



How to Write a Song
The "No BS"
Songwriter's Bible

by Paul Ventura

**Learn Never Before Revealed Secrets of
Songwriting Without the Fluff!**

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Chapter 1 – Basic Terminology.....	8
Chapter 2 – A Method to Songwriting.....	19
Chapter 3 – Lyrics.....	31
Chapter 4 – Stimuli for Songwriting.....	41
Chapter 5 – Devices.....	51
Chapter 6 – Writer's Block.....	57
Chapter 7 – Writing Great Hooks.....	61
Chapter 8 – Recording Your Music.....	67
Glossary.....	82
Conclusion.....	84

Introduction

Hi! I'm Paul Ventura, also known as the Music Guy around these parts. Welcome to “How to Write a Song - The 'No BS' Songwriter's Bible”.

Most anyone is able to write a song on the most basic level by which I mean they can hum or sing something unique and call it a song, but this book is going to look at the fine mechanics of songwriting and teach you how to write great songs using actual unique secrets which I use on a daily basis to inspire song ideas and develop them into well written songs with big hooks.

I know a lot of songwriters will flat out tell you that you can't “learn” to write a song, regardless of the method. They call songwriting a naturally inherent talent and ability.

This plain isn't true and I can attest to and am living proof that songwriting is a skill like any other which gets better both with practice and of course the proper method and instruction. Anyone who tells you differently and who has written a hit song early on in their songwriting careers (a very rare demographic) just got extremely lucky.

I'll explain more about who I am in a moment, but let me first tell you a bit about what this book is going to teach you.

First, I'm going to go over some of the basic music and song concepts which I'll be mentioning throughout this book and which will help you in your writing so that you can become familiar and comfortable with them.

I'll then go through a specific method of songwriting for beginners which I used when I first started writing and still use today in conjunction with other methods. In that chapter I'll also offer some tips on writing with other people whether that be in a one on one dynamic or in more of a complete band setting.

I'll then address writing lyrics specifically so that you can learn to write great lyrics on any subject matter even if you've never written one in your life.

From there we get into the real meat of this book where I teach you a variety of techniques for coming up with great song ideas out of nothing.

After that I'll offer a number of devices which you can use to bolster your existing ideas and then a chapter on how to overcome songwriter's block if you're absolutely stuck on an idea which you can't manage to finish.

I'll end this block with a chapter on writing HUGE memorable hooks which will have people humming them for hours, weeks, and years to come. I really am giving away some of my best secrets in these last few chapters.

The final chapter will cover everything you need to know to record your music either on your own at home (and on a budget) to get great sounding recordings or with a professional producer. I've been on both sides of this so I'll walk you through both processes in full so that you can choose the method which is best for you and learn what goes into each.

After you've used this information to write some great songs, I encourage you to check out my bonus eBook which you received with your purchase of this book on the subject of marketing and selling your music online in "How to Promote Your Music".

I've included a glossary at the end of this book and a kind of "final thought" conclusion chapter in which I'll share some bonuses with you which you'll see when you get there.

I should note that I'll be talking in the first person quite a bit throughout this book and will refer to my personal songwriting experiences in describing how something works when appropriate.

Now that you know the basic overview about what you'll get out of this book, let me better introduce myself as to give you a better idea of my songwriting experience and methods.

Who IS the Music Guy?

I'm Paul Ventura, a 37 year old musician who splits his time between DC and New York. My one true passion for the last 10 years or so has been music. I love listening to music, discovering new music, playing music live or just with my friends, recording music, and of course and most of all, I love writing music.

I have been the sole songwriter for 4 bands now including the 2008 Vans Warped Tour Battle of the Bands winner "The Great Escape" and currently

my newest project “Brigands”. I play guitar, bass, a little piano, and sing, and I have my own home studio setup which I use to record my music.

Here's a picture of me looking a bit tired after playing the Merriweather Post Pavilion date of the 2008 Vans Warped Tour.



I'm not the greatest singer or guitarist in the world, and I can't give you advice on how to keep a band together, but the one thing I pride myself on knowing how to do is write a good song.

In addition to writing songs for my own projects of the past and present, I've written instrumental jingles for local companies in my area, music for corporate presentations, and also video game soundtrack music. I'm currently writing the entire score for the throwback 16 bit RPG “Dance Quest” which is still in the production phase, but I'll post a link to it on my site when it's completed.

As I mentioned, I completely disagree with the idea that you can either write a song or you can't. I didn't have any sort of musical background myself growing up; no one in my family played any instruments and I

didn't even learn to play an instrument myself until I got my first guitar for my 17th birthday. I didn't even listen to much music or develop my own musical taste until I was about 15.

I admittedly craved attention in high school and eventually decided that I wanted to start a band around the time I was really getting into top 40 as well as underground music for the first time. Learning the guitar was more of a necessity and really just one of the first steps in working towards my aspirations of starting my own band which I would sing, play guitar, and write the songs for.

After I learned the basic chords and enough on guitar to be able to play along with my favorite songs, I started working on writing my own songs. Most of my first (horrible) attempts at writing were just bits and pieces like a guitar part which was typically just a rip off of something from one of my favorite artists of the time whom I was trying to emulate.

I ended up with a lot of what you could barely call fragments of songs. I took the most promising of what I had at the time and focused on finishing those parts and turning them into complete songs.

I started a band called “The Popsceen” while I was in college which was pop rock mixed with some ska. I put a lot of work into that band for a couple of years but eventually it became too difficult to recruit and maintain horn players for the band, so the drummer and I (having similar musical tastes) went on to subsequently start a couple of bands after I graduated, the latter of which was “The Great Escape”.

The Great Escape was mostly pop punk/pop rock and we built up a very loyal and dedicated fanbase in a short time which culminated with our winning the Ernie Ball Battles of the Bands and earning a spot on Warped Tour in 2008.

Shortly after that, things quickly fell apart as most of the other members had just graduated college themselves and had life plans revolving around relocating to different places.

I myself moved up to New York after that summer and decided against trying to relocate The Great Escape there without any of the original members. I joined another band as the singer and lead songwriter when I first moved up, and that's been the situation for the last 3 years which brings us up to today when I've recently started a new project of my own

called “Brigands”.

Now that you know a bit more about me we can get ready to get into the process of how to write a song; but first we need to cover some of the basic terminology associated with songwriting which I'll be using throughout this book.

Chapter 1 – Basic Terminology



In this first chapter we'll go over a lot of the songwriting lingo I'll be using throughout this book. You likely already know some of these terms but this will help to give you a better understanding of them.

I'm also going to be using a real song example to better explain these terms and how it relates to the song. I'll use "Let It Be" by The Beatles because each section is easy to identify and it's a song which virtually anyone who reads this will be familiar with.

If you're not familiar with it then **check it out on YouTube** right now; it's a fantastic work from Paul McCartney. If you're a bit confused with any one of these terms, see how it relates to the song at the end to better understand them.

Song Sections:

Songs are comprised of different sections. The order of the sections is known as the "arrangement". Let's take a look at the basic possible sections of a song.

Intro: The intro of a song is just that. Oftentimes it's the same as the chorus, minus the vocals.

Verse: The verse generally follows the intro of the song and normally plays at least twice, typically with different lyrics but the same melody.

Prechorus: The prechorus is an optional section which connects the verse to the chorus. You can use the prechorus to build the anticipation for the chorus to make it that much more powerful when it comes. A prechorus also gives you the chance to vary the tone of the song dramatically from the verse but without having to do it all at once.

Chorus/Refrain: The “pay off” of a song and the part which gets repeated both musically and lyrically at least twice. This is generally the most memorable part of a song; a great chorus can stand on its own without needing much help from the other sections of the song.

Bridge/Middle 8: A unique part between the second and final chorus of a song. Typically it uses a different chord progression and melodies.

Interlude: An instrumental/solo section, typically placed in place of or in conjunction with the bridge.

Coda/Outro: You're probably familiar with the term “outro”. Coda quite literally means “tail”. This is the final section of a song which brings it to its conclusion. When I use the term “coda”, I generally use it to refer to a completely unique and new part of the song, whereas an outro is typically just the repeating of the intro or drawing out of the chorus.

The most typical arrangements of pop songs are either:

intro → verse → prechorus → chorus → verse → prechorus → chorus → bridge → chorus → outro

intro → verse → chorus → verse → chorus → bridge → chorus → outro

Or without the prechorus:

Oftentimes they'll exist without the bridge, as well. The latter of these templates is one of the easiest arrangements to work off of, especially when working on your first few songs because all you've got to do is really write a verse and a chorus/intro at minimum.

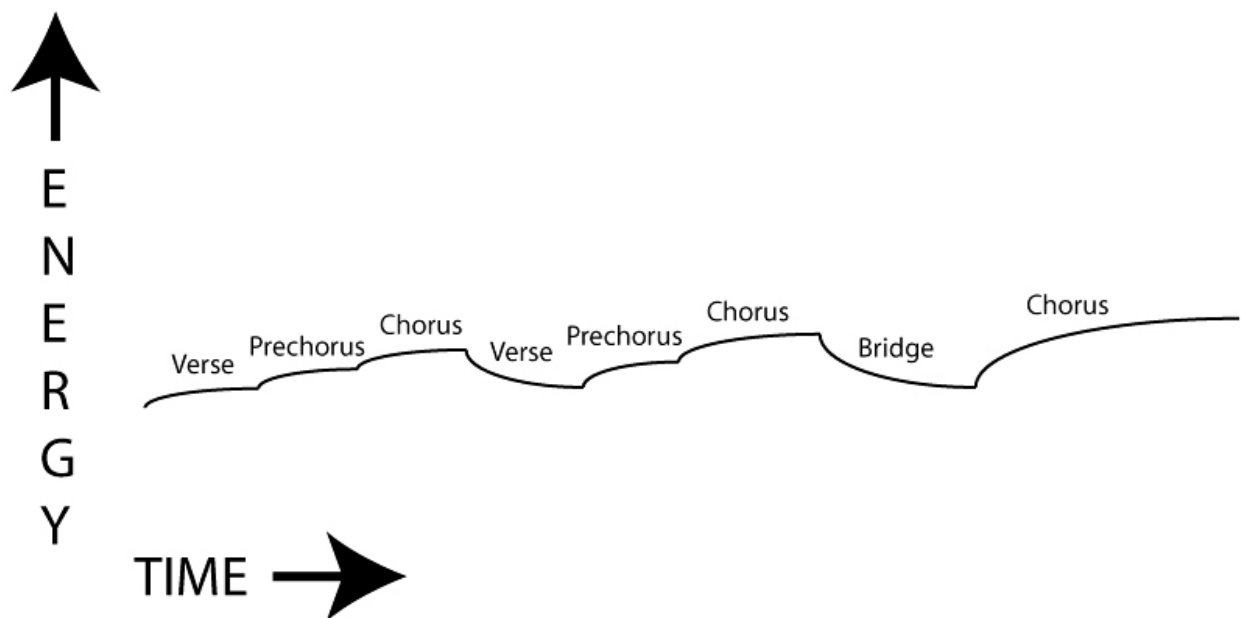
Let It Be's arrangement goes:

intro → verse → chorus → verse → chorus → intro → musical interlude → chorus → verse → chorus → outro

This isn't the most typical arrangement, but you can notice how Paul McCartney is essentially using the same 3 parts over and over just in slightly different presentations. Songwriting should be open ended and you should always do what's best for the song; don't feel pressured to stick to the basic templates which I listed just now and which you hear in most pop songs, this is how you can separate yourself from the rest.

Start with the chorus if it lends itself to doing that, or jump right into the verse while skipping any kind of intro if that's in the best interest of the song.

The different sections of a song can work together to build energy as the song progresses. Here is diagram showing generally how the song structure works to build energy as time progresses within a song.



Even if you're writing a ballad, this structure still applies. Verses should flow into prechoruses, prechoruses should set up big memorable choruses, then the energy should come back down to start the process over again with the ultimate climax occurring at the end of the song in the final chorus, so

you leave them and end with the highest energy. Again, remember to do what's best for the song.

Hooks

“Hook” is a pretty subjective term in songwriting which varies amongst different people. On the most basic level, a hook is a line of melody which stands out from the background rhythm of a song. A hook can be represented by any instrument including a vocal melody.

Some people use hook to refer to the most memorable part of a song, like if a song starts out with an intro which focuses and revolves around a catchy guitar riff, that's the hook, and it generally repeats later throughout the song, oftentimes during the chorus. Some people even refer to the chorus as the hook. Hint: write catchy and memorable hooks and you're in good shape, the rest can be filled in pretty easily. (See Chapter 7 for more information hooks).

In Let It Be, the main hook is McCartney's vocal melody repetition of the chorus of, singing “let it be”.

Lyrics/Vocals

A lot of people interchange the terms “lyrics” with “vocals” when talking about the words to the song. I want to make an important distinction between the two.

LYRICS are the actual written words which the singer is singing whereas the **VOCALS** are the sung vocal melodies of a song.

Melody/Harmony

Here is another case in which people mistakenly mix these two terms together when they really mean one or the other. **MELODY** refers to the notes of a hook whereas **HARMONY** refers to a second note or set of notes which compliment and “harmonize” with the original note or set of notes.

Time Signature

Time signature tells you how the beats in a song are to be counted. It's typically presented in a fractional format. 4/4, for example, is the most commonly used time signature in Western music.

Most people identify 3/4 time as “waltz time” because of its association to the Waltz dance step. Let's take the 3/4 example and look at what the 3 and 4 numbers mean, respectively.

Top Number (3): The top number refers to the number of beats per measure (a measure is simply a segment of time defined by a number of beats of a given duration). So 3 means there are 3 beats per measure. 4 would mean 4 beats per measure, and so on.

Bottom Number (4): The bottom number refers to the kind of beat to count. You can think of this number as its own fraction to help you out and add a “1” over it. So 4 = 1/4. So a 4 represents quarter notes, a 2 represents half notes, an 8 represents eighth notes, 16 represents sixteenth notes, etc.

So a song which is in 3/4 time means that it's 3 QUARTER (1/4) beats per measure.

Let It Be is in 4/4 time. There are 4 quarter notes played in each measure.

Tempo

Tempo is simply the speed at which the song is played. It's measured in BMP, or beats per minute. The style or genre of a song can dictate or have an impact on the tempo which you'll likely be choosing.

Keys and Chord Progression

The chord progression is the series of chords which are played during an individual section or part of a song. Occasionally you'll hear a song with the same progression played through the entire song (*example: “Enough to Get Away” by Joseph Arthur OR “With or Without You” by U2*).

