Kristina's Songwriting Workshop

The most important ingredient of a good song is sincerity. Let the song be yours and yours alone. However important, however trivial, believe it. Mean it from the bottom of your heart, and say what is on our mind as carefully, as clearly, as beautifully as you can.

Oscar Hammerstein II

SONGWRITING TIPS

If I could give you only three tips they would be the first three on this list.

1. I think that the most important tool for a songwriter is to have a writing support group. In my group there is no teacher or leader, this way each writer has an equal say, and if someone gives you a suggestion you don't like you can decide not to use it. In my writing group we only have two rules; you must bring something that you have actually worked on since the last group and you must bring xeroxed copies so the group can give you clear feedback. By requiring the songs to be written since the last group it creates a "pressure to write" situation, and it ensures that everyone is on the same uneven ground. Songwriting, as with all of the creative arts, is highly subjective, everybody has an opinion and everyone is right and wrong. Learn to listen intelligently and clearly give praise and criticism with out being harsh or unkind. Your listening skills will become sharper in the group, and soon you will be able to use the skills you've honed to see clearly what works and doesn't work in your own songs as well as your peer's songs.

2. Use the five senses: taste, touch, smell, hearing and sight. Abstract ideas are hard to hang on to. Use the senses to connect the abstract to something concrete. Paint a picture and be specific. Make sure you have at least one of the five senses in your song, more is more better! By including the senses, you make the listener connect your song to their body rather than just to the mind. The connection is much stronger. Also, employ the kinesthetic sense, we learned that in class!

3. Separate the editor and the creator and don't be afraid to write a bad song. Nothing dries up a good songwriter more quickly than when they try to write a new song that is as good as their last song. When you write a lot, your songwriting skills are sharp and well exercised, then when a good song comes along, you have the tools to catch it. Feel glad when you write an awful song, this gets it out of the way so you can write a good one. Create a physical way to keep your editor separate. I gave the examples in class of the guy who has a crazy hat he wears when he is in the creative phase, then changes his hat to an editor's green visor when he is ready to edit. Or the example of the Nashville writer who makes a beautiful cup of tea for her editor and serves it in a separate room so she can be free of the editor when she is in the creative phase. Find your own way to separate them. And watch out for the evil editor!!!! We all have that character roaming around in our head and that character is happy to tell you repeatedly that you have no talent and your song sucks, etcetera. Exorcize that character from your head by writing down the destructive things they say and (safely) burning those bits of papers!

4. Don't stop writing when you have three verses and a chorus, write until you have exhausted the subject and pare back. This means, don't edit while you are writing. Write a lot, much more than one song's worth, and let the creativity flow. When you

have exhausted the creativity, then change to editor and become critical. If you become critical to early, you will stifle your creativity and loose some great stuff. Always keep the editor and creator separate, don't try to do both at once.

5. Start a songwriting notebook with:

    - list of potential titles
    - ideas for songs
    - interesting phrases and rhymes
    - good bits of old songs that don't work as they are

6. Always keep a pad of paper and pencil and or a tape recorder (phone) handy, keep one by your bed and have a recording device at the ready in your car if you drive. There is something about the concentration of driving that uses the analytical part of your brain to deal with the driving, that gives the creative part of the brain a great playground for thought. Disable your car stereo system. If it works you will listen to it and end up celebrating others creative work instead of your own. For some reason, running water is also a great stimulator of the right brain. As I mentioned in class, these things don't work for me, but they do work for many of my students.

7. Listen to and analyze many songwriters. Be careful of only listening to one writer too much, you may find yourself imitating their style instead to being influenced by it.

8. Songwriting is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration. Be prepared to spend a lot of time rewriting. Most great songs got that way through a lot of hard work wearing an editor's cap and running the song by a songwriting group or other songwriter friends.

9. Be specific about the five "w"s (who, when, where, why, what). Don't talk about how you feel, *show* how you feel. For example, in Bill Imhoff's song "High Lonesome Sound":

    A woman sits in her window
    Her hand to her chin
    And she stares at the mailbox
    It's empty again
    She draws a breath inward
    Lets it go with a frown
    Like the wind in the treetops
    With a high lonesome sound

10. Use a thesaurus and rhyming dictionary.

11. If you are in a rut always writing the same kind of song, or if you haven't written for awhile, try writing a song on a new instrument or try writing a new style of song. If you always write soft ballads, try taking a rock guitar class, and write a song in that style with some of your new licks. You may still prefer writing in the ballad style, but you will probably bring a few tricks back to it from the rock class that will vary your writing and make it more interesting.

