

VAMS Workshop #1 - Songwriting

Start with the quote: “The hardest part about writing a song is writing a song”

Songwriting is a difficult process, which does not have any one way of doing things. Some questions that I am always asked are the following;

“What do you do first, the music or the lyrics?”

“How do you decide on what to write about?”

“What instrument do you use to write your songs?”

“How does technology play into your songwriting?”

And finally...”Where do you get your inspiration from?”

These questions are all extremely difficult to answer. The only answer I can give is that it all depends. Songwriting is a very personal process with no right or wrong answers in how to conduct the process. For me, the hardest part of songwriting is trying to find inspiration.

This workshop has been designed to try to answer these questions at the same time, look at some of the technical aspects of songwriting in the hope that I can reduce the difficulties of the songwriting process.

1. Part 1: Why We Love the Songs We Love

Workshop participants would be asked to think about and the songs that they really love and write down what made them great. Students would then write down as much as they can to answer the question. Once they have completed this task, they would share their ideas

with the rest of the group and talk about the common themes amongst the group members. This is a great way for students to think more critically about the songs that they love and why this is.

Why Do We Love The Songs We Love?

For this part of the workshop I am going to give you about 5 – 10 minutes to think about all of the songs that you love and write them down on a piece of paper. As well, I want you think about why you love these songs and write that down as well.

So what makes these songs brilliant and timeless?

For me, it's how they take you to a place in time and they evoke an emotion. – They spark memories.

How many of us can think back to a time when we were younger, maybe a poignant moment, and right in our minds there is a soundtrack that goes along with it.

2. Part 2: The Deconstruction of a Pop Song – A Listening Exercise

Students would listen to a couple of great songs and further add to their list of what makes songs great. (Students analyzing the songs and asking the questions, what are they doing well? What works/What doesn't work? Why is the song great/successful?

Some songs are amazing not because their structure is particularly strong but because of its tonal quality – the interaction of the instruments and the musicians behind

them. Though possible, this tonal quality is difficult to achieve by a single musician behind their computer.

It is not imperative that songs follow a stringent pop song formula. There are many songs that don't which are equally interesting and exciting. Remember that there are no rules to songwriting and song structure. However, it

The songs:

Once completed, I would then ask students to pay attention to the elements of the songs (intro, verses, melody, choruses, bridge etc.). Students would listen to the songs provided, and differentiate the different parts of the songs. This exercise would assist students in being able to differentiate and recognize the different elements, which make up a pop song. After students have been provided some time with the songs, as a group, we would write down the song elements on a white board. This deconstruction of songs will assist students in understanding what elements are required to write a great pop song. After the sections of the songs are revealed, a further description of each section would be expanded upon.

Introduction – The introduction usually contains no lyrics and its goal is to catch the listener's attention. Usually the intro is one or two bars. The intro may also be based around the chords from the verse, chorus or bridge.

Verse – The verse is the main part of the song where the main body of lyrics will reside. Usually a song will contain 2 or 3 verses where the music is identical, however, the lyrics will have changed. The verses are where the songwriter is telling the main part of the story.

Pre-chorus – A pre-chorus comes right before the chorus and its job is to set the chorus up. Not all songs have a pre-chorus.

Chorus – What is a chorus? This is probably the most important part of a song and one that the listener should always be able to repeat in their heads after they have heard the song. The chorus section of a song will repeat both musically and lyrically and should try to elevate the song both musically and lyrically. The chorus is where the hook usually resides. In pop music, the chorus usually comes after the verse or in some cases, a pre-chorus.

Bridge – Adding a bridge to a song can help a song be more interesting and break up the monotony of verse chorus structure. Bridges can sometimes be only instrumental, differ in their construction from verses and choruses, be in a completely different complimentary key, and are usually placed at the end of the song right before the final chorus. They can also differ in tempo from the rest of the song.

Lyrics – What's more important, lyrics or melody? How do we write lyrics or get our ideas for lyric writing? What makes great lyrics? Inspiration comes from everywhere but I usually tell people to write about what they know. For example, think about an experience and how it felt.

Personal experiences

Striking a balance between repetition and variety

Repetition is an element of a song which can make a song catchy

Catchy choruses are good

Rhyming and alliteration

Hook – What is a hook? Hooks are usually found in choruses. They are usually repetitive and become in the form of an instrument (such as a guitar riff), a vocal phrase, or a catchy harmony part amongst other things.

3. So How Does One Start? Here are some tips

The greatest obstacle to songwriting is not having discipline. It takes a considerable amount of discipline and dedication to become a songwriter.

Stop thinking about writing songs and just write. Commit to writing a reasonable amount of songs per week. Remember that for every 10 songs you write, usually only one is going to be great.

Listening to a lot of different genres of music can help. Analyze them to death. What are they doing well, what works/doesn't work, Why is the song great/successful? Try to identify the different parts of the song to get a better understanding of a well-constructed pop song.

How to avoid writers block

All writers at some point will suffer from writers block. The best way to break out of it is to grab yourself a

blank sheet of paper and write whatever comes to mind. We can try this exercise as a group.

Where does inspiration comes from?

4. The Technical

Arming yourself with a basic understanding of how songs are built will come in handy. Furthermore, having a general understanding of basic music theory (major and minor keys and chords) will definitely give you an advantage. For example, knowing what key you are in will give you ideas as to what chords work well with one another. If you do not have a basic understanding of musical theory, there are a lot of resources that can be found on the web. In addition, some major audio software applications can assist the user in chord usage. For example, Garageband has the ability to assist the user as to which chords work well together.

I use guitar 365. <http://www.guitarlessons365.com>

Using a computer program is a great way to help songwriters sketch songs or capture ideas when inspiration hits.

Always be ready to capture an idea for when inspiration hits. Keeping a notepad and pen on hand or a pocket recorder or smart phone is a good idea since you never know when a song idea might come into your head.