

Chapter 1

Capturing That Solid-Gold Nugget

In This Chapter

- ▶ Gathering song ideas from anywhere
 - ▶ Organizing and tracking your thoughts and inspirations
 - ▶ Documenting your ideas
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This book is for everyone who shares the dream of harnessing the songwriting power we all have within. You've come to the right place if your heart keeps telling you to write a song, but your mind is uncertain as to the process of the craft or what's required to create a really good song. You bought the right book if you're wondering how to collect and organize your ideas. You have found the right resource if you have pieces of songs lying in notebooks and on countless cassettes but can't seem to put the pieces together. This book is for you if you have racks of finished song demos but don't know what to do next to get them heard. When 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.

Unless you're lucky enough to have fully finished songs come to you in your deepest dreams, or to somehow take dictation from the ghosts of Tin Pan Alley (the publishing area located in New York City in the 1930s and 1940s), most of us need to summon the forces, sources, reasons, and seasons that give us the necessary motivation to draw a song from our heart of hearts. Given that initial spark, you then need the best means of gathering those ideas, organizing them, putting them into form, and documenting them as they roll in — before it's too late and they roll right out again!

Have you ever noticed how you can remember a powerful dream just after you've awakened only for it to vanish into thin air in the light of day? Song ideas can be just as illusive. Songwriting is all about capturing the moment of musical inspiration at its source. This is perhaps the single most important element of songwriting because, like the moment that rain turns to snow, at the instant of inspiration, your mind grows wings and a song takes flight.

In this chapter, we explore the various places to mine for golden nuggets of inspiration for your songs, ways to gather that information, and methods of documenting your ideas. We also demonstrate the importance of brainstorming ideas with others to let inspiration flow, and provide simple exercises to show you the way.

Ground Zero — Before You Write a Single Note

So, you want to write songs. But writing a song can be an intimidating process. After all, where do you really begin?

Is formal music training a must?

Music training is not a prerequisite for songwriting. However, if you don't at least have some ability on the piano or guitar to help put the ideas from 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.) Even if you're solely a lyricist (the one who puts the words to the music), it may be helpful to you and your collaborator (the person writing the music to go with your words) if you have a working knowledge of a musical instrument. Musical ability could also help you with the rhythm of your words and the structure of your songs. That being said, even though musical expertise is advantageous, it is not required by any means.

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), a melody (the arrangement of single tones in sequence — the part you sing), a 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-man band often choose to collaborate with others to come up with 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 contribute the expertise you lack.



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 Beatle's 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 at all. They had ears!

—Jim Peterik, performer, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist for the bands Ides of March and Survivor, plus writer of hits for .38 Special, Sammy Hagar, and others

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. It's all good. 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 fifths? 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 is my belief that life is the best teacher, and listening to and enjoying a good song are perhaps the best ways to learn to do it yourself.

—Jim Peterik, writer of 18 Billboard Top 10 hits including the perennial favorite "Eye of the Tiger: featured in Rocky III



Although some songwriters do well with the trial-and-error method, the more you know about music, the better chance you have 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 do not need to enroll in a college course to study music, because there are other ways to get instruction in music theory, composition, instrumental performance, and voice at a per-session rate. Qualified, reasonably priced private teachers can be located through your local music shop or record store or in the back pages of the local "freebie" entertainment newspaper and through a simple Internet search. 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 also 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 flat, then went back to sleep. The song? "Every Breath You Take." (Makes you want to get plenty of shut-eye, now 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 digital recorder 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. Those cool ideas that you know you'll never forget will be "dust in the wind" if you don't have the discipline to write them down or hum them into the recorder when they hit.



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.

Finding your own inner voice and expression

So you aren't being awakened in the middle of the night by divine inspiration? Not to worry. You can find a way to tap into that inspiration even if it hasn't quite found its way to your bedside just yet. We go into this process in greater detail later in this book, but just know there are methods that enhance the likelihood that you'll soon be listening to your inner voice of inspiration.

In the meantime, take a look at the unique ways you look at and feel about the world around you, the moods you project in life, and all the emotions will undoubtedly be projected in your songs. These emotions are a great place to tap into when you are looking for ideas and inspirations to begin your songs. 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 really is only one you).



We are always chasing that perfect song in life, that magical moment where the stars align. But nothing is ever perfect. Those imperfections echo our humanity. These songs are true expressions of what our lives are like, imperfect but worn; comfortable. But the chase is fun, and we keep on chasing. Meanwhile, we take pictures along the way and document our feelings through words, through phrases, through titles of songs and through performance as well.

—Geoff Byrd, singer-songwriter, producer, and creator
of TheSongwritingAcademy.com

Some writers are able to project a powerful optimism through their melodies, chord progressions, and lyrics, while others are able to project wonder, a bitersweet sadness, or pure intense anger. But very few songwriters can project all these emotions within a single song or even on one complete CD — so don't pressure yourself to cram in every possible emotion all at once. Let it out in single doses to begin with.



Whatever the mood or genre, 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 those emotions — instantaneously.

Expressing your authentic feelings in a song can be therapeutic to you as a person; those feelings can also be the clay from which a lasting song can be sculpted. If your audience can see a little bit of themselves within your song, if they can identify directly with what you are saying, your song just may stay in their hearts and minds (and their iPods) long after it has dropped off the Billboard charts. When there is an issue you feel passionate about, when you are swept away by some new fad or idea, when 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.