12. Here it is, that awful word... hook. I had one teacher call it the handle, if your song has no handle, the audience can't pick it up to carry it home. The hook can be a repetitive phrase, a repetitive lick, anything that someone listening can catch on to and remember your song by.

13. Don't overuse a metaphor unless you are doing it for comedy (pilot light has gone out on our oven of love).

14. Don't change metaphor mid stream (sea, bird).

15. Do obvious rhyme first, clever one second.

16. If you have problems getting the last word to rhyme, invert the sentence.

17. Keep a dream journal. Your dreams are full of great images and inspiration and a direct connection to your inner secrets/feelings.

18. With humor save the funniest verse for last. Let them think they know what is coming then surprise them.

19. Watch out for cliché rhymes, metaphors and images. Listen to many songwriters and see how they avoid or fall into cliché rhyme traps. The songwriters in my songwriting group are all inspired cliché busters. (fire/desire, wife/life, love/above are seriously overused rhymes)

20. If you get stuck with a song, try to look at it from a different perspective. (e.g. 'From A Distance') Also, you can try changing the gender or the point of view (e.g. I to she, he to you, etc.)

21. Resist the temptation to talk about your song too soon. Sharing ideas before they are developed can easily lead to losing the whole inspiration. However, bring a foundling song to a songwriting group can give you the direction you may need to finish it.

22. Structure can be very freeing, having a very specific topic or assignment to write about, or a rhythmic structure to write on (using a drum machine, for example) can unblock a blocked writer. I have included several writing exercises at the end that can be useful for this.

23. After you've written your song, run it through these songwriting tests:

    - Clarity - remember, as soon as words are sung with accompaniment, they become unclear.
    - Tense - clean up your verb's tenses
    - Brief - don't try to say too much, save brilliant lines that have nothing to do with your song for another song. If you have too many topics or song ideas in your song, keep focused on the title and save the others for another song.
    - Hook - will an audience be left with anything to later identify the song with?
    - Singability - can the words and melody be sung well? Is the language conversational enough or is it too formal or stilted?
    - Are there overused clichés present?
    - Are there overused or predictable rhymes?
    - Are there too many syllables in a line, clean it up!
    - Are there not enough images/senses used, too vague? Add some!
    - Have you stuck to your rhyme scheme?
    - Is your melodic accent on the wrong part of the word? Àn-gry An-grý

ELEMENTS OF A SONG

Verse tells the story.

Chorus contains the title/hook and sums up the song. If the Verse is sung low, the Chorus is usually sung high.

Bridge gives us another view or philosophy. If the Verse is in a major key the bridge is usually in a minor key or vice-versa.

- Or how about using some of the old elements, pre-chorus, Intro, Outro etc.

HOW TO GET INSPIRED TO WRITE A SONG

1. Keep a list of catch phrases, titles, moods, images, ideas, etc... When you're in the doldrums try writing from your list.
2. Go see a movie, read a book, watch a TV program etc. Write a song from the plot, emotion, mood, or images you just saw.
3. Word salad - try writing word association or free verse. Sometimes you'll come up with some good lines or ideas for a song.
4. Try writing a very complete, very descriptive page or two about an idea. Describe every detail, how the main character is feeling, what clothing they are wearing, the environment they are into the finest detail, all the images you can come up with, about 50 times more than you can fit in your song, then try honing it down using only the most exciting, vivid and essential parts.
5. Try putting yourself in someone else's shoes then write about what it's like being that person.
6. Try writing as if you were writing a play. Write a very strict treatment of every verse using plot, character, dialogue, action etc., then write a song sticking to that outline.
7. Keep a dream journal, use images and ideas from dreams. Always have a paper and pen near your bed.
8. Jam on your instrument. Often the process of noodling around with some notes will suggest the start of a song. This is the most common way I start a song.
9. Dead periods do not necessarily mean the end of all your writing abilities. Soak in other writers, do timed writing exercises, let this be a time to soak in inspiration. Fred Kohler says input=output.

