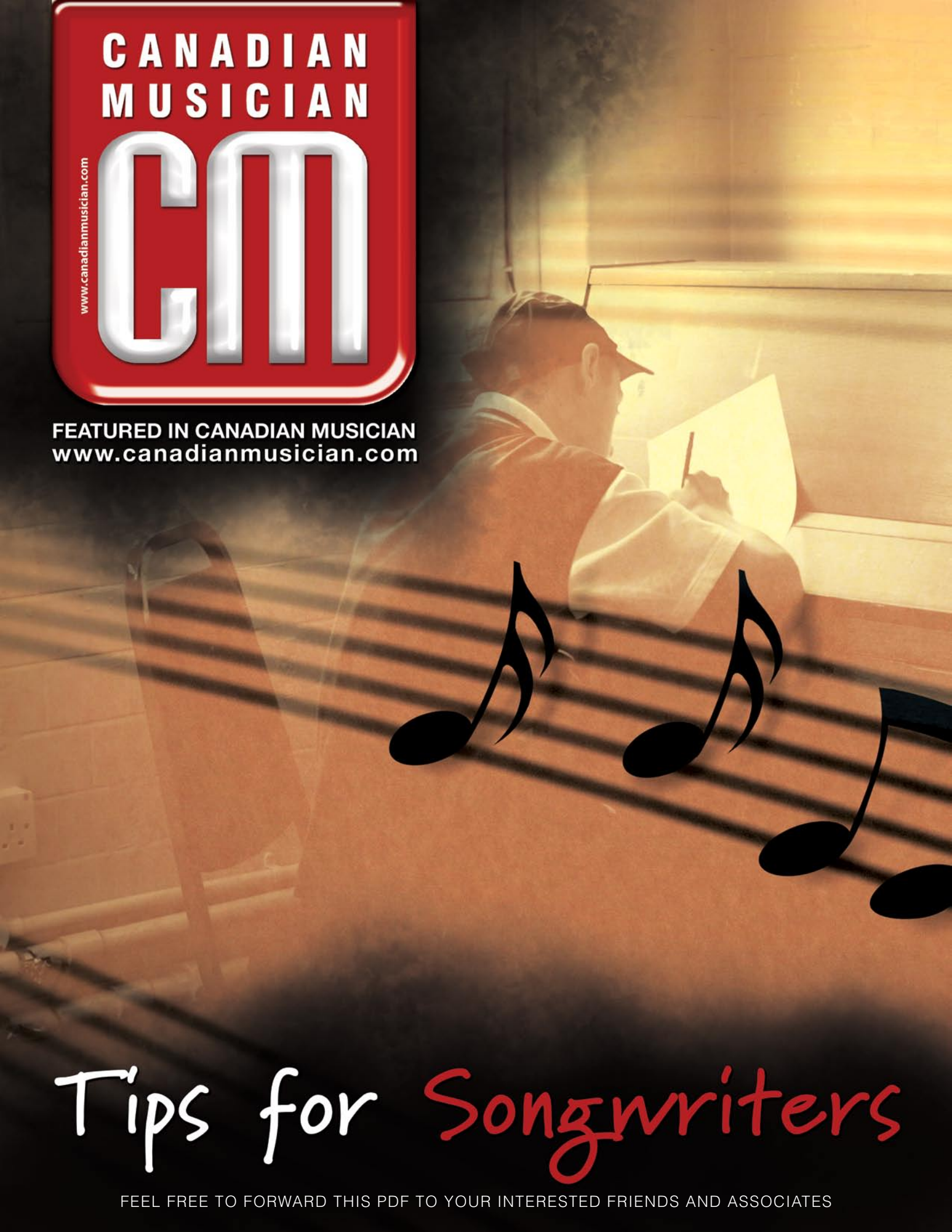

CANADIAN
MUSICIAN
CM
www.canadianmusician.com
FEATURED IN CANADIAN MUSICIAN
www.canadianmusician.com
Tips for Songwriters
FEEL FREE TO FORWARD THIS PDF TO YOUR INTERESTED FRIENDS AND ASSOCIATES

Premise? What Premise?

by James Linderman

I had a hard time learning the lesson … that all of my writing has an underlying premise.

Sadly, it was a lesson I learned from many mistakes rather than a lesson I learned from learning. Now that I've fully, yet painfully, learned it, I will endeavour to now write this column about it, to see if it is as relevant for you, as it has come to be for me.

The lesson of premise is that you are responsible for what your lyric *implies*, regardless of your intent. In other words, you can write words with no intention of passing on any pearls of wisdom but listeners will search for premise in every word that crosses their eardrum.

In the words of Pat Pattison, Head of the Lyric Writing Department at Berklee College of Music in Boston and author of *Writing Better Lyrics*, "We are as responsible for what we do not intend in our lyric message as we are for what we do intend."

So, after writing many strange little songs, I can now see that, unbeknownst to me, they expressed many a strange premise to my listener.