Of all the songs I've written or co-written, the ones based on personal experience, like "Eye of the Tiger" (co-written with Frankie Sullivan; hasn't everyone felt at one time or another like the underdog trying to beat the odds), "Hold on Loosely" (co-written with Don Barnes and Jeff Carlisi; I based the lyric behind Don's title on some advice my future wife once gave me), and "The Search Is Over" (co-written with Frankie Sullivan; the idea of taking for granted what's most precious to you) became some very long-lasting hits — proving the point that our own experiences are perhaps more universal than we think.

—Jim Peterik, writer of 18 Billboard Top 10 hits

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. And many of those blockbuster golden oldies are still generating new recordings after 50 years.



*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 was just 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.*

—Johnny Van Zant, lead singer of Lynyrd Skynyrd and Van Zant

Creating the mood

As the chapters of this book unfold, you'll see the elements that come together to make a great song. But 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 lyrics. 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 lyrics 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 in “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 we share with our audience as songwriters (and our greatest responsibility) is the transference of the mood we have created within a song. Taking that idea a bit farther, we’re also sharing with our audience the mood we happened to be in as we were creating the song. It’s a thought-provoking notion that when we respond emotionally to one of the great classics, we’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.

Drip, Drip, Drop: The Six-Step Process

Well now you have your notebook at your side, a gross of freshly sharpened pencils, and your digital 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 might not be ready for prime time. But there is really no such thing as a bad idea, only ones that may need to be refined, clarified, or made more unique and clever — and real. Remember, you’ve got to start somewhere. Try to set aside some time each day to be inspired and to write your thoughts down. 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 really wants (or needs) to hear.



When writing a song, if you’re afraid to suck, you’ll never write a note.

—Jeff Boyle, singer-songwriter of “Cubs Win” and a multitude of TV commercials including Coors Light and McDonald’s

Songwriting can take an enormous amount of patience and hard work. Fortunately, there’s a lot of fun to be had along the way. In that spirit, we have compiled — for you — the six steps to writing your first song:

- 1. Find a message you feel passionate about.** Choose a cause that resonates with you (a sure bet is anything about love — or lack of it!). Write about the girl you've been too insecure to ask out or that guy that 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 — we're rewarded by the connections we make in the synapses of our audiences' brains. Often the easiest melodies are the longest lasting.
- 3. Find a simple set of chord changes.** Search your piano keyboard or your guitar for this needed element of your song, use a program like GarageBand, or search the Internet and local clubs for the musicians that can furnish your words and melodies with a comfortable music bed.
- 4. Find a place to write.** Find a quiet, peaceful setting to clear your mind, light some incense, and let the melodies and emotions flow. If this is not possible, any chaotic subway station will do. Other key places to write: supermarkets, flea markets, soccer matches, PTA meetings, in the car, and anywhere else where the distractions merge to zero.
- 5. Find a nine-foot Bosendorfer concert grand piano in an ancient cathedral and let your fingers land sensuously on the keys as you compose your masterpiece.** If this is not possible, 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 for all we care.
- 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 learn how to improve your songs. Resist the urge to discount everything but positive reaction. Likewise, you should 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 consult your heart for the truth.

Pay Attention: Stop, Look, and Listen

Living and breathing are good places to start when writing a song: being observant to all that is swirling around you, making note of your own reactions to situations, taking notice of other people's reactions in similar situations, and

trying to put yourself in the other guy's shoes to better empathize with what he might be feeling. Like they say in all those contests, "You must be present to win!" By keeping your feelings close to the surface and refusing to disown even one sentiment, you are opening a panorama of emotions that can be channeled into a song. The melodies that enter our consciousness when our guard is down and our inner antennas are up are perhaps the most authentic of all.



I always tell people, and it's the truth, "I Believe" was written at about three in the morning . . . I was hearing the melody and I thought, "This is pretty." I just had to get up and play it.

—Eliot Sloan, singer and songwriter with Blessid Union of Souls



As a writer, don't get discouraged if you hear echoes of a song you've been slaving over in a new song that just came on the radio. These melodies and ideas are out there somewhere in the cosmos; it's just a matter of being in tune and being receptive to what's coming in. Perhaps someone else just happened to access that idea before you did. At least it shows that you're paying attention to inspiration and are most likely on the right track. So keep the faith, and remember that it happens the other way around too — next time it could be you who gets there first for that melody or lyrical concept!

Finding the inspiration zone

What inspired you to write that song? This is an age-old question that fuels many a conversation. You are probably familiar with the quote, "in the beginning was the word," but from a songwriter's perspective you could rephrase that statement as "in the beginning was the thought." A thought, idea, or inspiration is where all songs begin. It is the genesis of all musical masterpieces. I can hear you say "sounds simple, but how do I actually get the party started?" There are many techniques and methods to go about this, but the bottom line is that you need to tap into your inner voice to listen to those brilliant thoughts that are just waiting to come out and be revealed — you need to find a way to "get in the zone" and let inspiration come bubbling to the surface.

This is a common phenomenon in the sports world where athletes are able to slow down time and get into "the zone" of competition — a place where there are no distractions and everything seems to be effortless. For the songwriter, it's just as important to get in the zone. So how do you do it? You simply quiet your mind and pay attention to your inner self. This may be difficult for the average person to fathom, but with practice it is attainable to all who seek the ability to tap into a place of higher authenticity.



Coming from a professional athlete's point of view, Dave Austin uses this method on a daily basis with his coaching clients. The core of the work he does is "the process" of getting athletes into the zone quicker and having them stay there longer — the results his players get speak for themselves.