Most typically, however, songs will use different chord progressions at different parts of a song.

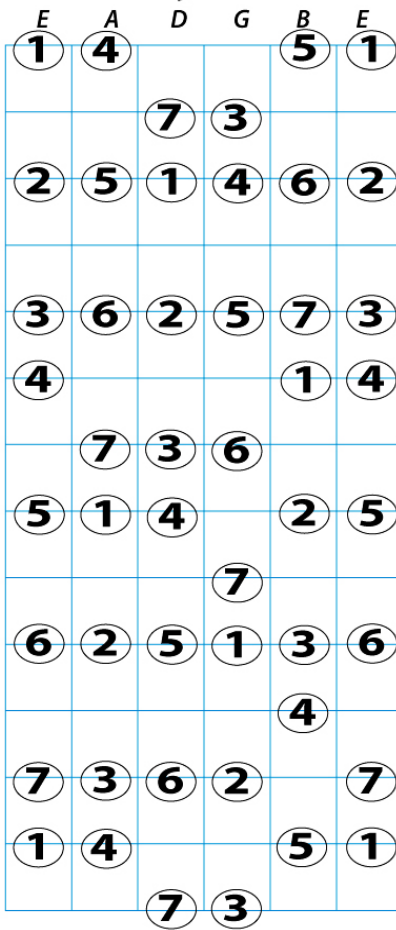
The key of a song dictates what chords/notes are played in that song. Most songs are based around one key, and most times every chord/note which appears in that song is from that key's scale. The chords/notes within a major key are listed 1-7.

Now you may be confused here and ask that if there are 12 notes (A, A#, B, C, C#, D, D#, E, F, F#, G, G#), where does the "7" come from?

Not every one of the 12 notes appears naturally in the key of something, and instead every major key has 7 notes within it. Exactly which 7 of the 12 notes which will appear in that key will obviously vary from key to key, but you'll notice that if you try playing one of the notes which does not belong in a particular major key, you'll find that it sounds off or displeasing to the ear.

Let's take a look on the next page at the scale of E to better understand the different notes which appear in its seven note diatonic scale in numerical format:

Key of E



You'll notice that this diagram resembles a guitar's fretboard but that I only have shown down through 13 frets. Each number on this board represents the scale degree of each note in relation to the scale of E which this diagram represents, and the position of each number on this board represents where the root note of the chord should be played.

The numbers on the first line of the board represent playing the string open, so the first fret is technically the second row's line in this diagram. Note that there are always 2 spaces between each degree except for 3-4 and 7-1.

So if we're writing a song in the key of E major, and I say the chord progression for the verse goes 1, 5, 6, 4, then you can refer to this diagram to see that (in other words) that chord progression goes E, B, C#m, A. "E" is the tonic or obviously the principle note in the scale of E. "B" is the 5th or dominant of E. "C#m" is the 6th or submediant of E. "A" is the 4th or subdominant of E. So in the key of E:

E - 1	F#m - 2	G#m - 3	A - 4	B - 2	C#m - 2	D# - 7
Tonic	Supertonic	Mediant	Subdominant	Dominant	Submediant	Leading Tone

The technical terms in the lower row aren't as important to remember as the numbers which can be used to quickly identify a chord progression.

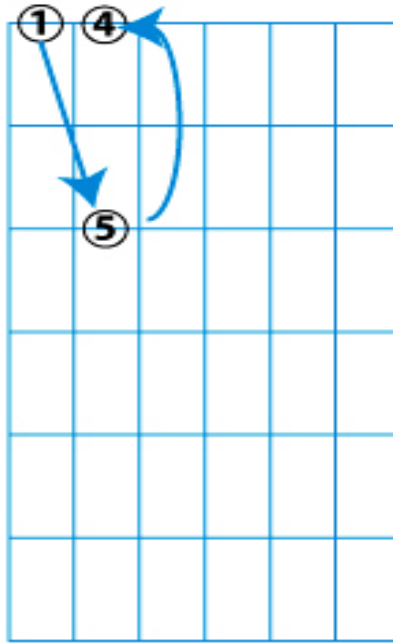
The spacing between each “degree” is always the same, regardless of the key of the song, so you know that if you're on the tonic note of your key then you should be able to find the 5th, the 4th, the 6th, etc. in relation to that key.

You know that from the low E string that if you're on the 1st (tonic), the 5th is one string over and two frets down or it's on the same string 7 frets down.

Developing a good understanding of this enables you to quickly find different chords which will all sound good when you're in a certain key so that you can try them one after another to see which sounds best in your chord progression when played underneath a vocal or musical melody of some kind.

Three Chord Progression:

A three chord progression is a progression which uses just three chords in its phrase. Typically this will include one chord being used twice in a phrase. A popular use of the three chord progression is to open the song on the main note of the key, go to the 5th, go to the 4th, stay on the 4th (1-5-4-4). So staying in the key of E, it would go:

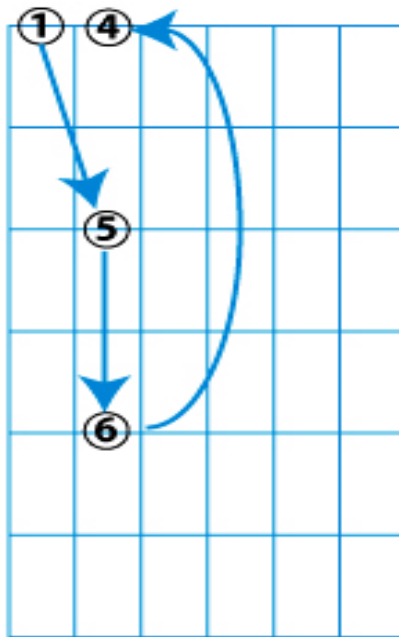


example: ***Semi-Charmed Life*** by Third Eye Blind

Four Chord Progression:

The vast majority of songs use four chords in a phrase, typically using one of just a small handful of popular progressions. I'll name a couple of the more popular ones here, but never feel tied into using one progression. Typically you'll try one chord then another and it will feel natural or it won't.

The “four chord wonder” goes from the 1st to the 5th to the 6th and ends on the 4th (1, 5, 6, 4).

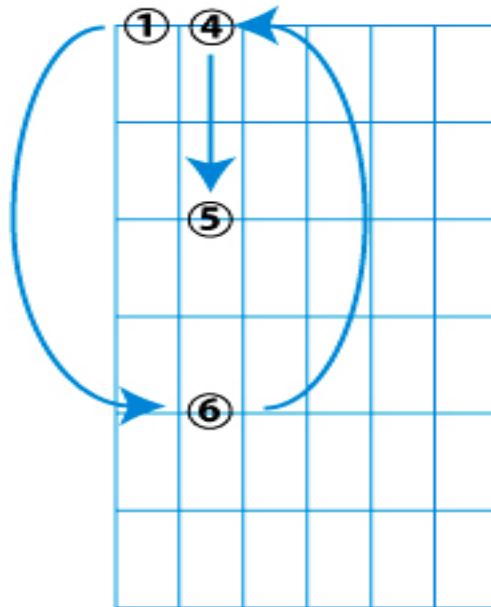


This progression is arguably the most popular and (over)used in Western popular music. Most anything you put on top of this progression fits and sounds good and it uses the most notable notes of a key's scale in one progression. I liken this progression to climbing a mountain.

The first three chords are the climb which culminates on the 6th, then you finally come back down on the 4th. In addition to just working with most pop music you're writing, I believe the listener subconsciously feels like they've gone on an aural journey just by listening to that progression.

example: "Let It Be" by the Beatles and hundreds of thousands of other songs.

Easily the most popular progression of the entire decade of the 50's in music was the "Doo-Wop" progression which was synonymous with doo-wop music of the time. It opens on the 1st then goes to the 6th to the 4th and ends on the 5th:



example: “**Earth Angel**” which was originally by The Penguins and later famously covered by The Temptations.

In returning to Let It Be, this song is in the key of C and uses the “four chord wonder” I just talked about in the first part of the verse.

1(C) 5(G) 6(Am) 4(F)
 When I find myself in times of trouble, mother mary comes to
 me,
1(C) 5(G) 4(F) 3(Em) 2(Dm) 1(C)
 speaking words of wisdom, let it be

Chorus:

6(Am) 5(G) 4(F) 1(C)
 let it be, let it be, let it be, let it be
1(C) 5(G) 4(F) 3(Em) 2(Dm) 1(C)
 whisper words of wisdom, let it be

Chapter 2 – A Method to Songwriting

As I said in opening, I started writing songs when I was about 17 after I had just gotten my first guitar and learned the basic chords. Song ideas wouldn't just magically pop into my head, I had to sit down and develop my own ideas. With practice, however, ideas began to come more naturally to me and over time the quality of my writing has improved.

This chapter is going to address this initial method which I used, then in subsequent chapters I'm going to talk about techniques you can use to get your creative juices flowing more easily.

If you don't find this chapter turns you into a prolific dynamo, don't worry because it's meant to be used in conjunction with the following chapters. Still, this chapter provides a good bedrock to get started on.

First off I should point out that while I think that MOST people who are reading this eBook will likely already have some experience with at least one instrument, if you don't then I recommend that you do because this enables you to use the basic chords to build your song around.



Also, I'd like to point out that it's important to have some kind of motivation for wanting to write songs as this will encourage you to continue writing.

If you get frustrated at not being able to write as easily as you'd like right away, you'll likely give up unless you have some kind of motivation for continuing. It's just like learning a musical instrument, if you don't have a reason to learn which will continue to motivate you to learn, then you'll likely give it up pretty easily.

My motivation was that I always had designs on starting my own band, and I had aspirations of making it a good band. I figured the only way to be a good band was to have good songs so I took that responsibility entirely on myself and started writing and never stopped after I found out how much fun it is.

Your motivation doesn't have to be to make it big as an artist or even start an organized group. It can be just getting up and playing one of your songs on open mic night at your local coffeehouse or being able to play something you've written for a significant other or family member.

Whatever your motivation, the point is to find something so that you can remind yourself of it whenever you are frustrated.

Now let's get into a method which I used to rely on before I ever had ideas coming to me back when it was just me, my guitar, and a piece of paper.

The Benefit of a Title

First thing's first, one great way to get started with building a song from the ground up is to choose **a title** for it. Normally I always preach music first, then lyrics, so why are we starting off with a title?

The title of a song can convey a lot of meaning and stir up so many thoughts or memories before you even hear the song itself. I have a very clear memory of a friend of mine about 8 years ago when I had just begun writing my first songs who suggested that I write a song called "The Reason Why I Hate You" because he was having some very rough days with a girl that he liked and hated at the same time.

It's a bit crude but I still think that's a really great title to this day because it

practically paints an entire back story for you in your mind and creates this structure where you just need to fill in the blanks.

At the very least it generates a lot of jumping points which can start the ball rolling. Almost as soon as he suggested that title to me I just pictured myself singing the chorus “but it's more than this whoa oh oh oh oh... the reason why I hate you” and I had the main hook written for the chorus just like that.

I never did much with the song, but that link will take you to a quick recording just showcasing the part of that song in question so that you can hear exactly what popped into my head from that title about 10 years ago.

A very evocative title can kick things off with a bang and give you a strong starting point to build from both musically and lyrically. In that case I got the main hook for the chorus from the title.

Think about a really powerful title for your song which can almost suggest lyrics and music just by virtue of itself. Think if you've ever caught yourself or someone else saying “that would make a great song title”.

You might think about asking a friend for a song title suggestion or two as a fresh and different perspective can really open your mind and give you something you never would have thought of.

Once you've got your title, try humming or singing some different notes with the title as the lyrics. I like to pick up my guitar and try plucking some different but random notes together in different variations of tempos.

Focus on trying to think of a way to present that title through melody. For something like “The Reason That I Hate You”, you might picture a biting, snarling delivery with a lot of minor chords.

This brings me to the other half of starting out. When you are starting out, you can rely heavily on and stick with what you know; in the case of songwriting, I mean to try to emulate the artists whom you like. Pay attention to their song structures and even their melodies to spark your own ideas. Every great artist in the history of music has looked to those who came before them at some point, and if you're just starting out this is a great way to learn.

When I started writing, Reel Big Fish was one of my favorite bands. They

have a knack for writing the most depressing, self deprecating, and angry lyrics, and contrasting them with the happiest pop ska melodies you'll ever hear. So instead of getting a really dark song out of "The Reason Why I Hate You", I had an uptempo poppy rock song.

Take one of your favorite popular songs of today and pick out the vocal melody for the chorus. Pay attention to the variation "up and down" rhythm of the notes as well as the phrasing and delivery of those notes.

EVERY popular song which ever existed, when stripped down, is nothing more than the variation of a bunch of notes over top of a chord progression. This is the most simplistic state which a song exists in and it's the easiest way to write one from the ground up.

Once you get the progression and basic melody on top of that figured out, other instruments and even sections to the song will begin to fall into place.

Can't Think of One?

If you can't come up with a unique title, try writing a song off of one of these titles which I came up with:

- Temporary Brothers
- Saturday Morning, 6 a.m.
- She Likes to Cry
- Trouble From the Past
- Promise, Intentions, Disappointment
- Mistakes Will Keep You Alive
- I'm Usually Better Than This
- Chase the Shadows Away
- Reaction Comes Too Late
- Why Do All My Days End Like This?

You can also check out the [Random Song Title Generator](#) or the [Song Name Creator](#) for millions of ideas.

Which Came First - The Music or the Lyrics?

Generally, I believe in writing music first. This is in part because, for me, the music takes priority over the lyrics. It's not just that the music (including the vocal melody) of a song is arguably more memorable and beloved than the lyrics, but it always feels much more natural to fit lyrics to existing music than doing it the other way around.

That being said, lyrics are extremely important and I put a lot of time into writing them, but in terms of the process, this is how I write.

I'll write a lyrical line from time to time to stir up a melody to go along with it (which I'll talk about later), but I've never written an entire song lyrically then matched the music to it.

This is how I teach and is also the conventional way of doing it amongst the majority of artists both past and present. Conversely, there are some artists who write lyrics first.

Fall Out Boy, a pop rock band, are an example of this. Their bassist writes ALL of the lyrics for the band, but the singer writes most of the music and fits the lyrics which he is given to match the music. The lyrics have a substantial effect on the music in this case and that's what helped to give them their own signature sound.