IDEA'S TO PROMOTE CREATIVE MELODY WRITING

1. If you start in a minor key, try to bring in major chords in the chorus (and visa versa).
2. Purposely start a song in a key you rarely use (i.e. if you usually play in the key of C, start a song in F. It will put your voice in a different place relative to the tonic and get

you writing some different melodies. Also, try writing your melody a cappella so your melody isn't limited by your accompanying instrument.

3. Change your style. Flat pick if you're always fingerpicking and visa versa. Take a lesson or two if you need to.
4. Play in a more upbeat tempo if you usually do slow ballads. If skills inhibit faster playing, write without an instrument and tap out rhythms.
5. Learn someone else's song in a style you enjoy but haven't played before. Take a lesson or two in that style. That background will add to your versatility. You pickup new song structures and chord progressions that way too.
6. Capo up on the neck of the guitar. "Sounds of Silence' was played up on the 8th or 9th fret. this made for a unique sound.
7. Try starting your melody on each possible scale degree.
8. Try each possible opening interval up and down as was done with the score to "West Side Story".
9. Invert (reverse the direction) of part or all of your melodic figure.
10. Derive melodic materials from phone number, a name etc.
11. Look at the intervals that you usually use. If they are always the same try using some new ones. Most people write primarily in seconds and thirds. Consciously add new intervals.
12. Have your melodies ask a question then answer it.
13. Use a motif and echo it.
14. Be aware of where you place the voice. Is it in a comfortable range? If it is placed higher then is comfortable this adds stress to the song and can be used to great effect. Generally you want to save the highest part for later in the song or phrase.
15. Use a pivot note in the melody to change key.

EXERCISES

1. Pick a somewhat random bunch of notes on your instrument. Then lay a contrapuntal riff over that. Find some chords that will work with both parts. Write a song over that. (Linda Waterfall showed me this one.)
2. Write a paragraph using a metaphor to describe something.
3. Have everybody write down kinds of songs, song ideas, things to write about, and put them in a hat and then draw out assignments.
4. Write a song the opposite of what you do most often or best.
5. Write a song using the fewest possible words.
6. Use newspaper clippings for song ideas.

7. Flash cards in three colors: person, place, activities, pick one of each and write a song about it.

8. Pick a singer you like and write them a song to sing.

9. Write a song for your favorite author.

10. Deal each person seven cards from a playing deck. A=A 2=Bb 3=B 4=C etc. up to Q=Ab and K is wild. This will be seven notes of your melody in the order they are dealt, but not necessarily the first seven notes. The key and the time value are up to the writer. (This is a game I made up when I was board on an airplane, it gets my melody writing out of a rut.) Also, you can roll dice till you have seven random numbers. 1=Do 2=Re 3=Mi 4=Fa 5=So 6=La (This one will keep you in one key and is easier to do.)

11. Give each songwriter a full-sized piece of paper and instruct them to make up a song title and write it on the top. Everyone puts their paper in the middle and takes one out. Put it back if you get your own back. Now each person makes up the first line of a song to go with the title they got and then folds the page so that only the line they just wrote shows. Put it in the middle again and take a new page. Continue writing, folding and passing so that only the line you just wrote shows. When you have a few verses or you get tired of this game, then once again put the papers in the middle and everyone takes one out and reads it. It's important that the writing be anonymous. The songs usually turn out better then you would imagine.

12. Write the alphabet along the side of a paper. Without thinking write a word for each letter to form a sentence.

13. Have everyone start with a blank piece of paper. Instruct each person to make up a word and write it on the top of the page. Fold the paper in half and put it in a pile with the others in the center. When everyone's page is in have everyone grab a different page. Have them write a definition for the word they got. Fold the page in half and put it back in the center. When everyone's page is in grab a different page. If you get your own definition, put it back, you can get your own word, just not your own definition. Write a poem using the word and definition you got. The poem can be in any form, limerick, free verse, haiku, anything. Put a 5-minute writing limit on the poems. Then fold the papers back in half again and put them in the center. When everyone is finished have everyone draw one to read. If you get your poem, put it back and draw another. Read the poems out loud. The thing that makes this work is that it is an anonymous exercise. People feel fine about writing quick, goofy and sometimes stupid poems if they know they won't be busted for it, and it really frees up blocked writing. The poems are usually completely delightful and funny. I use this game a lot at parties or when a group of people are out at a restaurant waiting for a meal. People are usually hesitant to start it then they want to play it 20 more times. I learned this from Kim Wallach.