Every successful songwriter has experienced this phenomenon more often than not when composing music and writing lyrics. You've probably heard a story or two about how an artist says their ideas come to them seemingly from nowhere. There is a perfect example of this when Michael Jackson, the King of Pop, said, "I wake up from dreams and go, wow, put this down on paper . . . that's why I find it hard to take credit for songs I've written. I feel that somewhere, someplace, it's been done and I'm just a courier bringing it into the world." From Stevie Wonder to Paul McCartney, and probably Mozart to Bach, songwriters have been listening to that inner voice of inspiration and wisdom and have passed those thoughts along to the masses.

Some basic tips for getting in the zone:

- ✓ **Clear the clutter:** Quiet your mind in a peaceful setting or surroundings.
- ✓ **Set an intention:** Determine what you want to accomplish, or set your sights on a particular subject or topic of interest.
- ✓ **Let your mind wander:** Accept whatever thoughts want to appear.
- ✓ **Allow inspiration to flow:** Don't judge or censor what shows up.
- ✓ **Listen and record:** Let your pen go as you jot down your thoughts onto a notepad or speak them into a recorder.
- ✓ **Visualize and fantasize:** Expand on any thoughts that are in line with your intention or subject matter.
- ✓ **Review later:** Don't immediately critique your work, but take a break and then review after you've allowed for time to reflect and a change of scenery. More than likely you will be blown away at what showed up during your "in the zone" session.

If you are adept at playing an instrument or are able to sing what comes to mind, make it a practice to record your sessions for future playback. Sometimes the best ideas come out of the blue and are hard to capture when you "come back to earth" and are trying to remember them.



Whence and how they come, I know not; nor can I force them.

—Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, speaking of where his ideas originated



There are many great workshops that help songwriters find inspiration. One such program that has led to a participant getting a record deal out of those inspired sessions is Creative Expressions, which can be found by visiting www.creativeexpressions.com.

Coming up with concepts for songs

Before you set your pen to paper to write the words (also known as lyrics) to your song, it's good to have a concept (a sort of idea roadmap) that points the way to your final destination — a finished song. If you can write out one sentence that explains what your song is about (this sentence is called a *thesis*), you're on the right track to the kind of clarity and focus needed in a good song. Refer back to your thesis often to make sure the words you're coming up with still support your initial concept. If your lyrics start taking you in a different direction, it could be a sign you need to change your thesis. Who knows — perhaps you need to write two separate songs.



Make sure each song that you write has one cohesive idea that flows from start to finish and that all the lines support that idea. If there is more than one concept fighting for life, neither will win.



One of the first things you should ask your co-writing partner is, “What matters most in your life? What do you feel passionate about?” Hopefully there is some common ground between you and your partner. Sit and talk for as long as it takes to find a concept that resonates and feels real to both of you. At least then you'll stand a fighting chance of writing a decent song.

Here are just a few of the subjects that have provided concepts for songwriters since the beginning of time — the headings are general, but the emotions you harness and the situations you create around these subjects are what will set your song apart from the others:

- ✓ **Love:** The most universal of all feelings is surely the gold standard when it comes to subject matter for your song. Refer to “I’m Yours” (written and sung by Jason Mraz), “Lovesong” (written by Simon Gallup, Roger O’Donnell, Robert Smith, Porl Thompson, Lol Tolhurst, and Boris Williams; performed by The Cure, 311, and countless others), “Forever” (written by Chris Brown, J. Jones, B. Kennedy, A. Merritt, and Rob Allen; sung by Chris Brown), and “I Just Can’t Stop Loving You” (written by Graham Gouldman and Eric Stewart; sung by Michael Jackson and Siedah Garrett). Take a week off from work and make a list of the couple of thousand more you can think of on your own! Or better yet, just Google “love” and spend a gazillion years compiling a complete list.
- ✓ **Friendship:** As a sub-genre of love, the bonds of friendship can bring out some of the strongest, sweetest emotions known to man. Refer to “I’ll Be There for You,” best known as the theme song for the TV series *Friends* (written and performed by The Rembrandts [Phil Solem and Danny Wilde]), “Umbrella” (written by Terius Nash, The Dream, Christopher Stewart, Kuk Harrell, and Jay-Z; sung by Rihanna), “Put Your Records On” (written by Corinne Bailey Rae, John Beck, and Steve Chrisanthou; sung by Corinne Bailey Rae), and “You’ve Got a Friend” (written and sung by Carole King; James Taylor’s only #1 pop single).