I also just plain and simple find it easier to create lyrics to a melody I've written. Once I have the vocal melody, I have an idea of the mood of the lyrics and more technically the spacing which is required of them such as knowing how many syllables per line I'll need. This is a very specific way of how the lyrics FIT to the music.

Recording Ideas

In getting back to writing the melody for your title, as you're experimenting I completely recommend that you have a means to record your ideas, even if you're just tinkering around blindly with some notes with your voice or with an instrument.



I'm not saying you need to rush out and buy a tape recorder. Virtually any phone you can buy these days has a built in app for recording voice memos, so you always have a handy way for recording ideas on the go at your fingertips.

Why record your ideas the moment you get them?

First, you never know when you might happen upon something you like while you're tinkering around with different potential melodies. You don't want to stumble upon a melody which you like only to have it disappear seconds later because you forgot it.

When I get an idea for a melody I rush to record it as quickly as possible because every second I wait while trying to remember it, that initial idea begins to either fade or warp into something different and more often than not that newer and morphed idea is worse than the initial one. After you've got that initial idea recorded, you can let the idea evolve and put down variations so long as you have that recording of what it sounded like at its genesis.

Secondly, recording yourself messing around with some melodies when you are first starting out gives you a chance to listen back later on with a fresh mind. Upon a second listen later on, you may come up with a completely new and better idea based off of something you were doing earlier but didn't like or notice at the time.

On The Go

I ALSO recommend having the ability to record an idea WHEREVER you are; so I'm not just referring to recording yourself while sitting down in songwriting mode, but being prepared to record a new idea while you are out somewhere if one comes to you.

It's very important that you always have a means to record ideas with you because you never know when something could pop into your head. Once you start trying to write a song and get into that mode or habit of thought, you'll be surprised at when inspiration strikes.

I get a lot of ideas when my mind is completely free of commitments such as when I'm commuting on my local metro rail/subway and I'll be humming some melodies to myself, trying to come up with something because I have nothing else to do.

Running With an Idea

Everything about this following point will continue to get easier and feel more natural the more you do it. Say you're on a bus just humming some notes in your head and you come upon what you could see making a great and energetic intro or hook for a song whether that be a vocal or an instrumental hook.



Once you have an idea for a part of a song, **I INSIST** that you run with it as long as you can. Yep, I'm pretty serious about this point.

What I mean by this is that you should immediately start recording your idea for that intro, but then rather than putting away your phone or whatever you used to record the idea, THEN envision and imagine where you could see that intro part flowing from there, like what kind of a verse would follow it up.

Just keep humming and working in the moment until you hit a wall. You'd be surprised at how easy it is to write some really quality parts in the moment if you just keep going with it as opposed to tabling it for the time being and revisiting that initial idea later on.

This is because it's much easier to build on an idea while it's new and fresh as opposed to finishing an incomplete song later on, or rather it's easier to write a song when you have absolutely no expectations whatsoever associated with it. And when do you have the lowest expectations for a song? **When it's still a brand new and largely blank song idea which could go anywhere.**

I know a lot of writers, myself included, who will write a very quality single section of a song whether it be a chorus, a verse, a hook, etc. then they'll go to bed or move on to something else quite satisfied with what they have just

completed. Then, when they come to revisit that part and try to build on it, it becomes increasingly difficult and sometimes impossible to finish that song.

Because that initial part which you do have is so strong in your mind, no other section of a song which you try to pair with it feels perfect, equal, or at that same level.

But the difference when you've just gotten an idea in the moment is that you're completely open to taking it in any direction.

I'm not saying that you'll come up with some great or even the best following parts to match your initial section in the moment, but statistically you'll be much better off running with that idea for another minute or two if you can.

Songwriting With Other People



Lennon and McCartney, arguably the best songwriting partnership of all time, co-wrote songs together especially in the early days of The Beatles. Later on they kept that same Lennon/McCartney credit so that every song was credited to the both of them, but they typically wrote songs independently after the hit singles of 1963/1964, save for a few examples such as “We Can Work It Out”.

They would finish off each other's ideas in most instances. If Paul was stuck and needed a bridge for a song or couldn't figure out where to take it next, John worked out something which worked for that song.

Writing with someone else can bring in the best of two songwriting minds. At the very least, a second songwriter can force one person's idea to go through a second quality assurance and see things which the first person could not.

Conversely you can make the argument that songwriting with someone else forces both parties to make compromises to the other person, sometimes to the detriment of the overall product.

I've been in all sorts of different songwriting dynamics over the years. I've written with a full band before and I've written one on one. Most commonly, though, I write by myself because I'm a bit of a control freak when it comes to my music.

If you are like that at all yourself, a good way to get around that is to just stick to fresh ideas when you are collaborating with someone else. In other words, don't bring a song which you've already had an idea for to the table if you don't want someone messing with it (unless you're REALLY stuck).

Instead, brainstorm on the spot with that person to get something fresh in the moment as you'll view this song as a complete collaboration rather than one of your own.

In keeping with this point, songwriting can not only be productive, but it can be a lot of fun, and one of the most fun ways to songwrite in fact is to collaborate with a friend and work to come up with a completely new idea together in the moment.

If you're writing with a full band, it's a very different dynamic because you'll have a lot of different influences and ideas coming from every angle. Be sure to be receptive to everyone's ideas, though. If you ever completely disagree with someone's idea, don't be afraid to fight to get your way if you truly feel it's best for the song. If you feel strongly enough about something, the other members will see and respect that.

Conversely, some bands take a very different approach. Coldplay, for instance, have a veto process wherein if just one of the 4 members of the group disagrees with a song or something in a song brought on by someone else, they toss that part out. This means that they also work a lot harder on their music in general to get to that point where all 4 members are in agreement that this is the best course for a particular song.



The upside in their case is that the quality of their songwriting is fantastic and very palpable, not to mention that they are always on top of both the

best selling and best critics' lists – a feat which is extremely difficult to do especially in today's internet based music world; so there might be something to their method.

Remember that some songwriting partnerships just simply are not meant to be. Some people's approach to songwriting can differ so drastically from yours that you'll find it impossible to be productive with them.

For example, I primarily think and write in terms of hooks and melodies, and I've tried collaborating in the past with another songwriter friend of mine who is a great technical guitarist and likes to write really sophisticated and technical song parts with little concern for the melody.

You'd think that would be a match made in heaven as we could merge our different approaches but try as we might we scarcely got anything done.

Chapter 3 – Lyrics



Lyrics can be a great way to take exactly what you're feeling, dress them up a bit (or not), and put them out there for the world to hear. Lyrics can be completely therapeutic if you're honest with yourself; oftentimes those actually make for the best lyrics.

Paul McCartney once said about his song “The Long and Winding Road”: “It's rather a sad song. I like writing sad songs, it's a good bag to get into because you can actually acknowledge some deeper feelings of your own and put them in it. It's a good vehicle, it saves having to go to a psychiatrist”.

The same principle applies to lyrics as it does to music: it can be whatever you want. You can represent whatever you want through lyrics, perhaps more directly, from reliving a tragic or joyous moment from your past to making simple everyday observations about the world at large or just sharing your favorite kind of ice cream.

Let's talk about what makes for a good lyric and I'll then give you some tips

on how to write them.

Rhyming

Rhyming is maybe the one constant staple of lyrics. Save for a few exceptions I can recall, virtually any artist or song you can think of uses rhymes. When it comes to rhymes, there are both true and near rhymes.

True/Pure/Perfect Rhymes

I'm going to call these true rhymes, but you know the kind of rhymes I'm talking about. These are words which perfectly rhyme with one another like “bad” and “sad”. It's typically just the last sound or syllable of a word which is the focus, so “phone” and “alone” would be another example of a true rhyme.

Near Rhymes

The best rhymes in my opinion aren't true rhymes, but near rhymes. True rhymes like “bad” and “sad” are fine, but they're very predictable and typically will limit you in the number of perfect rhyme possibilities you can get out of them.

Instead you should look for near rhymes which have a similar vowel sound in them but don't end exactly the same way as a perfect rhyme. So rather than “days” and “ways”, think “days” and “face” or even “tonight” and “line”. You can do a lot more with near rhymes in terms of choices and I find near rhymes to be much more interesting than perfect rhymes.

I've gotten better about not relying on it as much in recent years, but when I first began to write lyrics I relied on Rhymezone.com A LOT for both finding true rhymes, near rhymes, and from time to time synonyms as well, so check that site out as it's a completely free word resource.

You can also check out a program like MasterWriter which I've done a complete video review on here. This is a huge resource for lyricists who need help. It offers millions of true and near rhymes for your words of choice and also puts together phrases for you which end in the rhyming word which you want or contain that word. It's great for getting over writer's block in an instant.

Rhyming Structure

In terms of structure, rhymes can appear at different points in a phrase of a song. They can happen in the same line, they can happen at the end of every line, they can happen every OTHER line, they can happen at the end of an entire collection of lines, or it can be a mix of everything. Here are some sappy lines which I came up with in the last 2 seconds which detail each of the structures:

Same Line:

“Do you have **something to prove** ¹ or **just something to lose** ¹
When you're **looking at me** ² tell me **what do you see**” ²

Every Line (Pairs):

“What do you think when you look at **me** ¹
is there something in my eyes that still makes you **believe**” ¹

Every Other Line:

“Waiting in line and I don't know what to **do** ¹
what's the point in living if we're not gonna be **free** ²
looking around yeah I'm still looking for **you** ¹
someday I'll be gone, and you'll be missing **me.**” ²

End of Each Collection of Lines:

I'm running tonight while trying to keep
my head above the **water** ¹

something in the way you never come around
it says why should I **bother** ¹

Random Mix:

I'm running **tonight** ¹
and I'm trying to **keep** ²
my head above the **water** ³

I'm running in **spite** ¹

Of the things that I've **seen** **2**
Why should I even **bother** **3**

Notice in the last example of the random mix that I broke the spacing up while keeping many of the lyrics the same as the example before it. Writing lyrics with a specific spacing can help you create a melody to it. I intentionally took out some of the words in the last example to get the syllables down to 5 or 6 per line.

Writing Lyrics

As I mentioned earlier, I will write music THEN lyrics most of the time. Once you have your melody written out and you know the general intended subject matter of the song then it becomes much easier to know what you need to write.

Don't know what to write about? Generally the best themes are the universal ones; themes which people can relate to because they have lived or are currently living them themselves. Here's a few of the most common lyrical themes covered in popular music.

(Happy) Love Songs – Easily the most prevalent theme lyrically in popular music is relationships, but that's a HUGE ball of wax which can take many different shapes.

The first of these is straight ahead love songs. If you're in a relationship or were once in a relationship, you can focus on the bright spots and focus on your feelings for that person. I'm not much into writing love songs in this sense, myself, as I think it's too easy for it to come across as sappy, even if there's a completely genuine link between your lyrics and how you're feeling.

I personally think it's much more interesting to focus on the next two categories.

Lost Love

Nearly everyone over the age of 16 has been in a relationship and nearly everyone over the age of 16 has seen one or two end. It's a bit cliché, but whenever I go through a break up I find significant solace in being able to

write about it.

More specifically I find comfort in the idea that others will get to hear about it through my music. So not only is this a great way to cope personally for you with that broken heart feeling, but really it's just a great theme because everyone can relate to it.

Unrequited Love

Another universal concept; who hasn't been infatuated with someone else only to have their feelings go unrequited? You're from different worlds and the differences are too great for the other person, the attraction isn't mutual, they're habitually in another relationship, or the other person is quite simply a fickle girl who enjoys leading boys along with no finish line in sight (I may be speaking from experience there); **whatever the reasoning**, there is a lot to be said about love or affection when it goes unrequited.

Emotions

This is a broad category in and of itself, but taking whatever emotion you're feeling and putting it into words makes for another relatable theme. Just like with relationships, the most popular emotions when it comes to lyrical themes are the darker ones like jealousy, depression, and loneliness. This makes sense because if someone is lonely, it is comforting to hear a song from someone in that same position; music is very therapeutic in that way.

Novelty Songs

Novelty songs are typically characterized as being comical or nonsensical lyrically, intended and known for their comic effects. Think of Weird Al as a perennial example of a writer of novelty songs.

Opinions

Many artists use their lyrics as a forum to voice their strong opinions on

any number of themes. This can be current events/world issues, politics, relations with other people, etc.

Story Telling

A song is the perfect forum for telling a story. Look at Bob Dylan's "Hurricane" for example. This is a quintessential example of a story being told through a song and at the same time Bob was voicing his opinion on a then somewhat current event, so don't be afraid to mix multiple themes and devices into the same song lyrically.

Yes most of these lyrical themes have been written about thousands and millions of times before, but there is always a new way to express the same feelings and emotions. The key is to put your own lyrical voice and perspective on that theme. Part of what attracts someone to a particular artist and turns them into a fan is their appreciation of and love for that artist's unique and possibly identifiable perspective on situations which shines through in their lyrics.

You should also try to focus your lyrical theme to something which you can sum up in a sentence or two just as if you were pitching a movie idea. If you can't do this then the song's meaning can get muddled pretty quickly and can diminish a lot of the "impact" which the song can deliver.

Once you do have your subject matter for the song, write out a few themes or keywords which are relevant to that greater subject matter and that you want to evolve and get into the song at some point.

If you have some kind of recording of your song (obviously without the lyrics) even if it's just your humming the vocal melody, try playing that over and over while singing some lyric possibilities in that melody to see how they fit.

Writing lyrics is a matter of trying different combinations and possibilities over and over until you find something which you like. The most difficult part for writing lyrics is when you don't have anything written for a song. As you continue to add lines of lyrics, it becomes increasingly easier to fill in the blanks as existing lyrics breed new lyrics.

Tip: Looking to your rhyming structure as an effective way to fill in some blanks.

If you know that you are ending one line with a certain vowel/sound, that gives you a lot of guidance for what kind of sound you'll need to match it in its corresponding rhyming line.

If you have a few rough lines which you know you want to get into the song, then determine whether you want those lyrics to go in the chorus or in a different part of the song.

Lyrics in The Chorus

The chorus is ideally where you put your most important or best/most clever lyrics which reflect your main message and which you want to convey to the listener if possible. If you were in a debate class, the chorus would be your primary argument.

Not only is this the case because the chorus is the section which generally repeats at least twice in the song, thus reiterating your point through repetition, but it's also the part of the song which the rest of the sections revolve around and build up to.

Take a powerful song like “I Will Survive” by Gloria Gaynor or later covered notably by Cake. The lyrics in the chorus are as succinct and empowering as any you'll find in pop music.

