

Chapter 1

Everything You Need to Write a Song

In This Chapter

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 - ▶ Examining the role of music in your life
 - ▶ Finding out what it takes to write a song
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Songs — the combination of music and words (or *lyrics*) — have the power to make people laugh, cry, or even scream out in protest. They cause people to pound on their steering wheels as they're driving down the road — buttoned-down businesspeople are transformed into their favorite rockers during morning commutes. And thousands become pop divas in the privacy of their own showers. Songs can transport you to a moment 30 years in the past, and some of the songs you enjoy today will stay with you for years to come.

Given the way songs can move and inspire people, you're not alone if you're interested in writing a few songs of your own after playing a lot of guitar. Maybe you've even come up with some lyrics, or thought of a melody, but you're just not sure where to take it from there. In this chapter, you become familiar with all the facets of songwriting that you need to be aware of. Whether you're just starting out or you already have a few songs (or portions of songs) under your belt, you're at this book's beginning, and as Julie Andrews sang, that's "a very good place to start."

Understanding Why People Write Songs

People write songs for many reasons: to express their feelings, spark debate, inform their audience, push others to act. . . . There are probably as many reasons for writing songs as there are people who write them. Songs are often written by people who have a hard time verbalizing what's in their hearts — sometimes, pairing their feelings with music helps people say what they really feel. Others may write songs because they have a message to get across — a message that much of the world may not be quite ready to hear — and putting that message to music can help penetrate even the most shielded of ears.

You may want to write a song to

- ✓ Express your true self.
- ✓ Release the music inside of you that's just waiting to get out.
- ✓ Give back to your songwriting heroes some of the joy and inspiration they've given you.
- ✓ Develop the gift of expression you may have been born with.
- ✓ Gain acceptance and make new friends.
- ✓ Earn a living at something you truly love!



Whatever your motive, the goal is the same:

- ✓ To come up with words and music from the inner reaches of your imagination
- ✓ To connect with others through a song
- ✓ To create something of lasting value

Finding the Songwriter in You

Fortunately, the main requirements for writing a song are exactly the same, whether it's strictly for yourself and for your loved ones or for the music-buying public. The main ingredients are a passion for music, a need to express yourself in song, a mind receptive to the ideas that come floating your way, and a willingness to find and network with other talented individuals who can help you realize your musical vision. Ironically, many songwriters say that some of their biggest hits were never intended for mass exposure or written

with success in mind. They were a personal expression of something in their hearts as a gift to themselves or for family, friends, and loved ones.

This chapter is for everyone who shares the dream of harnessing the song-writing power we all have within. You've come to the right place if your heart keeps tugging at you to write a song — but you're uncertain as to the process of the craft or what's required to create a really good one. If you know the elements that make up a great song and how the pros go about writing one, you can get on the right path to creating one of your own. Writing a song isn't rocket science, no matter what the music theory books would have you believe. Not that a little book learning isn't a great thing; it's just that complicated notions can stop you before you get started.

Songwriting is about 80 percent inspiration, 10 percent perspiration, and 10 percent implementation. So let's not get it backwards. Hopefully we can take down some of the roadblocks to writing a song and get to the heart of the matter — because that's where a song is born.

Being aware of your personal connection to songs

If you are compelled to be a songwriter, you've probably gotten a great deal of enjoyment from listening to songs over the years. When you think back on your life (whether you've lived 18 years or 80), how many songs come to mind when you think of important moments? Do certain songs bring to mind sights, sounds, smells, and emotions from the places you were when you first heard them? Have certain songs become your favorites because they express exactly what you hadn't been able to put into words yourself?

If you can easily compile a soundtrack to your life, full of all the songs you've loved over the years, you're off to a good start. If you would have trouble fitting that soundtrack onto one tape or CD, that's even better! Why? Because if your life has been greatly affected by the power of music, you're in the right position to affect others through the songs *you* write.

Taking a look at your instincts

If you feel a deep connection with certain special songs throughout your life, you can be pretty sure that you have the emotional capacity to express yourself in the context of a song. Besides having that appreciation for other

people's songs, check out the following list to roughly determine your S.Q. (yeah, you guessed it, your "song quotient").