- ✔ **Family:** The family unit and its members have been the springboard for countless great songs. It's easy to see why. Your family most likely supplied you with some of your first memories — whether they are good or bad! The nature of those memories will probably determine whether your song is filled with sorrow, joy, regret, love, hurt, admiration, disdain, the desire to distance yourself from them, or your commitment to get closer. Refer to “Ready, Set, Don’t Go” (written by Billy Ray Cyrus and Casey Beathard; sung by Billy Ray Cyrus), “In My Daughter’s Eyes” (written by James Slater; sung by Martina McBride), “Cleanin’ Out My Closet” (written by Eminem and Jeff Bass; sung by Eminem), and “The Riddle” (written by John Ondrasik; performed by Five for Fighting).
- ✔ **Conflict:** Songs of war, strife, struggle, and broken hearts have helped countless generations deal with and heal the wounds of conflict. Verbalizing the feelings common to the heart of mankind is one of the songwriter’s most sacred privileges and responsibilities. Refer to “Ordinary People” (written by John Legend and will.i.am; sung by John Legend), “Broken” (written by Jason Wade; performed by Lifehouse), “Lips of an Angel” (written by Hinder, Brian Howes, and Rey Casiano; performed by Hinder, and later by country music artist Jack Ingram), “Paralyzer” (written and performed by Finger Eleven), and “Breathe You In” (written by Steve Augustine, Joel Bruyere, Trevor McNeven, and Arnold Lanni; performed by Thousand Foot Krutch).
- ✔ **Loss:** When the pain and devastation of a loss and the deep disappointment of losing can be put into a great song, you have a very effective delivery system for an all-natural cure. Your song will become popular with people who can relate to and draw healing from the sentiments you’ve expressed. Refer to “Forever & Always” (written and performed by Taylor Alison Swift), “One Sweet Day” (written by Mariah Carey, Walter Afanasieff, Wanya Morris, Shawn Stockman, Nathan Morris, and Michael McCary; performed by Mariah Carey and Boys II Men), “Wake Me Up When September Ends” (written by Billie Joe Armstrong/Green Day; performed by Green Day), “Here Without You” (written by Brad Arnold/3 Doors Down; performed by 3 Doors Down), and “You’re Beautiful” (written by James Blunt, Sacha Skarbek, and Amanda Ghost; sung by James Blunt).
- ✔ **Music and song:** Because of every songwriter’s inherent love for what he does, writing about the object of his affection has been very popular since time immemorial. Refer to “I Write the Songs” (written by Bruce Johnston; sung by Barry Manilow) and “Remember the Name,” which describes the life of making it big in the music industry but has a life of its own within the sports arena as a popular “pump up” song (written by Takbir Bashir, Ryan Maginn, and Mike Shinoda; performed by Fort Minor).

- ✔ **Towns, travel, and touring:** Famous places and natural wonders are always good stepping off points for a songwriter. Hiking, biking, driving, and exploring the world can supply you with endless reasons to write. Refer to “Route 66” (written by Bobby Troup; most recently sung by John Mayer, but also 40 or more other artists including Nat King Cole Trio and The Rolling Stones), “Dani California” (written by Anthony Kiedis, John Frusciante, Flea, and Chad Smith; performed by Red Hot Chili Peppers), “Fly Away” (written and sung by Lenny Kravitz), and “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” (written by Harold Arlen and E. Y. Harburg; recently covered by Hawaiian singer, Israel “IZ” Kamakawiwole).
- ✔ **Faith, hope, belief, God, and spirituality:** Although all very different subjects, we have put them together because they tend to intersect in some key areas. Looking for meaning outside of ourselves, believing in something greater than us all, searching for feelings beyond that which our five senses can validate, and looking for strength when you seem to have none have been the impetuses for some of the world’s greatest songs. Refer to “I Believe” (written and performed by Blessid Union of Souls), “Meant to Live” (written by Jon Foreman and Tim Foreman; performed by Switchfoot), “Jesus Walks” (written by Kanye West and Che Smith; sung by Kanye West), and “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” (written by U2 and Bono; performed by U2).
- ✔ **Motivation, inspiration, and sports:** Going against all odds, overcoming obstacles, or simply getting pumped up for the big event is a powerful way to breathe life into a song filled with emotion and determination. Whether you’re rooting for the underdog or the top dog, who couldn’t use a cheering section in their corner? Refer to “Welcome to the Jungle” (written by Axl Rose and Slash; performed by Guns N’ Roses). Although not originally written for this purpose, *Rolling Stone* magazine rates it “the greatest sports anthem.” Also refer to “Eye of the Tiger” (written by Jim Peterik and Frankie Sullivan; performed by Survivor), “My Hero” (written by Dave Grohle, Nate Mendel, and Pat Smear; performed by Foo Fighters), and “We Are the Champions” (written by Freddie Mercury; performed by Queen).
- ✔ **Death, dying, heaven, and hell:** These subjects have been the source of speculation, inspiration, and intrigue since time began. The concepts of the afterlife, lost souls, and past lives fill the pages of songbooks, and now, more than ever, there is a tendency for many of us to check out our lineage through the centuries. Refer to “We May Never Pass This Way Again” (written and performed by James Seals and Dash Crofts), “Live and Let Die” (written by Linda McCartney and Paul McCartney; performed by Wings), “I Can’t Hear the Music” on the album *All the Lost Souls* (written and sung by James Blunt), “I Knew I Loved You Before I Met You” (written by Darren Hayes and Daniel Jones; performed by

Savage Garden), “Soul Meets Body” (written by Ben Gibbard; performed by Death Cab for Cutie), and “Like You’ll Never See Me Again” (written by Alicia Keys and Kerry Brothers, Jr.; performed by Alicia Keys).