(coming out of the prechorus) “Did you think I'd lay down and die? Oh no, not I. I will survive, oh as long as I know how to love I know I'll stay alive; I've got all my life to live, I've got all my love to give and I'll survive, I will survive.”

It's the quintessential song of self-affirmation and for moving on after a relationship. Anyone can relate to this song following a breakup and use it to pull themselves back together even if just for the duration of the song.

You'll notice that the music follows the lyrics step by step in this song in the original Gloria Gaynor version. In the beginning, the singer is expressing how fragile she was when the man in her life walked out on her. The music, particularly the first couple of spaced chords reflect this fragile and unsure

state.

The music then picks up and moves into a constant beat to reflect the confidence which she is exuding in her words for the rest of the song. There is a brief pause where you might get the sense that it's all a front, but if there's any doubt she extinguishes it by bringing that beat back in and hitting the refrain once more to press on.

Remember that the chorus is the section which people remember the most and identify the song with, and even great lyrics when executed the right way can compensate for a lackluster musical hook.

Sometimes you'll be forced to put some of your best lyrics in a different part because of spacing constraints in the melody of the chorus. This is part of the tradeoff for writing music first because the music dictates which lyrics can go where in the song.

If you have a big musical hook for the chorus which will stick with people but you can only sing maybe 5 or 6 syllables, you might have to settle for less and sacrifice or tailor some of your lyrics or at least move them to the verse as opposed to sacrificing your big musical hook.

Lyrics in Other Sections

Don't force yourself to write new lyrics for the sake of writing new lyrics and avoid your repeating yourself in the other sections of a song. If your lyrics are strong enough to warrant being repeated in the verses or other sections of a song, then by all means do it.

The Killers' "Mr. Brightside" uses the exact same lyrics all throughout the song. They repeat the verse, prechorus, and chorus lyrically and musically twice without changing much of anything. This works because the lyrics paint such a vivid picture of a man struggling with manufactured thoughts of jealousy so succinctly that varying the lyrics the second time through would feel like it was spoiling the message.

The way in which The Killers' front-man Brandon Flowers delivers them and the succinctness of the lyrics more than makes up for the reuse.

The repetition of the lyrics fits in with the theme of the song that this is the singer's life and he's trapped in this mind game, so it makes sense that the

lyrics would be repeated twice.

On top of all of that, and it may sound like a cop out on my part, but plain and simple the lyrics are THAT GOOD that it works.

Everything else I mentioned in this chapter aside, I recommend that just like with music, you should always have a means to record lyrical ideas with you when you're out and about either in the form of a notepad and pen or you can just dictate them into your recorder.

Don't worry about getting specific with rhyming and spacing your lyrics, just write it down in free form poetry if a line, or perhaps better said, a feeling pops into your head.

Any ideas which you have can later be refined into usable workable lyrics, but it really helps having a pool of thoughts to draw from when you want to write lyrics for a song or even when you're looking for settings for songs.

Good Melodies Breed Good Lyrics

Something else which is important to mention is that a strong melody lends itself to strong lyrics or at the very least writing lyrics more easily. When you have a good melody, the you'll find yourself overwhelmed at the number of lyrical possibilities which jump out at you into your head.

In addition to making the task of writing lyrics much more satisfying and simpler, this lets you know that you're really onto something musically with that melody.

You should make a point to jot all of them down as quickly as they come to you. The point isn't to find the perfect lyrics for that part of the song at the moment but just to let your mind flow freely and record as much of it as possible.

When you've run out of ideas you should walk away from that song lyrically and revisit it later. Then when you do revisit those lyrics, you can tweak, adjust, and mix and match them accordingly until you find which you like best and which works best for that particular part.

You don't have to throw out the lyrics you don't end up using but simply adding them to your lyrical book for possible use in a later song as you

never know when you might find a particular line taken out of context for a completely different song than you initially intended it for.

Using Someone Else's Melody

This is useful regardless of whether or not you are writing for a specific song. Take another song which you like's melody and start writing your own lyrics to that melody to replace their existing ones.

If you're having trouble tuning the existing lyrics out of the song as you're playing it, you can get karaoke versions of a lot of the biggest pop songs and there are some freeware options out there where you can remove or significantly dampen the vocals and just leave the music for whatever song you're playing to get the same effect.

The lyrics will be in that same rhyming and spacing structure as that song uses, so this is really just for writing free flowing lyrics which you can then reorganize for an existing song of yours or alternatively you can just save them in your lyric book for later which is even better because you'll have completely forgotten the existing song which you used to write those lyrics when you revisit it later; it will just look like open verses of poetry.

Chapter 4 – Stimuli for Songwriting



In this chapter, I'm going to go over a few of the things which I use to stimulate songwriting and force musical ideas into my head. If you've had trouble writing a specific part or even just coming up with an idea for a new song, this chapter will fix that right now!

The Anticipation Method

Statistically for me, new music begets new music more often than anything else; meaning I'll get new ideas for music most often when listening to new music from someone else for the first time. I'm always anxious when one of my favorite artists releases new music for the first time; not just because I get to hear new music from my favorite artists but because I know that it will very likely inspire and sow the ground for new music for me. It's well understood and documented that music inspires music, just ask any successful songwriter.

Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys listened to the Beatles' 1965 record "Rubber Soul" and wrote their 1966 magnum opus "Pet Sounds". The Beatles in turn listened to "Pet Sounds" as the major inspiration for their 1967 magnum opus "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band". Beatles producer George Martin has even explicitly said that without "Pet Sounds" there would be no "Sgt. Pepper".

But I'm not just telling you to listen to new music and wait for inspiration to hit; I have a specific method which I'm going to share with you now.

How the method works is as I listen to the new song start out for the very first time, if I like what I have heard so far I force my ears to "anticipate" where the song will go next or where I would like it to go next as that song commands my attention. I'll then pause the song and record that idea for where I would take it next musically. This can be a progression or a musical or vocal hook.

After I've written down or recorded my own idea, I'll resume the track. Typically it will go in a completely different direction than what I envisioned or wanted, but this is one case where I'm happy to be wrong as I've now got a new song idea of my own. A few of my favorite songs or parts within songs which I've written have been "answers" to someone else's track.

To reiterate and offer a more structured way to do this:

- 1. Play a brand new song from one of your favorite (or not) artists.**
I visit music blogs in the genres of music I listen to so that I can get notified of new track streams online from my favorite artists as soon as they crop up.
- 2. Stop the track in the middle of a part which you like or at the end before it transitions into something else.** Most song sections build into the next section or at least give you an idea that they're about to change.
- 3. Get out your own idea recorder.**
- 4. Hum out some possibilities of where that song could go next.**
Play some different chords to represent the next section while you're doing it.
- 5. Don't limit yourself to that one section; let that idea continue to evolve as I mentioned earlier until you hit a wall.**
- 6. Resume the actual song which you were listening to to and continue steps 2-5 with each progressive section of that song.**

Most typically I'll use this method to anticipate the chorus of a song as the largest build happens right at the end of the prechorus. I'll make up my own vocal melody for the chorus coming out of that big prechorus build.

In a similar fashion, I also use this method frequently during the intro of a song I'm hearing for the first time. Oftentimes the intro of a song is just the chorus musically but without the vocals, so this makes for fertile ground for coming up with my version of the chorus vocal melody which I can then plug into my own song.

It's easy to develop your own huge vocal melody hooks (which you can transport to a different setting of your own) when you've got that musical canvas which is their intro to paint on.

Remember that, as you've never heard the song before, you have no idea what is going to come next as the song progresses. This of course makes the anticipation method a very time sensitive method for songwriting.

Once you've heard a song for the first time, it becomes increasingly difficult to use this method because you know exactly how the song is going to play out.

Visual Aids



credit: Belovodchenko Anton

You've heard the cliché “a picture is worth a thousand words”. I don't know if that's true, but I know that most pictures are worth at least one song idea. This is similar to the original method of creating a song around a title but can be more effective because it's much easier to fill in your own story by staring at a picture than it is from a few word title.

Just take a look at this picture above. Literally it's a photo of a beautiful woman set against the skyline of a lit up city and lake late at night.

We can start to deconstruct the image rather than taking it at face value. The leather jacket and colorful skirt combination say something about her style and perhaps her character.

This photo raises a number of questions, as well. Why is she out all alone and all dressed up like that in the middle of the night? What can we make of the expression on her face? Is she scared or nervous. Is she lonely perhaps?

The way the photo is edited gives it surreal qualities, as well, such as the

lights of the city as well as the reflected lights on the lake are imposed in part over on top of her to not only give it a very cool look but to perhaps make a statement, as well.

Pictures with people can give you a lot of fodder to work with musically and lyrically whether it be from what the people in the picture are doing or even their facial expressions.

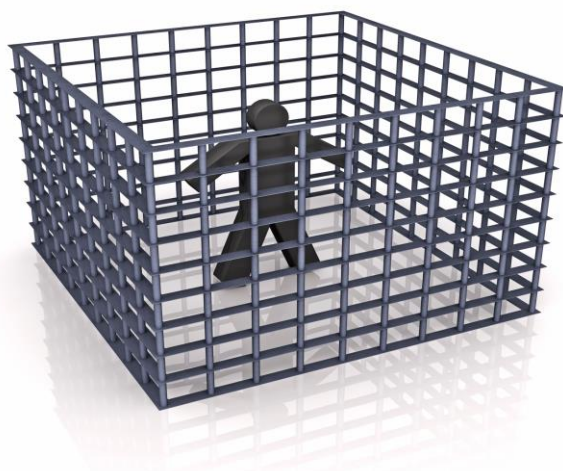
At the very least you should be able to write your own title to accompany that picture or photo and from there you can go back to the basic method of developing music from a title while pulling other themes from the picture you're looking at, as well.

A few years ago I was trolling along on Facebook and happened on a standard “out at a club” picture which a friend of mine had posted on her profile. She and her friends looked so happy or better said “alive” in that moment of the photo and there was a caption somewhere which read “Relive the Night” and the first line and hook of the song popped into my head in that instant “please don't pretend that we're going to get to live forever”.

This was a friend who I hadn't seen in awhile and had little contact with at that point so I didn't know her situation and not knowing any of the friends in the photo with her or her whereabouts helped me put together my own story with the photo which developed in part into that song.

The less of a connection and knowledge which you have to a picture and the people within it, the more which you can invent for it.

Writing With Boundaries in Theme or Micro Genre



It sounds counterintuitive, but employing boundaries from the start and committing yourself to writing about a very specific subject matter or writing within a very specific micro genre can actually expedite the songwriting process.

I say **micro genre** because telling yourself to write a rap song when you're a country fan or vice versa is both incredibly difficult, unfulfilling, and a waste of your time (at least when you're starting out).

Instead, try to write a song in the style of a genre within your genre of choice. I'm obsessed with the "sun soaked" music of southern California like the Beach Boys and current artists who draw a lot of inspiration from them.

I oftentimes challenge myself to write a song which is very of that style and maybe focuses around using a lot of layering of different harmonic voices as an instrument and possibly the main hook, like the Beach Boys were known for.

Giving yourself a boundary of saying I want to write a song which even revolves around a certain instrument, like a whistling hook (literally framing the song around a melody of you whistling) can be an effective way to come up with that first part so that the rest falls into place around it.

The 30 Second Sample



The “30 Second Sample” is used to imagine/trigger a huge hook of your own to build a song around. I came up with this when I would listen to the short 30 second teaser clips of songs on Amazon years ago for the first time from my favorite artists.

Amazon and similar sites obviously did this so that you could get an idea of what that song sounded like without giving away the whole track before you bought it.

This 30 second clip would typically revolve around and consist of the best part of the song which was usually the chorus. The song would fade in at just the right time so that you could hear the last bit of the building prechorus and then by the time the volume topped off you were in the middle of the highest point in the song.

This made me start to imagine my own 30 second samples for songs I had never written; and something about envisioning a song of your own fading in in that way and knowing you've only got a few seconds to showcase your best work to your listener triggers some really big hooks to form out of nothing.

Also, in getting back to actual song clips on Amazon from other artists, because most of these song clips only reveal the chorus, you're on your own to imagine where the song goes from there if you've never heard the full song before.

Consequently these clips can also be used effectively with the anticipation method I mentioned in opening this chapter and you can write some interesting parts of your own to inspire additional ideas.

Using Lyrics to Motivate Music

As I mentioned earlier, I recommend writing music before lyrics, or in other words writing lyrics to existing music. Occasionally, however, I'll do it in reverse. I oftentimes will write lyrics separate from music for example if a line pops into my head throughout the course of my everyday life, and as a result I have accrued hundreds and thousands of homeless lyrical lines over the years.

Sometimes if I'm looking to write a new song, I'll just flip through my many pages of lyrics and see if any musical ideas pop into my head. I've written entire songs musically around just one or two lines of lyrics, then once the musical portion of the song is completed I'll go back in and write the rest (almost all) of the lyrics for it.

This is a good method to use if you want to write a song to convey a specific emotion through your music. If you have some especially angry lines, you'll find it much easier to envision and come up with music to reflect those lyrics.

Same Part, Different Setting

If you DON'T listen closely, the vocal melody of the verses of Gwen Stefani's "Cool" is exactly the same as it is in the coda of "Under Pressure" by David Bowie and Freddie Mercury; it's even in the same key!

I guarantee you that either Gwen or her producer Dallas Austin, the two co-writers of "Cool", wrote that song in part after listening to "Under Pressure" and got the idea for that same hook but in a different setting.

The two songs sound pretty different otherwise and even the presentation of that hook is pretty different between the two songs; yet this is an example of how you can take a great existing hook and work with presenting it in a different way to make it unique and yours.

If you just plain and simple can't come up with a melody of your own sometime, give this a shot and just randomly take a melody from an existing song which you like and hum that melody while playing different chords underneath of it or dropping or raising the key.

This is the basis of how remixes are done. You isolate a vocal track, for

example, and then put a brand new chord progression/rhythm track in that same key underneath of it and add some other musical flourishes and you've quickly got a decidedly different song.

Turning a Musical Hook into a Vocal Hook

In a similar vein, a lot of musical hooks can make for great vocal hooks. I've gotten an idea for a vocal melody from some pretty random sources before. I was watching a little known kids movie from the late 90's and this one part of the score for the film stuck with me so I'd continue to hum it to myself on and off for several years.

About 6 years later I altered it slightly and came up with some words for that hook and based an entire song around it which I recorded a couple of years later.