14. On five sets of differently colored index cards instruct that everyone write a descriptive phrase on the first color. (The bulging greasy), a noun on the second color (step ladder), a verb on the third color (bounced), an adverb on the fourth color (noisily), and a prepositional phrase on the 5th color (between the sheets). Distribute one of each color of the cards randomly to the group and read the sentences out loud. The big bird sat solidly in the river, or A potato like bag was singing haltingly by the kennel. (Descriptive phrase, noun, verb, adverb, prep phrase.)

15. There is an exercise in "Writing Down the Bones" which I love. Here it is: 'Verbs are very important. They are the action and energy of a sentence. Be aware of how you

use them. Try this exercise. Fold a sheet of paper in half the long way. On the left side of the page list ten nouns. Any ten. Now turn the paper over to the right column. Think of an occupation, for example, a carpenter, doctor, flight attendant. List fifteen verbs on the right half of the page that go with that position. A Cook:

Lilacs	Sauté
Horse	Chop
Mustache	Mince
Cat	Slice
Fiddle	Cut
Muscles	Heat
Dinosaur	Broil
Seed	Taste
Plug	Boil
Video	Bake
	Fry
	Marinate
	Whip
	Stir
	Scoop

Open the page. You have nouns listed in a row down the left side and verbs listed on the right. Try joining the nouns with the verbs to see what new combinations you can get, and then finish the sentences, casting the verbs in the past tense if you need to. Dinosaurs marinate in the earth. The fiddles boiled the air with their music. The lilacs sliced the sky into purple.'

16. Take someone's phone number and let each number represent a tone of the scale and write a melody using that.

17. Instruct the writers to find a photo or picture and have them describe it in 12 (or 50) words. Have them bring this to the group and describe the picture without showing it and then have them show the picture and see how close they came to the image in their head.

18. Instruct the writers to write 1-8 in two rows with space in between on their page.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Then have them put random x's under more then 5 but less then 10 of the numbers.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	x			x	x		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
x			x	x		x	

It is important that they don't know why they are putting the x's under the numbers to keep the randomness in this exercise. Now tell them that each number represents an 1/8 note beat and the x's are where the beats occur. (So this is two bars of 4/4 time.) Now tell them to write a song using this rhythm. The rhythm can be in the melody, in the accompaniment or it can be the rhythm of a repeating riff. (I learned this exercise in a Linda Waterfall songwriting class.)

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

- **Alliteration** - Beginning syllables with the same sounds, for example, the sounds of soul
- **Assonance** - Where stressed vowels in a word agree, but the consonants do not, as in "neck" and "pet"
- **Metaphor** - Use of a word to represent an object or concept which the words do not literally mean, such as "rain, you're a woman"
- **Onomatopoeia** - A sound suggesting an idea, such as the word "swish" or "the ripple of the water"
- **Near rhyme** - Something that almost rhymes, like the "mean team"
- **Similes** - Similes are like metaphors, but more explicit. They often use the words "like" or "as", for example, "He broke like the waves"

BUSINESS

Use form PA to copyright your songs. You can copyright each song individually or you can put as many songs as you like on a cassette and call it "Songs of (your name here) Volume 1". That way you can copyright all your songs for one copyrighting fee (which is $65.00 as I write this, the rates go up from time to time). Otherwise, it would be $65.00 per song. If you use the volume method of copyrighting and you publish your songs, you then need to file form CA to list the titles of the songs you have on the volume. This involves another $65.00 fee but is still much cheaper than copyrighting your songs one by one. Copyrighting your song through the Library of Congress is the one and only way to copyright your song. You cannot copyright the title, the chord progression or the concept of a song, just the song itself. When you send a song or set of songs in to be copyrighted, they do not check to be sure that the song you send in is indeed yours. They don't listen to it, they just date stamp it and put it in storage. If you believe that someone has stolen your song, you can go through a complex legal procedure involving the copyright office digging out your tape and/or lead sheet and proving that you have the earliest date on the disputed song. But the reality is, it's quite rare for someone to steal a song and it's only usually

disputed when someone has made some sizable amount of money. If you are worried that you have accidentally stolen a song, run your song through the song identifying apps like "SoundHound" or "Shazam". For copyright forms, write to:

United States Copyright Office
Library of Congress
Washington DC 20559
(202) 287-9100 www.loc.gov/copyright

RECOMMENDED BOOKS

- *Writing Down the Bones* by Natalie Goldberg on Shambhala Press
- *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* by Betty Edwards
- *The Artist's Way* by Jullia Cameron
- *Where People Fly and Water Runs Uphill: Using Dreams to Tap the Wisdom of the Unconscious* by Jeremy Taylor
- *Music, the Brain and Ecstasy* by Robert Jourdain
- *The Natural History of the Senses* by Diane Ackerman
- *Words Fail Me* by Patricia O'Conner
- *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* by Stephen King
- Any of Lawrence Block's writing books, such as *Write for Your Life* or *The Liar's Bible*
- Use a Rhyming Dictionary!

Lastly, some fun from the internet:

HOW TO SING THE BLUES

(attrib. to Memphis Earlene Gray
with help from Uncle Plunky)

1. Most blues begin "woke up this morning."

2. "I got a good woman" is a bad way to begin the blues, unless you stick something nasty in the next line.

   I got a good woman--
   with the meanest dog in town.

3. Blues are simple. After you have the first line right, repeat it. Then find something that rhymes. Sort of.

Got a good woman
with the meanest dog in town.
He got teeth like Margaret Thatcher
and he weighs about 500 pounds.

4. The blues are not about limitless choice.

5. Blues cars are Chevies and Cadillacs. Other acceptable blues transportation is Greyhound bus or a southbound train. Walkin' plays a major part in the blues lifestyle. So does fixin' to die.

6. Teenagers can't sing the blues. Adults sing the blues. Blues adulthood means old enough to get the electric chair if you shoot a man in Memphis.

7. You can have the blues in New York City, but not in Brooklyn or Queens. Hard times in Vermont or North Dakota are just a depression. Chicago, St. Louis and Kansas City are still the best places to have the blues.

8. The following colors do not belong in the blues:
   a. violet
   b. beige
   c. mauve

9. You can't have the blues in an office or a shopping mall, the lighting is wrong.

10. Good places for the Blues:
   a. the highway
   b. the jailhouse
   c. the empty bed

Bad places:
a. Ashrams
b. Gallery openings
c. weekend in the Hamptons

11. No one will believe it's the blues if you wear a suit, unless you happen to be an old black man.

12. Do you have the right to sing the blues?

Yes, if:
a. your first name is a southern state--like Georgia
b. you're blind
c. you shot a man in Memphis.
d. you can't be satisfied.

No, if:
a. you were once blind but now can see.
b. you're deaf

c. you have a trust fund.

13. Neither Julio Iglesias nor Barbra Streisand can sing the blues.

14. If you ask for water and baby gives you gasoline, it's the blues.
Other blues beverages are:
a. wine
b. Irish whiskey
c. muddy water

Blues beverages are NOT:
a. Any mixed drink
b. Any wine kosher for Passover
c. Yoo Hoo (all flavors)

15. If it occurs in a cheap motel or a shotgun shack, it's a blues death. Stabbed in the back by a jealous lover is a blues way to die. So is the electric chair, substance abuse, or being denied treatment in an emergency room. It is not a blues death, if you die during a liposuction treatment.

16. Some Blues names for Women
a. Sadie
b. Big Mama
c. Bessie

17. Some Blues Names for Men
a. Joe
b. Willie
c. Little Willie
d. Lightning

Persons with names like Sierra or Sequoia will not be permitted to sing the blues no matter how many men they shoot in Memphis.

17B. Other Blues Names (Starter Kit)
a. Name of Physical infirmity (Blind, Cripple, Asthmatic)
b. First name (see above) or name of fruit (Lemon, Lime, Kiwi)
c. Last Name of President (Jefferson, Johnson, Fillmore, etc.)
Mix and Match