting past the barrier to the **Undiscovered Country**. Once you have gained access, it is far easier to maintain an original line of thought simply because there is strength in numbers, (of ideas). The more original ideas you have in a work the easier it is to make leaps or links to more good ideas.

Using Clichés:

Clichés can be very useful. They can be used to support or fill out the work until you have time to go back and improve the sections where you have employed clichés to fill out the structure so that you have a working model of the song. You can use clichés to fill out your lyrics or musically to fill in section of the form so that you can examine a working model of the song to give you an overall dynamic. This will allow you to put the True Idea into a context that will allow it to exert itself on surrounding concepts in a relative environment that will allow you to proceed with developing your ideas.

Discovering the Song:

Once you have a working model of the song, you now have to push onward and discover what the song wants, (See: *Method II*, below). You have to expand outward from the **True Idea** discover the music and the story. So there are **TWO** discoveries here: Lyrical and Musical. They can feed each other, but generally the music is easier to write than the words. Rogers and Hammerstein said often that the music would come very quickly, but they would spend days or weeks of the lyrical content.

B. Starting Points:

There are generally two ways to start writing. You can start with the words or the music. A lot of people start with some sort of musical foundation,

and then lay some lyrics over top of this. It is very common to start with a 2 or 4-bar repeated progression and expand from there. Most Blues and a lot of pop songs use this concept. But music that was written prior to the mid-80s is melody based as opposed to rhythm based, as has been the prevalent basis since the mid-80s. Most pre-80s music is written over a riff or melodic statement. This does not mean there is no attention to the groove or rhythm, it is just that the main ideas are melody-centric.

Melody-centric composition tends to have a greater degree of staying power as the history of pop moves forward into the 21st century, and is generally stronger compositionally. You can copyright a melody, but not a chord progression.

Starting with Words: starting a lyric can help orient your song towards melody-centricity. Because a writer is more inclined to put a melody to a lyrical phrase. It is as simple as that. And melody is a more progressive concept than rhythm. Rhythm is repetitive and therefore more inclined to be of a static nature when applied to a composition. So if you are looking for a way to propel the song along and have development, it can be helpful to begin with a concept that is more likely to provoke change and forward movement of the work.

Two Methods to approach writing songs:

Method I: Personal Agenda

Begin writing by having an agenda or preconception for the work:

1. the song will be about “ x” .
2. it will be in a certain style
3. it will follow certain requirements of form, construction, length, or will emulate another artist.

This method is usually employed by beginners who have not really developed their creative processes and by seasoned writers who are writing for specific artists or business interests. The beginner is at the mercy of his influences and not his imagination, so he goes for the familiar.

Method II: Art as Master

This method is generally employed by mature writers. Instead of having an agenda, they just let the ideas direct them to the completion of the song. If you have developed your craft, and can get in touch with your imagination, it is more a process of listening to your ideas and giving them what they need to communicate the strongest representation of the concept. These writers possess the ability to let the creative process flow and can follow it musically and lyrically. Also these artists have the ability to get outside of themselves. Unless they are such tortured souls they have no need for outside subject matter.

Young writers tend to write about themselves or people they know. And while this is fine, at some point you need to find more compelling subject matter. Just because it's true doesn't mean it's worthy. And at this point the young writer usually gets stuck inside his own experience. This is why it is very important to nourish your mind.

Musically limited writers can't play well enough to let the music flow and get bogged down just trying to find the music and then lose their train of thought or leap of imagination. They also will be less likely to run into useful mistakes that would propel the music in a new direction. So at some point you need to learn how to play.

Engaging Imagination/Muse:

Use whatever method you need to get started, but this will probably have to be adjusted once you seriously start writing. In the beginning whatever gets the process moving is desirable.

- Working with machines/computer nonlinear editing:
- Writing with loops, samples, or machines can hinder the creative process because they impose restrictions inherent in the figure accompanying you. The content of the loop which is probably 2 or 4 bars will lock you into that format:
- Lyrical
- Rhythmic
- Melodic
- Harmonic

Leaps of imagination are triggered by deviations or mistakes made by the writer as he goes through the song, and if you are restricted by the machine, you will not make this leap because your mind will generally be closed to it. It is sometimes good to work with restrictions as an exercise or if you are working on predetermined content, but in the genesis of the song, it will inhibit your creativity, and in the long run your ability to work without machines. If you do not develop your craft on many levels simultaneously, some aspects of it will not develop.

Working organically allows your mind to connect ideas together and intertwine them in ways that will be inhibited if you just paste them together in a computer. Loops have finite harmonic and rhythmic content, if you write in the box, you stay in the box. So keep the machines to a minimum.

Leaps of Imagination:

The more you develop all your facilities and understand the tools to aid you, the more the potential exists for leaps of imagination. The more you cultivate all the aspects of the creative routine, the easier it will be to jump.

Engaging the Secondary Consciousness: this is the ability to have the conscious and perhaps unconscious mind working on your creative projects when you are not actively doing so. It will give you the ability to have your mind working on obstacles or problems you are encountering in your writing while you are going about your other life activities. The more tools and skills you give your mind, (all the things we have discussed to make you a better writer), the less you need of your brain's computing power to create, or think of it as a better, faster and more powerful computer you have built inside your head. So it can work on problems when you are not actively doing so. And you will find that solutions will come to you seemingly by themselves.

Sanctuary:

This applies to a place, state of mind, or atmosphere in which most people find conducive to writing, creating, etc. For most people to be able to access their imagination they must feel secure and uninhibited to have the confidence to express themselves. The more you do it and succeed, the easier it is to access your imagination in more complex and difficult situations and circumstances.