You just may be a songwriter if:

- ✔ You've ever sung a melody in your shower and started gyrating wildly when you realized it was a song that didn't yet exist.
- ✔ You often find yourself lost in the industrial section of an unfamiliar town when you realize that the great lyric ideas you've been jotting down have totally obscured that little road map your friend had scribbled down for you to get to her house.
- ✔ You create a gaper's block in the freezer section of the supermarket when you take your microcassette recorder, iPhone, or digital voice recorder out of your bag and start chanting the hook of the new rap song you've created that documents the multiplicity of brands of frozen vegetables.
- ✔ You create a new angry lyric and shouted melody over the chord changes of "Muskrat Love" while performing karaoke at the local club.
- ✔ You visit friends and rudely spend most of the time in their 8-year-old son's bedroom, strumming some new chord changes on his toy guitar.
- ✔ You start haunting every club for musicians to put your latest poem to music.
- ✔ On the street, you stop everyone in a black turtleneck sweater to see if they're a poet who could supply words for your music.
- ✔ Your hands are rubbed raw from pounding out rhythms on your desktop, laptop, dashboard, dog, or garbage can.

If you can identify any aspect of yourself in this inventory list, you may be on your way to writing a song. If you haven't already done any of these things, don't despair. You can still develop your instincts and try your hand at songwriting. Who knows? You just may unlock a part of you that you never even knew existed.

Starting at the Beginning — Before You Write a Song

After you figure out why you want to write songs, and after you discover that you have what it takes to give it a shot, you're ready to dive in. But writing a song can be an intimidating process. After all, where do you begin?

Is formal music training a must?

Music training isn't a prerequisite for songwriting. However, if you don't at least have some ability on the guitar or piano to help put the ideas in your head into some tangible form, you *may* be at a disadvantage. (Notice we said "may." Funnyman Mel Brooks composed the musical score to his hit Broadway show *The Producers* by humming the melodies into a tape recorder and having someone translate that into musical notes on a page.) Musical ability, especially guitar playing, helps you with the rhythm of your words and the structure of your songs. All of this musical expertise is advantageous, but not required.

Jim Peterik, Grammy Award–winning songwriter, on songwriting

Most of what I know about songwriting, I learned by being a fan of music. Truly the best teacher is listening. I emulated the styles of songs that inspired me, and gradually, over the course of many years, integrated these influences into a style of my own. The Beatles' songwriting, to cite a notable example, was heavily influenced by the American rock 'n' roll of Chuck Berry, Carl Perkins, the Everly Brothers, and Little Richard. The Beatles created songs by absorbing those influences and adding their own unique personalities. The fact that they could barely read music hardly mattered. They had ears. Studying music theory, history, and arrangement can only enhance your abilities as a writer, but it would be a mistake to infer that formal training is a necessity to write a great song. Music appreciation classes can open your eyes and ears to what you should be listening for in songs, but you really don't need anyone to tell your foot when to start tapping or your lips to break out into a big smile when the chorus hits — that's just the power of great music. Start with your love for the songs you hear and then tap into all you have to express in your soul.

If you're still not convinced that you don't need training, consider the fact that some of the greatest songs ever written were composed by people with virtually no formal music training. Folk music, chants, Delta blues, country, and rock 'n' roll all got their start with people who had the raw talent to create songs. On the other hand, many legendary composers have extensive musical training in all forms of music, including classical composition. Just don't let the so-called "rules" hold you back or keep you frozen.

In college, my harmony teacher told me at the end of the semester, "You know all that stuff I taught you about avoiding parallel 5ths? Forget about it! If it sounds good, just do it!" By the way, that was the only formal music training I ever got, other than two years of piano and a few years of saxophone lessons. I earned a C+ in that class. It's my belief that life is the best teacher, and listening to and enjoying a good song are perhaps the best ways to learn to write songs yourself.

Although songwriting is more than just an assembly line of components to be bolted together, it doesn't hurt to know what's available in the "parts bin." A song is made up of *chords* (a combination of two or more tones sounded together in harmony), *melody* (the arrangement of single tones in sequence — the part you sing), *rhythm* (the beat or pulse of the song), and words (often called *lyrics* in the context of a song). Many successful songwriters excel in one area or another. Rare individuals can do it all. Even the ones who are a songwriting "one stop" often choose to collaborate with others to create that magical song that comes from a blend of styles and personalities. It's your task at hand, if you are challenged in a given area, to find writers to complete your vision and supply the expertise you lack.