- ✔ **Politics, protest, and going against the grain:** To register their feelings of disagreement or disillusionment, some people picket; some cause destruction; and some participate in marches, demonstrations, and strikes. Songwriters usually grab a pen, run to a piano, and attempt to express their frustrations through music. Love them or hate them, these songs are sure to invoke powerful emotions — note that lyrics in this category tend to fall prey to “explicit” warning labels more often than not. Refer to “Testify” (written by Rage Against the Machine and Zach De la Rocha; performed by Rage Against the Machine), “American Idiot” (written by Billie Joe Armstrong and Green Day; performed by Green Day), “When I’m Gone” (written by 3 Doors Down; performed by 3 Doors Down), and “What’s Going On” (written by Marvin Gaye, Al Cleveland, and Renaldo Benson; sung by Marvin Gaye).
- ✔ **The future, the past, and the present:** Some songs look back upon a bygone day, or even just yesterday; some look hopefully, pessimistically, or presciently into the future; and some are rooted in the good old here and now. Whatever your vantage point, a lot of material can be stitched together from the fabric of time. Refer to “Time in a Bottle” (written and sung by Jim Croce), “If This Was Your Last Day” (written by Chad Kroeger; performed by Nickelback), “Yesterday” (written by John Lennon and Paul McCartney; performed by The Beatles), “Right Now” (written and performed by Van Halen), and “Dust in the Wind” (written by Kerry Livgren and Steve Walsh; performed by Kansas).
- ✔ **Fads, crazes, and passing fancies:** Who could forget all these timeless songs that either drive you nuts or get you off your butt to dance? The fact is they have made an indelible impression in our memory banks. Start with writing the ones you have a true affinity for, and then move to the ones that you’re commissioned to write for big bucks by a major motion picture company. Refer to “The Twist” (written by Henry Ballard; sung by Chubby Checker), “Y.M.C.A.” (written by Henri Belolo, Jacques Morali, and Victor Willis; performed by The Village People), “Macarena” (written by Monge, Antonio Romero, and Rafael Ruiz; performed by Los Del Rio), and “Cha Cha Slide” (written and performed by DJ Casper).
- ✔ **States of mind:** This ever-popular subject, which ranges from sanity to insanity, elation to depression, and all stops in between, has always provided some good therapy for writer and audience alike. Refer to “When I Fall From Grace” (written and sung by Geoff Byrd), “Soak Up the Sun” (written by Sheryl Crow and Jeff Trott; sung by Sheryl Crow), and “Pocketful of Sunshine” (written by Natasha Bedingfield, Danielle Brisebois, and John Shanks; sung by Natasha Bedingfield).

We have, of course, only touched the surface of the subjects that may inspire you to create a song. Anything in life is fair game to write about. It's up to you to find unique and compelling ways of presenting these ideas and concepts through your words and music. Finding the subjects you're most passionate about, the ones that "strike a chord" in you, will make it easier to write a song that you're satisfied with and that will connect with others.



The better the source of inspiration, the better the song will be. If you come across a very compelling cause that moves you, use that as your motivation to write a compelling song. Let's say you meet a girl that knocks you out — use that inspiration to make sure the song you write about her will knock *her* out. From author Jim's experience, when writing music for a soundtrack, the better the movie script was from which he was basing a song, the better the song tended to be. Always look for the highest form of inspiration that you can find when setting out to write a song.



Some notes, chords, and basically the same words have been used since the days of Beethoven and Bach. . . . What makes a song a timeless thing? I basically write about love and life because they are always current.

—Smokey Robinson, legendary R&B and soul singer/songwriter,
and the King of Motown

Setting your antennae to listen for lyrics

There are song titles, song concepts, catchy phrases, rhymes, rhythms, and reasons all around us — you just need to keep your eyes and ears open, and consider practically everything as a potential candidate for a song. If you think of a phrase that sounds interesting, scribble that down in your notebook under "potential titles" or "intriguing phrases" to be used in the context of a future song.

Take a look at some of the places a songwriter might find lyrical stepping off points, story ideas and concepts, and catch phrases:

➤ **Evesdropping:** The next time you're at a restaurant, tune in to the conversation at the table next to you. (Usually, the diners are talking so loudly you won't have to strain.) You may catch a glimpse of a conversation that could spark a song.

One day while Jim was on a writing trip in Nashville, he was at a local eatery with a fellow writer. They couldn't help overhearing two young ladies discussing their love lives in the booth behind them. As the blond girl was listening to the brunette recount the wonders of her current



beau, the other one sighed and said, “Now that’s true love.” Jim and his friend looked at each other, quickly paid the bill and went to his piano room to write “Now That’s True Love” in about an hour and a half.

- ✓ **Situations you or your friends may be involved in:** There is nothing more real to write about than actual situations. The dynamics of people’s lives can provide thousands of stories. Obviously it’s okay to enhance or modify a real-life story (after all we’re usually writing fiction here), but many writers at least base their song on the interactions of real people.
- ✓ **Items in the news:** You’ll find an endless supply of song ideas just by reading the daily newspaper and watching CNN. Of course it’s important to watch actively — not only taking in and comprehending the events, but also taking the implications of the events to the next stage and searching for the motivation behind them. As you’re doing all this, you are considering different situations for the emotional impact they could have in the context of a song and just how deeply the event impacts you.
- ✓ **Items in magazines or blogs:** Magazines and blogs can be a great stepping off point for a song. Well-written articles can inspire an idea, and colorful ads can transfer a feeling of what’s considered current in the world of pop consciousness. Magazines and blogs are basically just another way for a writer to keep his “ear to the street.”
- ✓ **Television, movies, and videos:** This is a big and vibrant category when it comes to shaking loose some great ideas from that head of yours. Just the feeling that a certain movie evokes can be enough to write a song. The message contained in so many series and shows can sometimes be harnessed into a song. In good drama or comedy, the interactions between people can serve as a template for relationships in your song. Often, there is a particular character that you’re drawn to or can identify with. Write about him or her or from *his or her* perspective. And who can resist the temptation of looking at the latest YouTube offerings — the stuff that shows up there can be an endless supply of ideas.