Sometimes it's just a matter of getting that first spark to get a song rolling to the point where it can snowball into something substantial, so listen to all kinds of music from artist based popular music to soundtrack/scores to jingles and everything in between as possibilities for song and hook fodder.

Sometimes you'll find the biggest ideas in the most unlikely of places.

Richard Carpenter of The Carpenters heard "We've Only Just Begun" in a jingle format playing during a commercial for a California based bank in 1970 and although the entire song was only the length of a commercial/jingle, he tracked down its writer and wrote out an expanded upon full version of the song and his sister, Karen Carpenter, recorded vocals for the new version. It quickly became one of their biggest hits and remains their signature song.

Getting New Ideas From Varying Your Song

Also in the same vein, if you're recording your own music, you can play different tracks while leaving others the same. For instance, you can play a different drum loop over top of a different section of a song like putting the verse's section over the chorus.

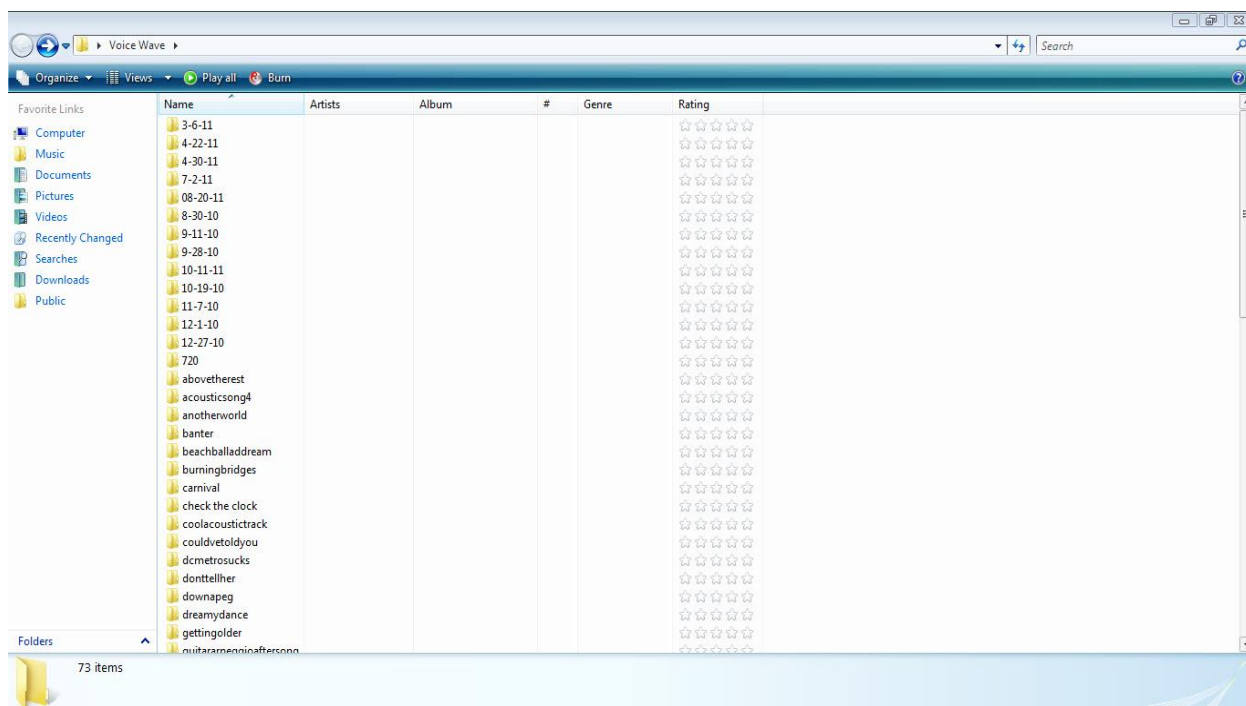
This is really easy to do using a digital audio workstation and you can cut and paste tracks and play different parts over different sections fast and

simple to experiment and get a unique sound for the song. Even if you don't end up keeping what you come up with in experimentation, it's a great method for exercising your songwriting gears and inspire some new spin off ideas.

Piecing Together Two Parts

If you're always recording your ideas down when you get them, over time you'll develop a sizable stock pile. Below is a screenshot of my library of ideas from the past year or so. A few dozen of those folders have titles which means that they have a decent structure/progress made on them and contain multiple wav. files which represent different sections of the song.

Conversely, the dated folders each contain about 50 unsorted ideas/files for fragmented songs:



I keep the older ideas on a separate hard-drive, ideas which date back to 2003, and whenever I'm truly stuck, I have hundreds of ideas which I can pluck from to find something which fits. It's not my favorite method, but it works in a pinch.

Chapter 5 – Devices

Now that I've given you tips on how to begin and write a song, this chapter will help you in bolstering the existing parts of your song. This chapter is going to look at and define commonly used song “devices” which are used in popular music all the time. I call them devices because they are easy to understand and execute on when it comes to adding them to your own songs, and they add a lot in terms of quality and progress in actually completing a song.

Along with an explanation of each of these devices, I'm going to give at least one real life example of this device in action in an actual pop song so that you can better see and hear it in action.

The Stripped Down Chorus

example(s): “Semi-Charmed Life” by Third Eye Blind, “Perfect” by Simple Plan

The stripped down chorus is easily one of the most common devices used in pop music which can be used in a number of different ways. It's so popular because the chorus is almost always the selling point of a song, so presenting the chorus to your listener but in a different way can be very refreshing to the ear.

It works by typically establishing the song's chorus over the course of the first two choruses in the song, then following a bridge or musical interlude of some sort, the chorus comes back in with identical or nearly identical vocal notes and lyrics, but it's presented in a different way. Most often this chorus is presented in a way which makes it sound held back.

A lot of artists choose to just use one guitar and the vocal part to give it a more stripped down natural and intimate break in the song.

Third Eye Blind's “Semi-Charmed Life” offers a good example of the held back chorus device after a lengthy verse/bridge. Coming in around 3:10 or 2:22 (depending on if you're listening to the original version or radio edit, respectively), the guitar, bass, and drums are all still present, but in a diminished state. The bass plays each note in the chorus progression once

and lets it ring, the drummer taps the cymbal around the vocal part, and the guitar part consists of lightly played clean notes found in each chord. The vocals are played over all of this but with a slightly different and quieter delivery than the full on choruses.

Simple Plan uses this device differently with their song “Perfect” in that their first chorus is held back. The prechorus in that song acts as a build into the chorus, but in the first chorus all of the instruments ring out on the first beat so that nothing but the chorus vocal hook stands out.

You don't have to use this device after the bridge, it's just most commonly used in this way after the listener has had a couple of chances to get used to that main presentation of the chorus. The Killers' “This River is Wild” presents each of its 3 different choruses in different ways.

The first chorus is uptempo whereas in the second chorus the song takes a breather as the drums are reduced to the drummer keeping time on the ride cymbal for every quarter beat. On the final chorus it all bubbles up and climaxes at full speed as singer Brandon Flowers sings the vocal melody in a higher range and much more dynamically in terms of rising and falling with the notes.

Nursery Rhyme Structure

example(s): “Yellow Submarine” and “With A Little Help From My Friends” by The Beatles

Think back to the rhyming structure section of the lyrics chapter. Using lines of just a few syllables enables you to build a very tight rhyming and spacing structure which I like to call the nursery rhyme structure. You can use this to easily come up with catchy vocal melodies which have a sing songy feel to them which is very mechanical and regular. Let me bring back in the last lines from that section:

I'm running tonight
and I'm trying to keep
my head above the water
I'm running in spite
Of the things that I've seen
Why should I even bother

Note that each line has an extra syllable than the one which proceeded it (it goes 5, 6, 7) but they're all very structured. Now let me show you how I very quickly add notes to each syllable to form a melody.

A# C D F D
I'm run ning to night
C A# C D F D
and I'm try ing to keep
A# C D D F D C
my head a bove the wa ter
A# C D F D
I'm run ning in spite
C A# C D F D
Of the things that I've seen
A# C DD F D C
Why should I e ven bo ther

In this melody I'm pretty much just going right up the scale in the key of A#. With that very structured spacing and simplistic note progression of the melody, you get a very sing songy nursery rhyme effect. This is very effective and frequently used in pop music because sometimes the simplest melodies can appeal to the broadest audiences.

I don't want to get overly subjective and make claims about people inherently liking sing songy melodies because it transports them back to their childhood or anything like that, but one thing which is obvious is that these simple melodies are the ones which get stuck in your head and you find yourself singing to yourself over and over again. The simplistic nature and structure of the notes makes them easy to write, as well.

“Yellow Submarine” by The Beatles is a good example of this device all throughout the song whether it's the verse or the chorus. Most of the Ringo Starr sung Beatles songs had this sing songy nature to them due in part to the fact that Ringo Starr was not known as a talented singer, so when the songs were written by Paul and John they were written to be easy to sing with short spacing and a limited range of notes.

Open On Chorus

example(s): “Can't Buy Me Love” by The Beatles, “Girlfriend” by Avril Lavigne, “Any Way You Want It” by Journey

Opening a song with the chorus can be a good idea for a more uptempo song especially, although it depends on the chorus as some choruses are more suited for this device than others. This is an especially radio friendly technique which pulls the listener into the song immediately by making sure that the strongest hook of the song is the first thing which you hear, so no time is wasted or risked as you come out with your best foot forward.

Some songs like “Girlfriend” by Avril Lavigne or “Any Way You Want It” by Journey open the song with a vocal focused version of the chorus. Conversely, “Can't Buy Me Love” by the Beatles opens with the exact same version of the chorus which plays every subsequent time.

Garbage to Gold

example(s): “The Sweet Escape” by Gwen Stefani

I like to call this device “garbage to gold”. The concept behind this device is to basically take a song section which can almost be construed as being displeasing to the ear and effectively use it to flow into a part which is very refreshing to the ear. It's almost as if you're waiting through or putting up with the verse just so you can get to the best part which is the pay off of the chorus.

Gwen Stefani's “The Sweet Escape” isn't the purest instance of it but is still a good example of this device at work which is present in the tail end of each of the verses. I don't want to call them prechoruses because they feel much more like extensions of the verses, particularly the second. In the first verse, she uses very quick, almost scating like spit out monotone vocals to setup and flow directly into the pleasing drawn out and stabilized notes of the chorus. In the second verse she flat out raps before the chorus. This song also features a third verse, and it repeats the same staccato style as the first verse to again flow nicely into the chorus.

These staccato vocals have the effect of dehydrating your ears until they are parched, then with the onset of the chorus it's like dropping them into a pool of water.



The band Linkin Park have practically built their entire multi-multi platinum careers around this device as their band has two vocalists, one who predominantly raps and one who predominantly sings, and they use a very similar formula in most of their songs of rapping for the verses to set up and deliver a big vocal hook for the chorus.

In getting back to “The Sweet Escape”, also notice the chord progression and how it varies between the verses and the chorus. In the verses it's a 6-1-2-4, making the first note a minor note.

Then, when it switches to the chorus it goes into a much poppier and pleasing 1-7-6-3-2-5. When it transitions into the chorus it almost comes off as sounding like a different song altogether at least in terms of the progression.

While the average music listener won't think in these terms or oftentimes even be conscious that this is going on right in front of them, their ears and brain will recognize this change and find it very pleasant and refreshing to hear.

One of the neat things about this device is you can really do some interesting things in the verses as long as you “make up” for it once you hit the chorus.

Sometimes you may even make it a point to make the verse as blatantly displeasing and even annoying to your listener as possible because the further your verse goes off in this respect, the bigger the recovery you'll make in getting to the chorus and this device can make the chorus that

much more memorable.

You can use notes which are out of the typical scale of the song and then transition into a very poppy progression like a 1-5-6-4.

Changing From a Minor to a Major Key

example(s): “Blueside” by Rooney

This is a very cool device to use and you'll gain a lot of respect amongst the music nerds out there if you can pull this one off.

“Blueside” by Rooney is one of my favorite songs thanks in part to this transition. The song starts out in the very intimidating sounding key of B minor, repeating 6-5-flat5-4-3, but in 2 measures which adjoin the verses and choruses the B minor turns into a B major which sets up a very cool vocal harmony layered chorus.

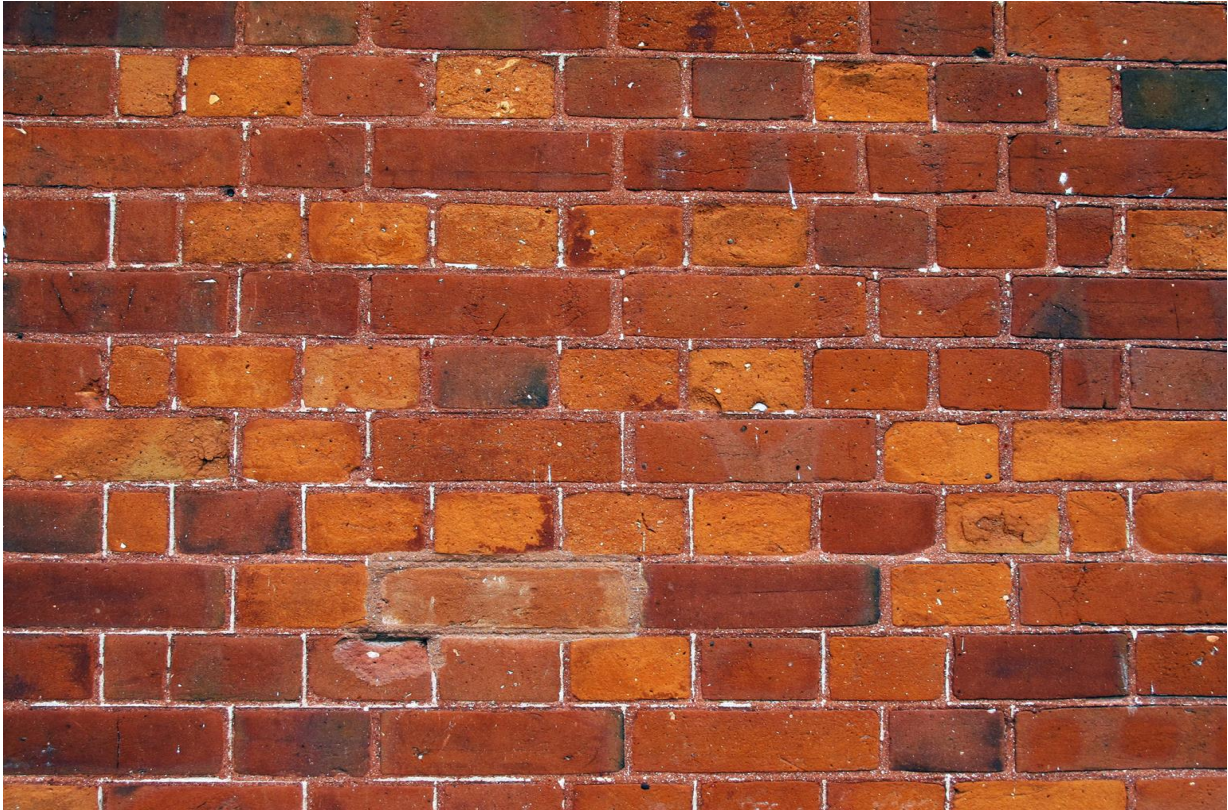
Throughout the rest of the song they continue to transition back and forth between the major and minor presentation of the B. They even use the stripped chorus device after the bridge and interlude; this song has a little bit of everything!