It also now occurs to me that if I were to write from a solid premise and work on my lyrics from there, then my listener would feel the impact of my single, universal message and it would be a message that I had intended, and one that every word in my lyrics could be written to support.

There are a lot of premises to write from but a few of my favorites are listed below.

- Don't judge a book by its cover.
- To live big, you have to dream big.
- We miss most, what we no longer have.
- People who live in glass houses, shouldn't throw stones.

Once we have established a premise we need to determine what we want our verse materials to describe.

- *Don't judge a book by its cover* could start with a description of a subject – He wore a polyester suit, two sizes too big and his hands were weathered and dirty.
- *To live big, you have to dream big* could begin with a description of a particular time – It was January 6th 1910 and the new world stood just beyond the starboard bow.
- *We miss most what we no longer have* could start with a description of a setting – It was a half dead farm house held together with old paint and rusty nails at the end of a road no one ever drove down anymore.
- *People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones* could begin with a description of relationship. The other parents of the PTA in Harper Valley looked down on someone because … hmmm, that one sounds awfully familiar!

Once the descriptive material in the first verse is locked in, we now need to connect our listener emotionally with some personal, narrative perspective.

- *Don't judge a book by its cover* with our subject – He wore tattered and dirty clothes but my grandfather meant the world to me.
- *To live big, you have to dream big* with our description of a particular time – We left everything we knew, to start a new life for our family in the new world.
- *We miss most what we no longer have* with our description of a setting – The old farmhouse was where I grew up and now that I live in the city, I miss the honesty and innocence that place represents.
- *People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones* with a description of relationship – Try an Internet search for the lyrics to "Harper Valley PTA" by Jeannie C. Riley sometime and you will see how premise can build a message into a lyric that can resonate across universal cultural, social or generational boundaries.

The wonderful thing about writing from premise is that we, as artists can influence how our audience will respond to our song based solely on our intent to influence them but we can also instill in our songs a way of thinking or a particular morality that we would like to see become more prevalent. Some would call this cultural manipulation but we have seen this sort of influence help bring about some wonderful shifts in contemporary thinking too.

Some examples of songs that have done this from an obvious cultural premise would be tunes like…

- **"Southern Man" by Neil Young**
- **"Blowing in the Wind" by Bob Dylan**
- **"Imagine" by John Lennon**
- **"American Woman" by The Guess Who**
- **"Where Have All the Flowers Gone" – Traditional**
- **"America" by Paul Simon**
- **"The Universal Soldier" by Buffy Sainte-Marie**
- **"The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald" by Gordon Lightfoot**
- **"Allentown" by Billy Joel**
- **"Father and Son" by Cat Stevens**
- **"Four Strong Winds" by Ian Tyson**

There are thousands of examples we could list (and these kind of just came off the top of my head) but they do represent, fairly well, how writing from premise can make art that instills a soundtrack to a cultural phenomenon.

In this regard premise influences public perspective, public perspective gets woven into the popular culture of the day, and the popular culture of the day marks a page in human history.

James Linderman lives and works at theharmonyhouse, a music lesson, songwriting and recording pre- production facility in Newmarket, ON. James writes songwriting articles and music book reviews for The Muse's Muse Web magazine, www.musesmuse.com (3 million readers monthly), Canadian Musician *magazine,* Songwriters *magazine,* Professional Musician *magazine,* Songwriters of Wisconsin International *and* The Dallas Songwriters Association. *Contact James at theharmonyhouse@rogers.com.*

Personification – Where Songs Come To Life

By James Linderman

Here is how Merriam–Webster's Online Dictionary defines personification: per·son·i·fi·ca·tion
noun
1: attribution of personal qualities; *especially*: representation of a thing or abstraction as a person or by the human form.
2: a divinity or imaginary being representing a thing or abstraction.
3: EMBODIMENT, INCARNATION.

James Linderman lives and works at theharmonyhouse: a music lesson, songwriting and recording pre- production facility in Newmarket, ON. James writes songwriting articles and music book reviews for The Muse's Muse Web *magazine, www.musesmuse.com (3 million readers monthly),* Canadian Musician *magazine,* Songwriters *magazine,* Professional Musician *magazine, Songwriters of Wisconsin International and The Dallas Songwriters Association. Contact James at theharmonyhouse@rogers.com.*

I first became aware of personification when I was just a little kid and my kindergarten teacher sang "I'm A Little Teapot." Linderman family folklore, which I must warn you has so far proven to be mostly apocryphal, claims that I made a big deal about how she was not actually a teapot … and was not even really short and stout (she was kind of tall and scrawny as I remember) … no handle of any description to be found on the woman, anywhere … no spout, either.

Ironically, personification later became one of my favourite metaphorical magic tricks as I entered my teen years and decided to write a series of songs with the first name of almost every girl in my grade nine class in each title.

There was "The Song Becomes Samantha" and "Love Whispers Heather." I also proudly penned "My River is Janet," and my all-time personal favourite, "Saturday Night Sings for Sandra."

What can I say? It was 1969 and I was a 14-year-old boy.