The song title “The Search is Over” (written by Jim Peterik and Frankie Sullivan; performed by Survivor) was a phrase that Jim Peterik jotted down in his notebook after he heard it said on the evening news program.

Making up music “dummy” style

Everyone has a melody inside of them. The simplest three notes put together just right can be a melody that lasts for ages. That song you whistle while doing the laundry, walking the dog, mowing the lawn, driving, or taking a

shower could be a tune you've already heard, such as the latest Black Eyed Peas smash or an Elton John classic — or it could be something you've just pulled out of thin air.



To avoid a potential copyright infringement suit, it's critical to know the difference between a song you've heard somewhere before and one you've come up with on your own. If you think you've heard it before, screen the charts, your memory banks, and your record collection to make sure it's original. It's well documented that soon after Paul McCartney began writing "Yesterday" he went around singing it for friends to make sure he had not stolen its melody from an old song. He was finally convinced that he'd just written a new and original classic.

A working ability on guitar or keyboard can also help you experiment with and eventually find a melody for your song. When you finally put the music together, you can create a suitable bed against which you can road test your lyrics and eventually perform your finished song. Although certain people can write entire songs "in their head," most of us need an instrument at our disposal to help coax the ideas from our cranium.



Although Jim says he is far from a virtuoso on the keyboard, he uses a process he coined "creative noodling" to help create ideas. He simply dials up an interesting sound on his keyboard synthesizer (generally a reassuring combination of piano and strings, although for edgier ideas perhaps a distorted electric piano setting or clavinet), and lets his fingers find their way across the keys. (Let's call it "The Columbus Method" — just find a "key" and land on it!) Often the sound itself will dictate the type of musical idea he comes up with. Try to keep a digital recorder close by to catch anything close-to-good. One truism that we've learned is this: "If I don't have my recorder handy, I most certainly *will* come up with a good idea that I *won't* quite remember later!"

One fast-track method of getting in the groove to writing your songs is to learn from the masters and not try to reinvent the wheel. A quick and effective way to begin is to grab one of your favorite tunes and use it as a "dummy song" to build your own without having to start from scratch — kind of like cut and paste in your computer's word processing program. The key here is to remember that this is just a method of getting you in the flow of creating a song, and not a means to rip off copyrighted material from the best of the best! Begin by dissecting, or picking apart, the greats by using the reverse engineering route to isolate the structure, lyrics, and melody to see what works in a great song. Not only will you learn by doing, but you can focus on just one aspect at a time. As a bonus, you will also be practicing your craft without the tendency of repeating old habits or familiar ways of doing things, thereby allowing yourself to learn something new.

The more you use a "dummy" song as your teacher and collaborator, the stronger your songwriting muscles become — and as a bonus you'll get some of the best training in the business for no money down!



The better you can become on your instrument of choice, the easier it is for you to consistently come up with good song ideas. It is also helpful when you can demonstrate to others how your song goes. Facility is not a prerequisite for writing a song, but it sure can help the process along.

—Jeff Jacobs, songwriter, arranger, and keyboardist with Foreigner

On-the-Go Tools of the Trade for Recording and Organizing

Practically anyone can write or co-write a song after getting the hang of being an open vessel for inspiration. Ideas for concepts and melodies can come from anywhere, but documentation and organization of those special moments of illumination are crucial — although often a tedious but necessary evil part of the process. As with any other craft, songwriting requires a few tools of the trade — a simple notebook, recording device, rhyming dictionary, and Thesaurus, to name a few. But don't forget the computer and a slew of musical instruments and software programs as well — the latter is covered in greater detail in other chapters.



Have you ever had an original melody in your head all day long, only to lose it by evening? This is why the notebook and the recorder were invented! Having learned the hard way to disregard the statement, “If it’s really a great idea, don’t worry. . . I’ll remember it,” many good melodies and ideas have fluttered away because there wasn’t a net to catch them. And unfortunately, some of these rare butterflies only come around once in a lifetime — guaranteed!

Have a notebook or a digital means by which to capture those fleeting thoughts with you at all times! Time and time again you’ll be glad you did because no matter how easy and simple that thought seems when inspiration strikes, trust us, it will be gone quicker than you can say “brilliant idea!” If you get caught with your pants down and have nothing handy with which to record your great thought, call your voicemail and leave a message to retrieve later. No matter how embarrassing it may be to have someone else beat you to the phone and hear your “crooning in the moment” message first, you’ll be glad you did it!

Using a digital recording device

Any songwriter — whether aspiring or accomplished — should at all times carry an inexpensive, hand-held digital recorder. Better yet, always carry your cell phone or a Flip video device that can document the visual setting of your inspiration. Quality of sound is not nearly as important as merely documenting the idea. Extra batteries are always a must.

When you're driving down the road or waking up from a profound dream, and you think of a great line or words for a song, grab your recording device, press the Record button, and do the following:

- 1. Start saying or singing the words or melodies that come to mind. If you're recording lyrical ideas, say them slowly and intelligibly.** With musical ideas, make sure that if you don't have an instrument handy, you give your melody a count off (as in 1, 2, 3, 4, start) so you can tell later where your musical phrase starts. It's also essential to hum the "root note" (the tonic or base note of any chord) of the key you are in, if you possibly can, so that your melody has a musical reference point when you review it later.
- 2. State the date, time, your location, and anything else to help you identify the moment of creation.**
- 3. Identify the working title of the song you're creating — or, if it's something new, give it a working title.**

Recording your ideas is one thing, but without a system for organizing and naming all the files you record, your ideas can be lost or extremely hard to find again. A month from now, you probably won't remember that the song you just thought of is buried deep within your hard drive . . . or on an entirely different computer. With all the time you'll spend searching for the song in question, it's probably easier to start a new song.