Layering Parts

When you get to your last chorus, a good device which you can use depending on the rest of your song is to layer the vocals of the verse, pre-chorus, or bridge on top of your last chorus.

This reprise of a part can sound very good on top of both other vocals and a different progression than what you used when you first delivered that part and this can result in a completely different and pleasing sound. Try out layering different parts over different parts of a song to find great melodies which work really well together.

Chapter 6 – Writer's Block



Writer's block affects songwriters just as easily as it does any literary writer. Being unable to come up with a resolution to a song or write a specific part of a song can be frustrating and especially difficult if your expectations are high for that missing piece.

It's obviously up to you as to whether or not you want to “settle” in your mind when it comes to putting something in a song just because it fits, or if you want to wait it out until the right part comes along.

It will generally come, in time, though sometimes you just have to grind it out. I came up with the verse and prechorus for one of the songs on the new Brigands record and it took roughly 2 years before I came upon a chorus which I liked.

Here are some tips for tackling writer's block.

Chords

Make a mental list of all of the chords which you've used so far in your song. You might even think about writing them down.

Remember there's 8 notes and corresponding chords which sound good in every major key, and it's likely that you haven't used them all in the existing parts which you do have for your song already. Identify the note or notes which you have neglected so far in that song and try playing those chords as the first chord in the missing piece.

Playing a new chord which you haven't touched on yet is also very refreshing and pleasing to the ear and can get the attention of your listener. You can hear Paul Simon, one of the greatest American songwriters of all time, explain this in an interesting interview he did with Dick Cavett on Dick's show from the 1970's.

This interview is also interesting because Paul plays a half completed version of "Still Crazy After All These Years" before it was finished; a song which he not only finished but subsequently released and which became one of his best selling and identifiable records.

Most importantly, using a new chord helps you to take the song in a new direction by leaving the existing comfort zone of the song, inspiring you to come up with some unique parts which can be just what you need to come up with a great part or finish a song.

Figure Out Where You Want To Go

If you can't think of a part of a song, it helps to first narrow down and get some idea about where you want to go with that part. What kind of beat will this part have, will it be similar to the preceding part, etc.

Limiting your choices may seem like it limits or constricts you, but again this little bit of direction can be just what you need to make progress on a part.

Refer to Your Lyrics Book

Referring to your lyrics book can be very effective when it comes to coming up not with just song ideas like I mentioned earlier but in coming up with a specific part for a song. Even if you've already written some lyrics for existing parts of your song, you can take a seemingly random and irrelevant lyric and designate those the lyrics for that missing part.

The focus isn't on the words of the lyrics themselves, but the spacing which those existing lyrics carry.

More often than not the combination of using those lyrics with their set spacing can jog your brain to come up with that missing piece. You can then go back in and more closely tailor the lyrics to the actual message and theme of the song of you have one already.

Refer to Your Hook Book

I showed you a picture of where I keep my musical ideas from the last year or so. As I touched on earlier, whenever you are truly stuck, refer to your library of orphaned hooks/song ideas.

Don't discard an old idea as being a match for your newer song just because it's in a different key or in a different tempo. Adapt the key and tempo to your new song to see if it fits with the other sections of the new song.

Sometimes you'll find that after adjusting the tempo and key of that older idea, it actually works much better in the style of the newer song and it fits in very well.

You can kill two birds with one stone by using one of your unused hooks to finish off or at least make some progress on a song which you're stuck on.

Consulting

Sometimes it really helps to get a fresh ear in on a song idea which you have. Find another friend who writes songs and get some input first without giving them any details first. After they've heard it and made their own unique comments then you can give them your thoughts about what

you want from it.

Note that I don't recommend that you solicit just anyone who is around you for input. This friend doesn't have to be Paul McCartney, but someone who simply enjoys songwriting or at the very least is an artistic and creative person.

Walk Away

After you've exhausted your ideas for a particular song or aren't happy with what you're coming up with, walk away from it for awhile. Work on another song or better yet take a break from songwriting altogether.

I can't think of any situation in which you'd have to force finishing a song even if you're a well known and established artist with a deadline for turning in your latest record. If a song is going to suffer by rushing its completion, hold off on it until you find what fits and feels right.

Sometimes approaching a song with a fresh mind a day or a week later can be just what you need to come back and tackle it with just the right part.

Chapter 7 – Writing Great Hooks



As I covered earlier, a hook is a memorable line of melody delivered either by a single or by multiple instruments, typically in the form of the chorus or part of the chorus. It's apt title refers to the fact that this is the part of your song (which you hopefully have) which grabs your listener and pulls them in.

You can have the best lyrics or be the best singer or guitarist in the world but you're still going to have trouble getting anyone to notice it without a hook to get their attention first.

Conversely, a great hook can make your listener forget about or even overlook elements of what may otherwise be bad song (not that that should be your goal). In this chapter I'm going to talk about hooks and talk about how to come up with your own strong, memorable hooks.

I want to first say something on the topic of hooks which is very subjective but very true at the same time: **Great hooks will make you feel as if you have just been on a journey.** They rise in just the right places, lifting you up with them, then fall once you've reached that peak. Note that this doesn't necessarily mean that the notes themselves have to rise and fall.

Do You Need a Hook?

It's true that not every song needs a discernible hook. Sometimes the strength or focus of a song can be on its beat, its melody, or the quality or truthfulness of your lyrics or even your delivery of the lyrics. In this case you may not need a discernible hook. Of course it's also true that what constitutes a hook is pretty subjective.

Not all music fans buy into the need for a discernible hook. Some people are especially attuned to lyrics in songs and look to be able to relate to the words whereas others simply love music with “a good beat”.

The greater truth, however, is that the vast majority of people who listen to music love it at least in strong part due to its hooks; so on average, yes, you need a hook than if for no other reason than to get people paying attention to you initially.

Of course the **best way** to answer this question is if you listen to one of your compositions and feel like something is missing, then there's your answer.

Good Hooks Can Save a Bad Song

This is more to emphasize the importance of the hook rather than again to condone neglecting or getting lazy on the rest of your song, but a good hook can absolutely save a bad song.

I've heard some songwriters disagree with this point perhaps out of principle; but when you take a look at pop music I'm not even sure that it's debatable: good hooks can and do save bad songs on the Top 40 charts every week.

There have been hundreds if not thousands of horribly bland pop songs with nonsensical or horrendously bad lyrics which were saved by the virtue of the strength of the one hook or several hooks which they revolve around.

I'm sure if you gave it a moment you could think of a handful of songs where you don't recognize ANY part of any of the songs save for their hooks themselves. I can think of occasions where I've been out at a bar before and someone puts a song on the jukebox which I'll swear that I've never heard before until they get to the hook.

At the end of this chapter I'll give a few examples of songs in which that's likely the case.

Sometimes a lackluster verse or prechorus makes a big hook seem even BIGGER (similar to “Garbage to Gold” but without intentionally making your other parts displeasing). In this case you're teasing your listener because again the other parts are really just something you have to wait and sit through until you can enjoy the huge hook once more, making the payoff that much more intense.

Make It Short

The word “short” is subjective here. The point is that a hook should not get to the point where you're not sure if what you're listening to is still part of the hook or not. If you've done this then you've made your hook far too long and awkward to where it can lose its appeal very quickly.

Shorter hooks are easier to remember, as well. Take Lady Gaga's “RAH RAH” scating intro to “Bad Romance”. Sure it's nonsensical, but it gets stuck in your head. There are lots of nonsensical vocal hooks tearing up the charts these days which I'll touch on in a moment.

Top 40, meaning the current top 40 most popular songs for a country, is the quintessential place to get an education in hooks. People love big hooks in music, so it's no coincidence that you'll find the biggest hooks in Top 40 music.

Top 40 is also a reflection of the kinds of music which are currently “en vogue” in a particular country which can be interesting to learn about, as well.

You can check out Billboard.com to see what's currently trending and among the most popular songs in America right now for real time examples of the biggest current hooks.

Memorable and Relatable Lyrics Amplify a Hook

I talked earlier about how generally it's more difficult to fit inspired lyrics into your hook. Generally with your hook you're working off of a much tighter spacing/melody than you are when you're writing lyrics in a more

free flowing verse.

Though difficult, writing memorable lyrics which people can relate to or lyrics which are especially clever (like coming up with a clever catch phrase but delivered through a vocal part) will significantly boost your hook.

Weak or nonsensical lyrics sung via a massive musical hook will earn you attention, yes, but **strong, relatable, and memorable lyrics** sung via a massive musical hook will earn you attention **AND** credibility, and that should be your ultimate goal.

Anything Can Be a Hook...

...When it's presented the right way. This is a bit of a secret which very few people realize, but if you hum any random string of notes right now, that can be turned into a huge hook with the right presentation and support around it.

This especially means the chord progression played under that hook, the beat, and the instrumentation around it.

A great hook can be anywhere from one prolonged note to several or even potentially dozens of notes, but it's much easier to stick with and focus on just a few.

Some artists have strong poppy hooks all over their songs. While it can take a lot more work developing dozens of memorable vocal hooks in one song, this can actually backfire on you.

Too many hooks will exhaust your listener's ear. This is why arrangement is so important because if, for example, your strongest hook is actually in the prechorus without your realizing it, the chorus will not come off as being nearly as powerful.

Ultimately anything can be a hook. You can trick your audience into really responding to an average hook just by how it's presented again with the instrumentation and support around that hook.

When you approach and think of songwriting and writing hooks in this light, it's much easier to come up with a line of melody and work on making that a powerful hook rather than just trying to come up with a powerful

hook which can stand on its own regardless of the support around it.

A List of Songs and Their Corresponding Hooks Identified

And now a brief look at a handful of songs with their predominant hooks identified and explained:

Baker Street – The hook in this song is that very identifiable saxophone which the song revolves around. Most people can't recognize the song from any of the lyrics or vocal parts, but as soon as that saxophone kicks in, they know they've heard it before. A rare case where a musical hook heavily overshadows the vocals.

Bad Romance – This is one of the songs which made Lady Gaga famous. It features multiple recognizable hooks from the first “oh whoa oh oh” to the “Ra Ra Ra Ra Ra ah” to just about every bit of the chorus.

Sweet Escape – I realize I've already referenced this song, but it's another song where the hooks are very identifiable. The chorus is obviously a hook, but the most memorable hook in the song is the Akon delivered “Woo Hoo, Yee Hoo”.

Kickstart My Heart – This is another song where for me personally I can't recognize which song is playing until they get into the chorus hook of “Whoa, yeah, kickstart my heart, give it a start”.

Beethoven's 5th Symphony – Beethoven's 5th Symphony's hook could be said to be the opening notes of G G G followed by the E flat.

Kids – MGMT's “Kids” is another example where the main hook is a music melody which is played on a synthesizer rather than a vocal part. There are some cool live videos of this song where the audience sings along with this musical (not vocal) hook so loudly that they drown out the music itself – that's a catchy hook.

Cupid's Chokehold – A lot of rap tracks use sampling, meaning they take what is typically the hook from a song from the past and use that as the main hook in their track while adding different beats and chords/bass around it and rapping in the verses to build up to that glorious pop hook. It's another case of Garbage to Gold but it extends to a lot of an entire genre.

Gym Class Heroes' "Cupid's Chokehold" samples Supertramp's "Breakfast In America" and uses that as the main hook but delivered from Fall Out Boy frontman and solo artist in his own right, Patrick Stump. In this case, they take the best hook and most memorable part of the Supertramp song and build an entirely new song around it.

Empire State of Mind – Jay Z raps for the verses in this one while Alicia Keys delivers the powerful vocal hook for the chorus which the entire song revolves around and which repeats many times.

Chapter 8 – Recording Your Music



I've talked about making rough recordings of ideas for your songs; now I'll talk about how to make legitimate recordings of your songs to release officially either in physical or online format so that people can hear or even purchase them.

There are obviously two ways of going about recording your music: at home on your own or professionally with a producer, so let's start at home.

Recording at Home

Up until a decade or so ago, it wasn't feasible to record your own music at home and the only way to get a half decent recording was to pay a professional with a legitimate studio. Now thanks to the widespread popularity of personal computers (and consequently home recording), today anyone can grab some recording software and some relatively cheap

hardware and get decent sounding recordings at home through mic'ing instruments/amplifiers or straight in recording and virtual MIDI based instruments like drum machines.

Having been on both sides of it, I generally prefer to record and produce my own music myself. For one thing it's much cheaper, especially in the long run. More importantly, in recording my own music I obviously have my own setup which affords me the luxury of recording decent sounding ideas and tracks whenever I like.

Additionally, I have designs on producing for other artists more often with time, so I want to continue improving my technological setup for recording and getting away from relying on depending on established producers to do my music for me.

I also like to be in total control, and that's pretty much the producer's bag. That's not to take anything away with working with a producer, I've had some great experiences with some great producers, but I've had some not so great experiences, as well (more on that later).

When I first started "recording" songs, I basically had an entertainment system in the basement which had a tape deck built in. I recorded myself playing and singing my ideas to audio cassette tapes using a cheap microphone meant for karaoke and that sound system.

After that when I started my first band I began recording using my laptop's built in microphone. It was as crude as can be and just gave a very muffled low quality version of the song as I sang and played my electric guitar through an amp, but I used that method to send out the "demos" of my songs to my band mates. I've come a ways since then, and the point is nowadays you can record decent sounding music at home on a budget.