Although some songwriters do well with the trial-and-error method, the more you know about music, the better your chances are to write a great song. The more adept you can become at an instrument, the easier it will be to create and demonstrate the ideas in your head. You don't need to enroll in a college course to study music. Instructions in music theory, composition, instrument performance, and voice are available at a per-session rate. Qualified, reasonably priced private teachers can be located through your local music shop or in the back pages of the local "freebie" entertainment newspaper. Finding someone who inspires you will make songwriting a lot easier.

Being prepared when inspiration strikes

Ideas will come into your brain while you're in the strangest of places, at any time of the day or night. You've probably heard stories about how some of the greatest hits were born. Paul McCartney has said some of his best songs came to him in his dreams. Billy Joel got the song "River of Dreams" from — you guessed it — a dream. And Sting, former lead singer of the group The Police, awakened in the middle of the night, wrote a song in ten minutes, and went back to sleep. The song? "Every Breath You Take." (Makes you want to get plenty of shut-eye, doesn't it?)



When a melody or a lyrical idea pops into your head, make sure you have a way of freezing it in time. Try to carry with you, at all times, a notebook to jot down ideas and a recording device to capture your musical phrases. Never fool yourself into thinking you'll remember the ideas when you get home. And don't think that "If it's really so great of an idea, I won't forget it." Some great songs will never be heard because the songwriter couldn't reconstruct some once-in-a-lifetime moment of inspiration.



A flash of inspiration may hit you when you least expect it. Be ready to catch it — then be prepared to work hard at turning the initial idea into a finished song.

Capturing that loving feeling

In a survey based on performances, sheet music, and record sales, *Variety*, the entertainment trade paper, once named the 100 most popular songs of all time. An analysis of the

themes of those 100 titles showed that about 85 percent of them were love songs. Many of those blockbuster golden oldies are still generating new recordings after 50 years.

Finding inspiration within yourself

So you aren't being awakened in the middle of the night by divine inspiration? Not to worry. You can find inspiration even if it doesn't seem to find you. The unique way you look at the world and feel about things, the mood you project in life, and all of your emotions are unmistakably projected in your song. In other words, write about what you know and feel, and you're sure to come up with something unique (because even though you thought your mother was lame when she said it, there's only one you).

Some writers, through their melodies, chord progressions, and lyrics, project a powerful optimism. Others project wonder, a bittersweet sadness, or pure anger. But few songwriters can project all emotions within a single song or even on one CD — so don't pressure yourself to cram in every possible emotion all at once.



Whatever the mood, all great songs have the ability to move people, to make them *feel* something.

Psychologists say that songs can put us in touch with our feelings. We all know what it feels like to be happy, sad, afraid, or in love. Often, a song is what puts us in touch with emotions.



Expressing your authentic feelings in a song is not only therapeutic to you as a person, but it can also be the clay from which a lasting song can be sculpted. If your audience can see a little bit of themselves in your song, if they can identify directly with what you're saying, your song just may stay in their hearts and minds (and MP3 players) long after it has dropped off the *Billboard* charts. When you feel passionate about an issue, when you are swept away by some new fad or idea, whether you are moved to tears by a movie or the passing of a loved one, or when you've recently fallen in or out of love — these are the subjects and feelings that will resonate in your song. Your own experience is perhaps more universal than you think.

Words of wisdom from Johnny Van Zant, lead singer of Lynyrd Skynyrd

Whatever moves me to write a song is usually a pretty good reason. I can really only write about what I feel in my heart. On September 11, 2001, I received a call from a good friend of mine who works on the rooftops in Manhattan. He had just been witness to one of the great tragedies of our or any time, as he heard a huge explosion and watched helplessly as the first of two jet aircrafts crashed into the World Trade Center. He called me and said that when he looked around, all of his co-workers had tears streaming down their faces. I said to him, "This has got to be the day America cried."

As I watched the images of destruction all that day, I started to sing a melody that seemed to

mirror my emotions at the time. The next day I called up my good buddy Jim Peterik and told him that there was a song to be written here that could possibly do some good. I sang him a piece of the melody I had in my head. The first words out of Jim's mouth were, "In the shadow of the Statue of Liberty" to which I added, "In the torchlight of the land of the free." From there, with the help of Ma Bell, digital recording, and the grace of God, a song was born.