The world of digital recording has leaped forward at hyperspeed. For example, Todd Rundgren was able to record an entire album on his computer's inexpensive Reason program (a music software program that creates a virtual studio and instruments), and many commercial albums have now been produced on GarageBand (a computer software program designed for the music hobbyist). But when it comes to merely documenting song ideas, you can simply use the recording function on the latest and greatest cell phone. There is even a multi-track format available to iPhone users where you cannot only memorialize the idea, but can also lay down a keyboard track, do a vocal, and add a harmony to boot! The whole song can be represented so that all the band needs to do is learn it and add their individual expressions to the final recording.

There are a zillion digital recording options out there now, and nearly every audio company now offers some type of simple digital device (featuring stereo condenser mics and usually a tiny monitor speaker). Some even have outboard effects such as *reverb* (echo) and *compression* (squashing the signal) for a more distinctive sound. Musicians can now e-mail demos to their writing and/or production partners whenever inspiration strikes! Because new technology is spitting out faster than new books are printed, rather than suggest one or two models, we suggest that you simply do an online search using the keywords "audio company digital recorders," or some variation of that, to find the latest and greatest new devices out there. But if you prefer "old school," stick with a notepad or cassette recorder (that still does the trick!) — just make sure you stock up on blank cassette tapes before they become obsolete!



On a biking tour in Europe, Jim labeled the idea-catching cassette he carried in his shoulder bag “July 6, '01 — Vienna to Prague.” At least he’d be ready to write a few polkas and maybe even a waltz! Entry #1 was marked “Melodic hard rock thing in Austria.” As he was winding through the streets of some quaint Austria town, he heard the sound of American rock-and-roll emanating from a boom box in someone’s living room. The music was like hearing from an old friend. He stopped his bike and, into his recorder, he sang a new idea that was inspired by the mood of that moment. Jim always tries to classify an idea by genre and include any details that may help bring to mind the genesis of the idea. He also uses a star rating system (one through four), indicating his level of excitement about the idea. In this situation, the next entry was “work on possible Skynyrd seed” — perhaps a stepping off point for my upcoming writing session with them. After that he entered “Boy-band type rock.” When Jim got home, he filed this tape with hundreds of other cassettes arranged by month and year. If Jim is having a creative dry spell, he spends a lot of time going through those tapes. Take a look at Figure 1-1 for an example of Jim’s Vienna to Prague J-card.

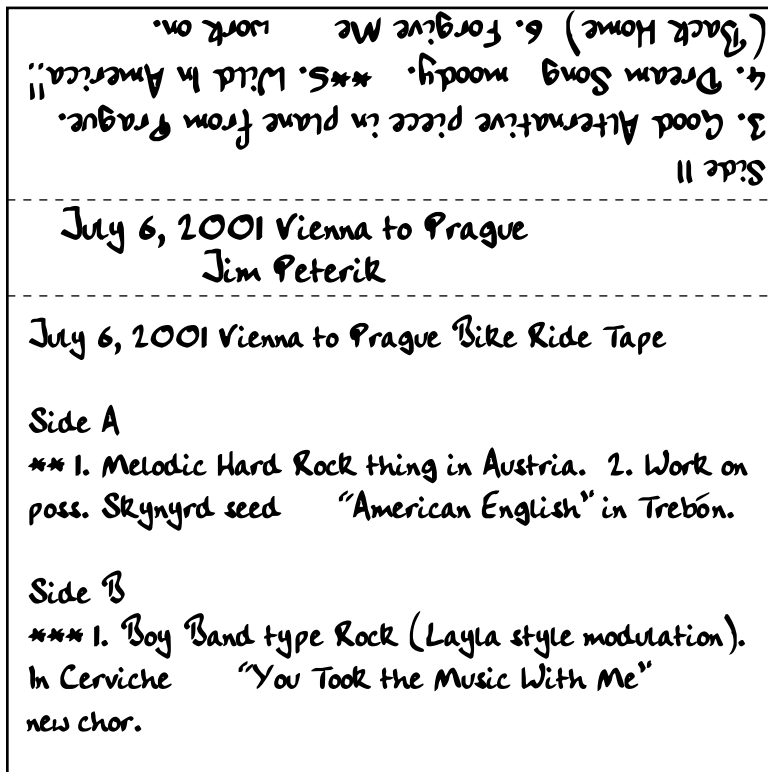


Figure 1-1:
A sample
J-card.



A J-card is the paper card inserted in the plastic storage case of audio cassettes. The card gets its name from being folded into the shape of the letter J (when viewed from the side) to fit inside the cassette's case.