In order to maximize the class situation, everyone must be willing to support each other so that everyone can derive the most development within the group setting. People must be willing to expose their art and accept criticism, knowing that there is no malice or pettiness involved. There can be heated discussion, competitiveness, and conflict all in being passionate about your art, but there also must be the acceptance of the fact that most of the art being exhibited is flawed and in need of development and improvement. The writers must trust in

other people in the group even when harsh criticism is levied. But everyone also must realize that their own heads will soon be on the block. It is all right to rip someone, just make sure they feel the love while you are flailing their hide.

Creative Growth from a Group:

Helping others to develop helps you develop as an individual. You can always learn something from someone no matter what their level of ability. Every person has a specific and unique point of view and personal history, and it takes a vast body of knowledge and experience before you can receive some unique perspective from another person. If you can find a solution to someone else's creative dilemma or problem, you have learned and grown from that experience, and by writing with others, the aggregate pool of experience usually cross pollinates and enriches each individual. Sometimes group participation is about growth, not results.

Writers' Creative View:

Writing is a lifelong endeavor. And most people do not conceive of it in the correct manner. It is easy to write when you take a class because there is a reason to do it and an audience to listen and discuss it. The writer's view of the class and their relation to their craft is as if the "class" is a very active creative time with the output decreasing after the class ends. With the other aspects of their life growing back into the space they allotted for the class and depressing the creative output. It is very hard to sustain creative output with all the other demands life puts upon us, especially as we grow older. What the writer should try and achieve is to construct their life in such a way that the other aspects of their life feed the creative so that it is never wholly shut down and that it continues to grow throughout the span of the years.

The creative process should be fed by, and therefore, start to consume more of an individual's conscious world if it is continually fed. And a lot of the time, this really has to do more with your state of mind while also being a lifestyle. It should be like a creature that continually grows inside your head. The more you feed it, the more space it takes up, and the bigger it gets, the more it participates in your conscious and subconscious life. And the more you contribute to the creative facilities, the easier it is to create.

Artistic Integrity in the Context of: Artistic Credibility, Originality, Self Indulgence, and Commercial Success:

There are always a few arguments that arise when writing songs, and they are:

- A. On the personal level: Is the Artist the best judge of his work.
- B. On a credibility level: Does Commercial Success provide automatic Artistic Credibility and Justification.

The answer to both questions is usually: " NO" .

Artist as Judge:

For the most part it is hard for an artist to be a good judge of his work.

This is especially true for inexperienced artists who are craving early gratification for their work. When criticism is levied, the writers cry of, " Well I love it" , does not automatically invalidate the Criticism or give the writer any credibility except perhaps in his own mind. Of course there can be discussion, but generally in the early stages there is always room for improvement. Also keep in mind that most professional recording acts go into the studio with a seasoned producer for the express purpose of improving the artists music and guiding them through the process. It is generally the non-professional artists with an impaired view of their ability that go into the studio and record their own music without objective help. And how many self-produced masterpieces can you name off hand?

The most we can ask of any developing artist is that they do their best with the ability they have at that point in time, and accept criticism as part of the developmental process. One must strive to improve his ability, knowing that the art they are creating, while perhaps flawed, is a snapshot of their development at this stage. It is an artistic barometer of how far they have come at this stage in their life, and possibly a reflection of what has happened in their personal history as well.

Commercial Success as Artistic Justification:

The battle cry of the derivative writer is, “ It sounds just like what is on the radio” . Yes, and we all know commercial radio thrives on forgettable and disposable detritus floating in the sewer of popular music. So get over it. Perhaps you can go and make a million dollars, and I encourage you to do so. But do not confuse good art with good business. If you want to be a commercial artist that will have a 5-minute career go do it, but don’ t try to justify inferior craft with commercial relevance. One is art, the other is business, and do not confuse the two. This does not mean that there isn’ t quality music available, but one does not equal the other, and visa versa.

Working with and without machines or recording your song too early:

If you work with machines to give you harmonic structure, (loops, samples, etc), or you record the song too early, you have pretty much hindered its further development. Once you actually stop playing the song, or can’ t play the song yourself, you are limiting how much more it can develop. You have to quit writing it at some point, but generally you must have very good judgement as to when to commit the song “ to tape” and relinquish the ability to make further leaps of imagination in its basic development. It is our common nature to be excited about what we have created and want to commit it to some sort of record. Just make sure the ideas are developed optimally when you do that. There is

definitely something to catching the first take/idea/germ of the idea. Something can be lost by polishing the prize into a pile of dust. But don' t quit polishing until you have the diamond, otherwise it just looks like a rock.

The Song should sound effortless:

The sign that the song is well constructed is that it flows effortlessly along and is perceived as such. You should have the impression that the song:

1. musically and logically flows along without any changes that seem confusing or forced unless this is the writer' s intent.
2. It should also flow lyrically. It should seem that the words just merge with the song, and have no points where they sound forced, (rhythmically, rhyme), and seem to make sense with the theme of the song.

Form:

Need to introduce form through analysis: basically two styles

1. That derived from the Blues/country branch which is ABABCAB
2. Jazz/big band branch with no real chorus but more rotating on a Head or Hook: Sinatra/Nat Cole

Lyrics:

A. Lyrical Proficiency: there is also music in words and you have to become adept at the manipulation of this music.

1. Meter
2. Rhyme
3. Assonance
4. Alliteration

B. The Visual Lyric and Concrete Images:

Need to make the students understand that this is a major issue with inexperienced writers and have to understand what this is.

Assignment: ask them to write lyric with only description and not conveyance of any emotions or state of mind. . All information has to be conveyed through observation of actions, description etc. No commentary on feelings or emotions, just description of the scene or situation is allowed to convey the message.

*could give them picture and have them start from there to write lyric.