For your setup you may need some or all of the following things (depending on what you're recording):

- **Preamp**
- **Computer**
- **DAW (digital audio workstation) software**
- **Patch/XLR/FireWire Cables**
- **Microphone/any physical musical instruments and amplifiers which you want to record**
- **A nice sounding space to record**

- **Mixing monitors or headphones**

Preamp

A preamp is an electronic amplifier that prepares a small electrical signal for further amplification or processing. This is what you connect any physical instruments with, such as guitar, bass, keyboards, microphones, etc.

Unless you're making electronic music which exclusively consists of digital instruments and no vocals, you'll likely need a preamp.

Something simple like the popular [Focusrite Scarlett](#) will do you just fine:



The sound quality is fantastic and it's extremely compact so you can take it wherever you want to record.

Computer

Unless you're using a multitrack recorder like the old days, you'll need a computer to record to. Practically any computer will do so long as it can handle the demands which recording puts on a computer.

The most important thing is that you have a decent processor and as much

RAM as possible in your computer as recording can really eat up your system's memory.

This is because you are not only transmitting huge amounts of data all at once from your preamp to your computer, but it's happening live; so it can really put a strain on your computer and begin affecting the performance of the software itself.

With 16 GB of memory and a decent processor over 2.0 GHz you shouldn't notice any performance or lag issues. You'll only run into problems when you've got several other programs and a lot of digital instruments open in your program while you're recording.

Instruments

Guitar, bass, and some instruments like a keyboard can all be recorded straight in with a patch cable, but you might think about getting some kind of effects processor to sculpt the sound of the guitar or anything else which you record.

If you want a more authentic sound and aren't afraid to make some noise then you can mic an amp of your choice with an instrument microphone like the extremely popular SM-57 from Shure which has long been the industry standard for affordable instrument mics at just \$100. Even some higher end producers use this versatile microphone when micing amplifiers because of the quality and how faithfully it records the instrument.

The SM-57:



As far as which guitars, basses, amplifiers, etc. to use; this is a discussion which rages on and is entirely based on preference and is subjective, so I won't get into that here.

I also recommend getting a condenser microphone for vocals, as well. Anything from Audio Technica will sound great; I still use an [Audio Technica AT3035](#) which will reproduce your vocals warmly, crisply, and faithfully.

It also sounds great for recording a lot of instruments. I use mine to record my acoustic guitar because it gives it a natural acoustic sound while reproducing the rich lows of the guitar, as well.

The AT3035 was recently replaced by the AT2035 which is the same microphone but in black.

The AT2035 normally sells for around \$150 which is a great price especially given the quality of this 5 star microphone and the use you'll get out of it.

The Audio Technica AT2035:



Mixing Monitors/Headphones

Once you have finished recording your songs, you might think about getting some studio monitors to pick up the subtleties in your recordings so that you can get a better sounding and more faithful mix.

You can get a pair of great sounding studio monitors for around \$300. If you can't spend that much or can't make a lot of noise where you live to mix because it's customary to really crank the volume up so that you can get a genuine feel for the mix, you can get some extremely solid monitor headphones instead for around \$150.

Both of the monitors speakers and monitor headphones which I've linked to in that last paragraph are designed to let you hear the highs, mids, and lows of your recordings faithfully so that you can hear every aspect of your recordings so that you can mix accordingly to achieve the most well rounded final product.

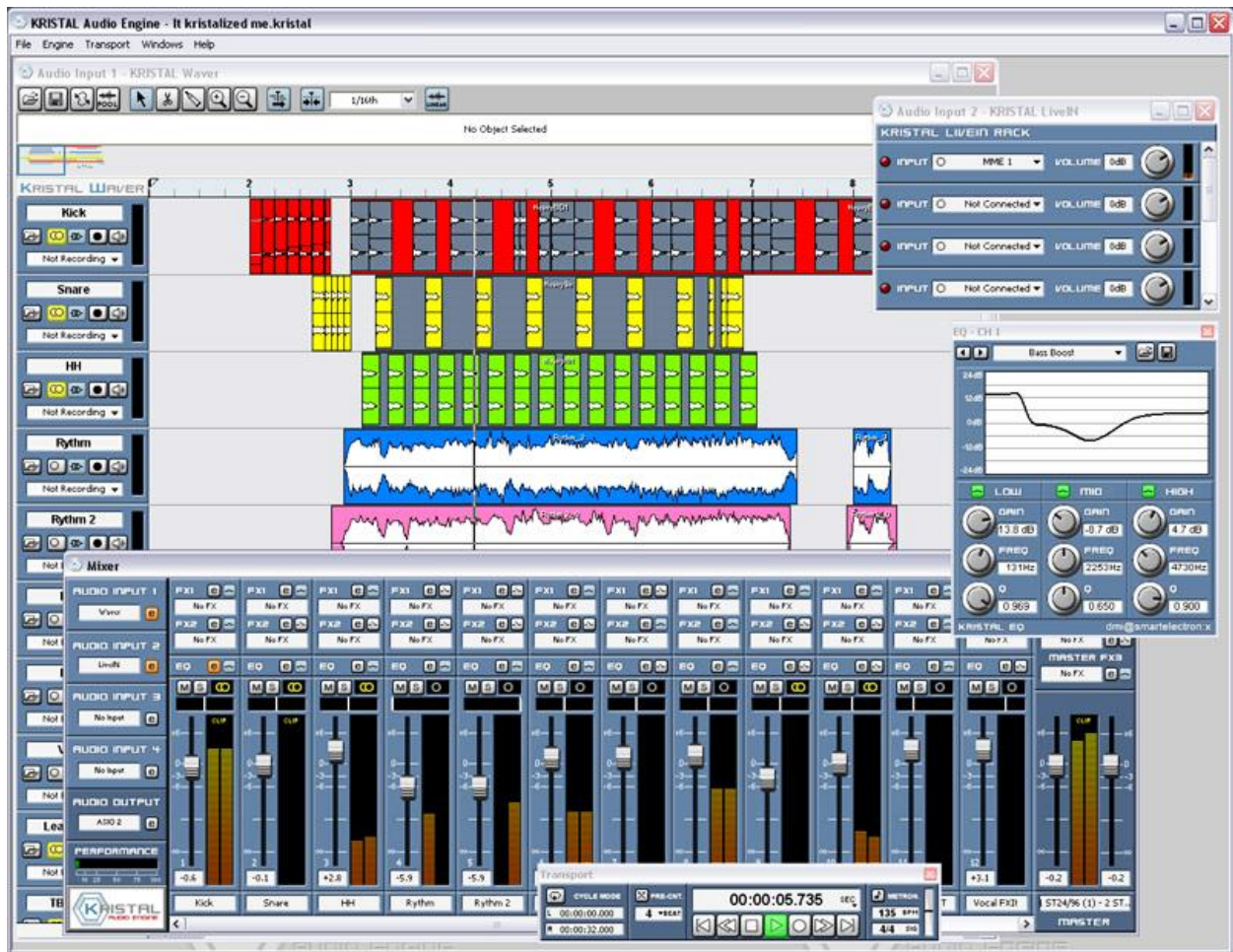
Software

In addition to the hardware, you'll need some kind of digital audio workstation (DAW) software on your computer to record music to, like Studio One Artist.

A DAW enables you to record audio over different tracks, play it back, mix it, and finally render the completed collection of tracks into a CD quality .WAV file which you can do with as you like.

In terms of DAWs, there are a lot of options out there so do your homework and take a look at the different programs available today to find one which works for you, but I'll mention one decent free option along with the one which I use on the next page.

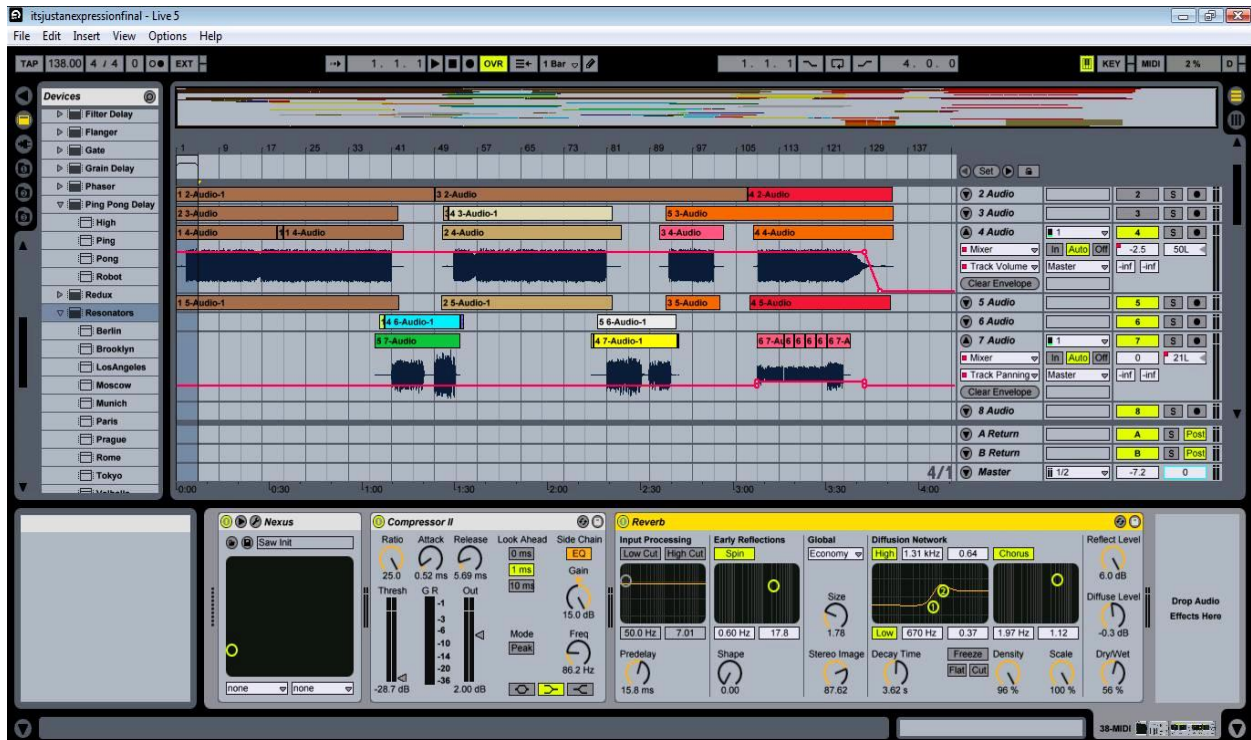
Kristal:



Cost: Freeware

Kristal is a freeware audio engine designed in cooperation with some people from Presonus. Kristal just offers the meat and potatoes but will be fine if you're just starting out or are just interested in recording some decent home demos.

Ableton Live:



Cost: \$100-750 (Depending on Version)

[Ableton Live](#) is both a digital audio workstation and a sequencer which can not only be used to record music but is also made for easy playback use in a live setting, hence its name. I've used Ableton Live for over 5 years now and have grown accustomed to and prefer its interface over other software options.

It comes with a ton of built in virtual instruments, effects plugins, and a lot of functionality which you can't get with freeware and some other premium digital audio workstations.

It's pretty pricey if you're just starting out, but if you want one of the most sophisticated digital audio workstations of today which is pretty intuitive and you are interested in getting some live functionality out of it, as well, this is your best bet.

VSTs

VSTs (virtual studio technology) are virtual instruments which are played

either using a MIDI “instrument” like a keyboard or you can just use your own computer's keyboard to mimic the keys of a keyboard and record the notes that way.

Conversely, you can also just add in the notes with your computer's mouse exactly where you want them and for the length that you want them to ring out.

There are thousands of free and premium VSTs available online to mimic the sounds of any instrument you can think of; some more faithfully than others, of course. Some of these VSTs use programmed sounds to mimic the sounds of an instrument whereas others simply play recorded sounds of that instrument being played which were compiled into the virtual instrument's database.

I rely on a few VSTs off and on for synthesizers, piano, and drums most often.

VSTs really tax your system's memory, so you should record your audio tracks first, then add the virtual instrument tracks when you're getting ready to mix.

Effects Plugins

Unlike VSTs which are virtual instruments, effects plugins can be applied to existing tracks to sculpt and shape their sounds. Reverb, for example, is a popular effects plugin which adds reverberation to your track to give it more atmosphere.

A little reverb on your vocals for example can make a very noticeable difference for the better. Most popular music has a good bit of reverb put on it and it can make your recordings sound a lot more professional whereas without it your track can sound flat and empty.

You don't want to overdo it on reverb or any other plugin, you just want to add enough without your listener noticing it, unless you're going for a particular effect that is.

You can achieve all kinds of results using different effects plugins. There are plugins for EQ, chorus, filters, compression, panning, gates, delay, and saturation just to name a few. Most of the premium/pay for DAWs today

come loaded with both VSTs and effects plugins.

All Together

Let's tally up everything to see how much (or little) you can get by with spending these days to get some nice sounding recordings. I'm going to assume that you've already got a computer to record to and whatever instruments or amplifiers which you want to record, so I'll leave them out and just talk about the recording hardware/software itself:

- Preamp (Some Come With DAW/Recording Software) - \$100
- DAW - \$100
- Vocal Microphone - \$100
- Instrument Microphone - \$100
- Mixing/Monitor Headphones - \$150
- Miscellaneous Cables and Microphone Stand - \$50

Grand Total: ~\$600

Bear in mind that this is my recommended setup. You don't necessarily need specific monitors/headphones for mixing so that's at least \$150 less there.

Additionally, you may not have or need an amplifier depending on what you're doing, so you might not need an instrument microphone. I have an effects processor for my guitar which I use to record straight into the preamp sometimes for the convenience and I still get a realistic amplifier sound from it which I'm happy with.

Conversely, your songs might not even feature any guitar; maybe you're using mostly just virtual instruments. Your exact setup and need for equipment will be dictated by what you're trying to achieve, but the equipment which I've mentioned in this section is of exceptional quality and is highly recommended for the prices.

Note that I rushed through this section and there is a lot more to know about recording and mixing at home, but I cover this in depth with regular tutorials as well as an in depth training course at [MusicGuyMixing.com](https://www.musicguyonline.com).

A Quick Word About Vocals

A quick word about recording vocals if you plan on releasing the music which you record at home which I wouldn't even mention if I didn't find it immensely helpful in getting the best vocal takes.

It's obviously easy to record vocals whenever you want when you record at home, but I recommend that you resist from actually recording anything for the final record before you have your lyrics and melodies COMPLETELY written out.

Record the melody with whatever you use to record your on the go ideas with, then write out your final lyrics.