Jotting down ideas in a notebook

As a songwriter, at any stage of success or experience, it's always a good idea to carry along (in addition to your portable recording device) a traditional notebook as well as a pen or pencil. Making notes is fast, easy, and you never need to wait for it to boot up or load an app. If you happen to be versed in notating music, it may be preferable to get a notebook that contains staff paper — pages that are pre-lined with the five lines of the musical staff. This would be for jotting down melodies and their accompanying chords in note form. As for your standard notebook, we recommend one of the spiral ones divided into three or more sections, with pockets lining each divider panel. This notebook configuration can help you organize your creative output in the following ways. If you purchase a five-section book, here's how your notebook could be organized:

- ✓ **Section one:** The first section could be for the miscellaneous ideas, phrases, titles, concepts, observations, rhymes, and pieces of lyrics that you're likely to collect as you go about your day.
- ✓ **Section two:** This section could be “songs in progress” — the ones that may have a verse but no chorus, a chorus but no verse, a rhyme with no reason, or a reason with no rhyme. It's wise to notate on these pages the current date and a cross-reference to the exact cassette or file folder where the corresponding musical tidbit can be found. This section might include songs with a few permanent or “keeper” lines (you know, the ones you're really satisfied with), and the rest of the song composed of dummy lyrics.

The *dummy lyrics* are lines that serve to fill up the correct amount of space that the line should occupy, but it's usually made up of temporary words off the top of your head or substandard stuff that you fully intend on replacing at a later date. That being said, about half of the words that end up in Jim's finished songs start life as a dummy lyric. That may be because when you take the pressure off yourself to be brilliant, it often opens up creativity you didn't even know you had.

- ✓ **Section three:** This section is reserved for finished lyrics. We suggest you leave a few pages between songs to allow for the inevitable rewrites.
- ✓ **Section four:** You could make section four a list section — songs to be finished, songs already finished, projects in progress, and ideas on whom to pitch your tunes to. (Refer to Chapter 17 on marketing your song.)



✔ **Section five:** In this section, you can just doodle your brains out until inspiration strikes, or make lists of songs already written and ideas of which artists might be appropriate for each song. If you have an upcoming writing appointment, you may want to write down some *seed ideas* (starter ideas that could spark creativity in you and your collaborator). If you're writing with a specific artist in mind or will be collaborating with a specific band or artist, you may want to put together lists of prospective titles and concepts that seem in keeping with your target artist.



In the pockets of your notebooks, keep the scraps of paper that you originally used to scribble down ideas. It's great to have these crude representations when your song hits #1 — which, of course, is entirely possible. Also keep in these pockets anything connected to a song's creation, such as the paragraph in the magazine that triggered a song, the photo of the girl who broke your heart and triggered a song, and so on.



I generally write my lyrics in progress on the right-hand page of my notebook. I keep the left side reserved for what I call "spare parts" — phrases that occur to me that relate to the song I'm working on, alternative lines, alternative titles, trial phrases, and ideas I'd rather not forget. These "left page words," as I like to call them, can be worth their weight in gold, especially a few days later when you need some fresh inspiration.

—Don Barnes, singer, guitarist, and songwriter with .38 Special



Always put your name, address, and contact number somewhere near the front of the notebook (perhaps on the first page or on the cover) with the words, "If found, please return to . . ." Also, make note of the date the book was started and the date of your last entry.

Practice Makes Perfect

As you go about your daily routine today (or any day, for that matter), try to notice everything that enters your consciousness. In that receptive state, be sure to have a digital recorder or a notebook close by, ready to catch your inspirations. Write down all observations, feelings, and realizations that you have that day, even if they seem trivial at the time. If you think of a catchy phrase, see an intriguing headline in the newspaper, notice a slogan on a bus as it's going by, or incorrectly hear something your child says to you, jot those things down, too. When you get home, try to find a little quiet time and look over your crop of ideas from the day. Audition them all as potential candidates for future songs. If the mood hits you, set your notebook on your piano, and if you happen to play, open your notebook to today's bounty and,

informed by your own inspired words, see where your fingers take you. Try the various phrases and ideas against the music of your mind. Who knows. Before you know it, you may have a good start on an awesome new song.

Take the phrase that strikes you the most and start building a song around it. Have some fun with it. Now start your file of song ideas. Your writing sessions will become much more productive if you have a decent way of putting your thoughts and concepts on paper or on tapes. You might have a thought one day that you believe can be really good material, but you're not sure where it may take you. Now, if you've been disciplined enough to store away these thoughts for future use, when the moment comes that you can now take it further, you'll be able to recapture that original thought and let it inspire a whole new song when the time is right.



If you let your mind go and let your imagination take flight, writing songs can be easy. But being able to do this takes practice and discipline. Be ready for that moment of inspiration, and always be prepared to catch those thoughts before they float on by. Even though they seem so simple at the time and so easy to remember, they'll haunt you forever if you decide you're too busy or lazy to write them down!

Saying hello to a good idea

In Dave's opinion, it's always fun to be around Jim because you never know when something said or seen is going to become the new title for a song or part of its lyrics. Just being around such a prolific songwriter has also proved to help Dave raise his own antenna without much additional effort on his part. Case in point: One day Jim and Dave were in a meeting together, and Jim (who had just written the title track for the debut CD of our new artist) needed to get to another meeting across town. Everyone excused themselves and left the room, but before we knew it, Jim and Dave got to talking about something else and time slipped away from them. (If you know either of these

two, you'd agree that this is not very unusual!) A while later, the CEO of the record company came back into the room and told Jim, "Boy, you're bad at goodbyes."

Jim immediately took out his pocket notebook and wrote down the words "bad at goodbyes," saying what a great song idea that was. Dave agreed — so much so that he couldn't get that phrase out of his head. That night he awoke in the middle of the night, his mind filled with the words to that song. Good for him that he had a pad of paper and pen available by his bedside so he could quickly write down the words floating around in his mind.