We are proud to say that the fruits from our labor of love became the title song to *The Day America Cried* album, helped raised some money, and hopefully expressed a few emotions locked in so many hearts. That's the power of a song.

Creating the mood

It all starts with you — who you are and what feeling or mood you're able to project. The number of people who will be able to connect with and relate to the mood you're creating will determine just how successful your song will be.

In some great songs, the mood of the music matches perfectly to the lyric. For example:

- ✔ Minor chords often become the basis for sadder, deeper, and more introspective songs. Listen to "New York State of Mind" (written and sung by Billy Joel), "New York Minute" (written by Don Henley, Daniel Kortchmar, and Jai Winding; sung by Don Henley), or "Paint It Black" (written by Mick Jagger and Keith Richards; performed by the Rolling Stones).
- ✔ Major chords generally result in happier and more optimistic songs like "You Are the Sunshine of My Life" (written and sung by Stevie Wonder) or Survivor's "High on You" (written by Jim Peterik and Frankie Sullivan).

In other songs, the mood of the lyric is in direct contrast to the vibe of the music, such as in Elton John's deceptively happy ditty "I Think I'm Going to

Kill Myself” (written by Elton John and Bernie Taupin) and “I’ll Never Fall In Love Again” (written by Burt Bacharach and Hal David; sung by Dionne Warwick). That bittersweet contrast between the words and the music is often what gives a song its potency.



The greatest intimacy you share with your audience as a songwriter (and your greatest responsibility) is the transference of the mood you have created in a song. Taking that idea a bit further, you’re also sharing with your audience the mood you happened to be in as you were creating the song. It’s a thought-provoking notion that when you respond emotionally to one of the great classics, you’re actually feeling a little bit of what the composer was feeling at the moment of creation, even if it was many years ago. Such is the transcendent, timeless nature of songwriting.

Six Steps to Writing Your First Song



You have your notebook at your side, a gross of freshly sharpened pencils, your recorder in your bag, and you’re just waiting for the next drip of inspiration to hit you on the head. First off, don’t expect miracles right off the bat. Your first ideas may not be ready for prime time. But there’s really no such thing as a bad idea, only ones that need to be refined, clarified, or made more unique and clever — and real. You’ve got to start somewhere. Try to find some time each day to write. Before long, those moments you set aside will become an oasis in the often dry climate of a typical day. The more you practice your craft, the better your odds of coming up with that one special song that the world wants to hear.

Songwriting takes an enormous amount of patience and hard work. Fortunately, there’s a lot of fun to be had along the way. In that spirit, here are the six steps to writing your first song:

1. **Find a message you feel passionate about.** Choose a cause that resonates with you. Write about the girl you’ve been too insecure to ask out or that guy who you wish would take notice of you. Write about what interests you. Write about what you know. Keep it simple. If a subject is vital to you, it just might be vital to others as well. Similarly, if you don’t care about a subject, don’t expect others to either.
2. **Find a simple melody.** So many new songwriters get in over their heads trying to be complex to win friends and influence publishers. Songwriters are not paid by the note — you’re rewarded by the connections you make in the synapses of your audiences’ brains. Often the easiest melodies are the longest lasting.

3. **Find a simple set of chord changes.** Search your guitar or a piano keyboard for this needed element of your song, or search the Internet or local clubs for the musicians who can furnish your words and melodies with a comfortable music bed. (Chapter 1 in Book II gets you started playing chords.)
4. **Find a place to write.** Find a quiet, pastoral setting to clear your mind, light some incense, and let the melodies and emotions flow. If this isn't possible, any chaotic subway station will do. Other key areas to write: supermarkets, flea markets, soccer matches, PTA meetings, in the car, and anywhere else where the distractions merge to zero.
5. **Be inspired by your guitar or other instrument.** Pick up any old instrument that's lying around the house and see if you can coax some sound out of it. It's really all about what you're hearing *in your head*. If you can imagine what the finished song will sound like, you can write it on your late Uncle Louie's banjo.
6. **Find the confidence within yourself to put your heart and soul on the line and share your song with others.** It's through this loop of constant feedback that you discover how to improve your songs. Resist the urge to discount everything but positive reaction. Resist the urge to devalue the positive reactions. Breathe in the accolades and weigh the brickbats. Take it all in, but before making any changes, always check it against your heart for the truth.