99% of the time that you record vocals, you'll get the BEST take and best emotional take specifically to suit the music on your first run through. Your first vocal take on a song will have the most passion, energy, and emotion in it, not to mention you get to hear the semi finished product for the first time.

All of this combined translates into a powerful vocal take which is very difficult to replicate again in the future, especially if the final take takes place weeks, months, or years later.

In the past I've been in a lot of situations where I'll record my placeholder lyrics when I first get an idea for a song, then if it takes me days, weeks, or even months to finish the lyrics, by the time I go to finally lay down the real lyrics of the song, after listening to those older vocal takes over and over again I can never locate that same emotion which I had when I first started tracking that song and was so excited about it.

Somehow the intensity and even the flow of the new lyrics and vocals feel as if they are lacking and a bit forced, and I have to work at that vocal track over and over and over and even then it's never the same.

Many singers feel similarly about this approach. Neil Diamond only ever does one single vocal take when he goes to record a song because he feels that that first take holds the most raw and authentic energy, and I have to agree with him.

Ever since I have begun to hold off on recording final vocals on a song until I have the finalized lyrics, I've had much more powerful vocal takes which

clearly show through in the song. Your entire song will be amplified by the greater intensity and quality of your take.

Obviously if it's a difficult song to sing for you then you might have to rework a few parts, but I recommend that you try to finish the song in one session as opposed to coming back a day later and revisiting it.

This isn't as much of an issue when you are working with a producer because you generally aren't going to be recording with someone expensive without every aspect of your songs being completely written and planned out beforehand.

A Healthy Voice is a Happy Voice

Take care of your voice and it will reward you with better vocals. For getting your voice in the best possible shape to sing, remember to:

- Drink plenty of water all day long to keep your throat and vocal chords lubricated
- Drink warm tea with honey to repair a tired or worn voice
- Get as much sleep as your body needs
- Don't smoke or drink alcohol
- Avoid soda and spicy foods, really anything which dehydrates you or puts air in your stomach
- Avoid foods and drinks which create more mucous like milk
- Avoid cold drinks which tighten and constrict your throat as well as scalding/too hot drinks which can burn and damage your throat
- Don't eat within a couple of hours of singing
- Conserve your voice which means don't talk loudly/scream, don't talk more than you need to
- Practice singing scales to warm up

- Sing as often as possible to develop your voice, vocal stamina, and range

A lot of people have asked me about vocal sprays which supposedly help a tired voice. I've tried a few and have never been all that impressed. The best way to develop your voice is through regular practice, vocal lessons, and an understanding and knowledge of the vocal chords.

A cup of warm (not hot) herbal tea of your choice with a bit of lemon or honey can really help to soothe and open up your throat if you need a temporary fix, though.

Professionally

I've recorded with some great and some not so great producers in the last 8 years and I use the term “producers” pretty loosely for the latter half. Recording with a professional producer can be a good learning experience when you're just starting out so that you can learn what goes into the process under ideally someone who knows the art of recording and mixing music. Here are some tips if you decide to go with a professional producer.

Choosing a Producer

First, if possible, find a producer who has done a record which you liked or has at least worked with artists in your genre or style of music. It sounds obvious, but I've been in a band before which tried to fit a producer to our sound as opposed to the other way around. He plain did not get what we wanted to accomplish with our record and his musical taste differed drastically from ours.

Not drastic in the sense that we were a rock band and he typically worked with rappers (though the first producer situation I was ever in was just that), but his and our “rock” tastes differed pretty drastically and it made a huge difference for the worse.

Obviously if you're on the level of U2 or someone who has access to the biggest name producers in the world and you want their different sound to influence your new record, then that's one thing. But if it's your first or second time then it will be much easier going with someone who knows what you want without having to discuss it too much.

Any producer worth dealing with will have their own website which you can contact them through which will also list their credits and give you more background on them.

The best things to mention in that preliminary email is the style of your music, the number of songs you wish to record, and give them an idea of what would go into recording that album in terms of instruments and numbers of tracks which would be present on it so that they can get an estimate of about how long it would take.

Also very important is that you list a few of your favorite records in terms of production so the producer has an example of what you want your record to sound like. You'll also want to link to your existing music somewhere online so they know what you sound like.

From there that producer will typically get back to you and let you know whether or not they're into your music and find it to be a good fit, their upcoming schedule so that you can decide on a time, and most importantly the cost. Most producers will either work out and pitch a flat rate to you for the entire project, or they might work by an hourly rate.

From there you can get back to them and if the specifics work for both of you, then you can go ahead and schedule some studio time with them.

I will say that if you have a certain producer in mind and are really dedicated to working with them, you may be surprised at just how accessible they are. There was a producer who had just finished work on an album from one of my favorite artists which had recently gone Gold, meaning it had just sold 500,000 copies.

We really liked the sound of that record and he worked just an hour away from where our band was located so we sent him an email with a link to some of our home demos and he agreed to work with us because he both had just had a cancellation and liked the tracks which we had put up online.

The moral of the story is to not hesitate to at least give a producer you're interested in a try, even if you think it's a reach.

If you do end up landing him or her, don't expect it to be cheap. We ended up paying that producer somewhere in the realm of \$4,000 for about 10 days worth of recording, plus mixing. It's was pricey, but it was a good deal considering just how busy this guy normally was and his past credits; and

we came out with a professional EP which sounded great.

Discussing Your Goals

In getting back to the producer who will go unnamed who I alluded to in opening this chapter, we made our biggest mistake not only in choosing someone who had no idea what we wanted, but we never took the time to seriously sit down and talk about it with him.

If we had talked to him beforehand, we would've established that this wasn't a good fit for all involved before starting.

Long story short, we drove 250 miles to work with that producer for nearly a week and not only were our goals in terms of how we wanted the record to sound different but so too were our expectations in terms of how much we could get done.

Push came to shove and it was clear that we were not anywhere close to finishing on schedule and it all blew up at once, accounting for easily one of the most tense, ugly, and awkward days of my life.

Therefore, I cannot stress enough how important this “pre-production” phase is and is something which you should demand as opposed to just going in and getting started with setting levels or getting a good bass sound.

The higher profile artists who get a huge recording budget from their record label will take as much as a week or longer talking to the producer and agreeing on generalized things like how the record should sound and the number of songs and more specific things about each song so that when both parties come together to actually start recording, they are all on the exact same page.

You don't have to spend a week or even a day doing this, but at least go back and forth via email with your producer and let them clearly understand your expectations. The worst thing that can happen is that one of you decides its not the best marriage and pulls out so that you don't end up wasting everyone's time and your money to come out with a less than satisfactory record – or worse.

Glossary

Arrangement – The ordering of the sections of a song.

Beat – The basic unit of time in music.

Chord Progression – Series of musical chords or chord changes for a specific section of a song.

Coda – The outro of a song.

DAW – Digital audio workstation; software used for recording music with physical or digital instruments.

Harmony – The use of simultaneous notes which complement one another and are perceived as being pleasant to the ear.

Hook – A memorable line of melody delivered either by a single or multiple instruments including the human voice.

Key – A set of notes in music which all relate to one another. (See **Chapter 1 For More Information on Keys**)

Lyrics – The words of a song which convey the meaning or theme of that particular song.

Measure – A segment of time defined by a number of beats of a given duration.

Near Rhyme – Not a true or perfect rhyme but still similar sounding. Examples are “Round” and “Down” or “Man” and “Jam”.

Rhyming Structure – Refers to the timing and spacing in which rhymes occur in a specific section of lyrics.

Section – A part of a song, such as a verse, prechorus, or chorus.

Time Signature – Notational convention used in Western music to identify how many beats in each measure and what kind of note represents one beat in a song.

True Rhyme – Two words with the exact same sounding final accented vowel. Examples are “Cat” and “Hat” or “Cone” and “Moan”.

Vocals – Melody delivered by the human voice.

VST – Virtual instruments which can be recorded within a DAW.

Conclusion

One of my favorite questions to answer is “what do you like about songwriting?”. It's my favorite creative outlet for conveying what I'm feeling. Any emotion can be portrayed through songwriting. The painful emotions can be alleviated whereas the joyful emotions can be amplified.

My favorite thing overall about songwriting is how open ended it is. We live in a pretty great time where music from around the world, from virtually any artist you can think of, is readily available at your fingertips by just a couple of clicks of a mouse.

People complain about the music today and while you could make an argument that mainstream music is weaker overall today than it was in arguably any decade before, it's never been easier to access music from any time period past or present and that's a special thing.

Whether it's mainstream or below the radar, you can more easily find what you're looking for today than any other period.

So if you are complaining that the radio today lacks in comparison to the Beatles or something like that, then by all means go listen to the Beatles. Popular music today doesn't negate or replace popular music from the past ago, and that's an important thing to keep in mind.

Sorry about that tangent! The point is that you can put any influence you want into your songs, and everything you write is still an extension and expression of you and has your personality on it.

I'm not just talking in terms of style, but you can take a song in any direction you want. You can and should surprise your listener and keep them on their toes with your changes.

LASTLY, remember that songwriting this is a skill which you develop over time. The more you exercise your songwriting muscles, the higher quality of the songs which you write in terms of structure and the strength of the hooks and lyrics.

To display this point and draw an end to this work, I'm going to do something a bit embarrassing and share with you the VERY first song which I ever wrote. Then I'm going to follow it with a more recent song

which I wrote a couple of years ago but finally made a recording of so that you can literally hear the development and change which took place in the 6 years between the two.

“I Hate My Friends”

When I say the first song I wrote, I mean it's the first which I ever completed because I had a lot of fragments floating around for a couple few months before I finally focused and committed myself to finishing one. I actually wrote this one around the end of high school/beginning of college, probably that summer to be more precise.

I was listening to a lot of Reel Big Fish and Forces of Evil at the time and wanted to write a song like I could imagine hearing from them, so between the depressing lyrics set against a poppy horn lick/melody I think I accomplished what I set out to do.

I have to mention a number of disclaimers with this song. I wrote this when I had designs on rejuvenating the genre of ska and bringing it back into the limelight. All throughout college this was the only kind of music I was writing (poppy high energy rock with horns). It was only when I graduated that I realized it was far too difficult to keep a ska band together so I made my first foray into straight ahead rock.

Unfortunately I only had a couple of live practice recordings of it to choose from, so the quality isn't great. I took the better of the two though the bassist didn't show up in this version.

I also have to seriously apologize for my “strangled cat” vocals. Keep in mind I had just started singing within the past few months and didn't know how to sing, so I think it's neat to see my voice develop between the two songs, as well.

Finally, this sounds like a high school band (or worse) practicing but unfortunately this was my first band in college. This was one of our first practices so we were still very green and didn't have a great grasp on the song.

HOWEVER, putting aside the awful vocals, recording quality, and instrumentation, I don't think the song ITSELF is too bad considering it was my first.

It's in 4/4 time, it's in the key of A, has a tempo which fluctuates somewhere between 148 and 153 beats per minute, and structurally it's pretty simple:

**intro/same as chorus without vocals,
verse,
prechorus,
chorus,
verse,
prechorus,
X2 chorus,
musical outro**

Lyrically the song could be considered novelty in the silliness of the subject matter and lyrics themselves. It's pretty straightforward: I was tired of flaky friends who would cancel plans or be difficult to get a hold of (I still am, actually), and while I was fed up with that situation, I wanted to present the message in a cheeky and sarcastic way.

Lyrics for “I Hate My Friends”:

**my friends suck as friends
but they're all that i've ever known
i know that they'll just let me down
when i am home**

**(prechorus)
why do i come to rely on them every time
i call them again and again but there's no reply**

**(chorus)
which is why
i, i hate my friends
they did it again
they left me here all alone
and i, remember when
i called them my friends
when i wasn't all alone**

**they say that they'll
give me a call later on the phone
they always tell me that they will
but then they don't**

**(prechorus)
why do i come to rely on them everytime
the only way they'd ever notice me is if i died**

(chorus) X2

“Sunshine”

Fast forward many years later to a song which I'm not quite as embarrassed to share with you. I had recently finished with my band “The Great Escape”, had just moved to New York, and wanted to start a new music project but didn't have much direction or idea about what it would be or who would be a part of it, so I just started up stock piling songs intended for a still unnamed project which later turned into “Brigands”.

You can listen to it at <https://soundcloud.com/brigandsrock/sunshine>.

I remember laying on my bed in my apartment, watching something on my laptop or listening to music and the intro horn hook popped into my head.

It used to be much longer but I cut it down and wrote the verse guitar chords over it on my acoustic and the song was finished that night save for the chorus and bridge (of course).

Soon after I got the idea to use that 8th note snare and kick drum alternation with the crashes over top for the chorus and the vocals just slid into place and from there the bridge, while it's decidedly different from the rest of the song, flowed out from the chorus.

I wasn't trying to emulate anyone in particular this time around. You'll do less of that as you develop your own songwriting voice.

The song overall has a bittersweet melodrama kind of south of the border feel to it, at least that's how I think of it.

It's in 4/4 time, it's in the key of G#m for the most part, has a tempo of 126, and structurally it's more sophisticated than the last song:

**intro/verse without vocals,
verse,
prechorus,
chorus,
musical interlude (same as verse without vocals)
verse,
prechorus,
chorus,
bridge,
chorus**

You'll notice that in the last chorus the previous drum scheme disappears and the part instead flows pretty well from the bridge to give it distinction from the previous choruses and an extra feel of energy.

Lyrically the song is about a bad situation I was in awhile back with a girl who came and left and even after we were "done" we still found our ways back into each other's lives at the worst possible times when we had no business doing so.

Lyrics for "Sunshine":

**you wake up one day and you don't mean a thing
carry on and then you live through that
yeah something came up someone she'd rather see
and the world is left to hear her sins**

(prechorus)

alright

oh yeah

no i didn't need all that

**i heard about him heard your plans have been made
but you still come around now and then
our time is gone we salvaged skin in remains
so it's skin that holds me back again**

(prechorus)

(chorus)
sunshine
i'm not living for you anymore
sometimes
we find our way to each other's door
but when the lights go on just to see us run
you outta know that that was not the plan
sunshine

**friends ask about me but no they're not with me
see their lives see them settle again
can't we be bigger than everybody's dream
no we rust, you run to be like them**

(prechorus)

(chorus)

(bridge)
will you drive me crazy
my little miss play me

**will you lead me on like we both know you can
will you drive me crazy
my one chance to save me
i want to get by again**

(chorus)
sunshine
i'm not living for you anymore
sometimes
we find our way to each other's door
but when the lights go on just to see us run
i'll tell you now that that was not the plan
sunshine