Since then I have drank at the well of personification many times while writing songs. I've also made some kind of an effort to try to make sense of its use in songs that have captured our hearts and won themselves some public attention over the years.

Here is what I have determined so far:

"The Hills Are Alive With The Sound Of Music" is from a movie that is *not* about a singing mountain, but a nun singing *on* a mountain, so it's a good example of personification.

Cat Stevens had "Moon Shadows" following him around, Jimi Hendrix heard the "Wind Cry Mary," "Country Roads" took John Denver home, "Morning Is Broken" evidently, and, apparently, you can "talk to the wind but it won't listen to you."

It seems there are a lot of inanimate objects being brought to life just to be discarded and left to become eternally lonely. We've had "Lonesome Jubilees," "Lonesome Roads," "Lonesome Rivers," "Lonesome Highways," and even a "Lonesome Looser" – which is technically not an actual personification but I felt it really rounded the list off nicely.

I can "Give My Regards To Broadway," but if your name is "Ruby" you are strongly advised to not "take your love to town" … as if you could fit love in your backpack or the trunk of your car. Hmmm … are either of these true personifications or just manifestations of personifications? Who knows … I'm so confused!

"Killing Me Softly With His Song" may also not be personification, but it metaphorically transforms the song as a work of art into an object, specifically a weapon … which is still pretty cool.

When the train sings, "I'm the train they call the city of New Orleans" we are definitely talking personification and "Luck be a Lady Tonight" is a wish for personification … I think!?

You can sing "Don't Cry For Me Argentina" and "Cry Me A River"; one is a personification and the other is just an exaggeration.

To end an era we all "started singing bye, bye Miss American Pie" and many of us realized just how much symbolism could fit into a single song and just how thirsty for the power of metaphor our culture had become as it attempted to make sense of a changing world, using art as its marker.

It also becomes clear that personification is a powerful element in helping songwriters define something as complex as an era, or the human condition, or even all of life itself.

IT'S A SETUP!

Collaborating And Co-writing

by Bob Lanois

In 2005 I had the opportunity to work on two different projects during the same time span: one with my brother Daniel Lanois on my debut CD *Snake Road*, and the other with Tom Wilson on *The Shack Recordings, Vol. 1*. Although the two projects came together under quite different circumstances, at the core of each one lays the concept of setting people up so they can bloom – an important aspect for all successful collaborative ventures in life.

Snake Road happened because of Dan's persistent push for me to lay down my harmonica melodies and begin the process of recording. He initially offered to help me get started, but things went so well that we ended up recording a whole CD together and the project turned into an unexpected musical collaboration.

When working with a producer like Dan, someone with such strong instincts for arrangements, the songs will inevitably be profoundly shaped. I walked out with the writing credits, but the compositions would have been quite different without him. Dan's writing skills are so keen that just working with him would be a co-writing experience for anyone. Here's a run-down on how the process went.

We arrived at the final melodies for tracks like "Rendezvous" and "Negril" by using "bits of this 'n' that" he had heard me play in the past, and re-organized it all into something new and exciting. On most tracks, however, I would come in and present him with what I had already written and rehearsed. Usually this would be a little melody with verses and choruses, which I would play for him on the harmonica. Then we'd go to the piano, where we would explore the song structure in terms of where the verses and choruses might be placed, and simultaneously try different feels and tempos while playing along together. Sometimes he would ask me not to play in a certain section, like the bridge, because we didn't have a solid part worked out yet, something we'd work out and punch in later on. Dan would make comments like: "Okay, let's twist the melody around a bit and see if we can come up with an intro." Once the structure of the piece was laid out, he would search for a beat on the Roland 808, sometimes for a whole hour, while I played in the room for him. He would not walk away from that rhythm box until we got goose bumps. That beat would then get printed on a track of the Radar recorder.

Next came the exciting part – where we recorded while playing together, but only Dan got to hear the beat. He listened to the beat track on his headphones, while I, unable to hear the beat track, played harmonica to his piano accompaniment alone. This became the setup we honoured throughout the project, and although we created some variety on the CD, the fact that we remained loyal to our basic setup gave the project continuity. This kind of magic goes on all the time. Many artists have had the good fortune of working with a strong producer who generously handed them a few pearls along the way. There is no doubt that my brother set me up well.

For my collaboration with Tom Wilson on *The Shack Recordings* I stepped into a co-production role, and it was now my job to set up Tom – to bring out a side of him that we haven't heard before. Tom, on the other hand, proposed that I play harmonica on the tunes, and he encouraged me to co-write with him. He probably also chose me for his project because of my working style in the studio and because my take on music would bring that certain something to the record that he had in mind. It was essentially the way we set each other up in the Shack that gave us the results we desired and produced the performance we were after.

Watching a strong lyricist like Tom at work was a learning experience for me, and he encouraged me to write my own lyrics for future projects. We ended up writing two instrumentals together: "Kids" and "Car Dream." Tom had it all planned. He played me chord progressions for the tunes over the telephone with a feel that he had already worked out. The two instrumental pieces sounded great right from the start, but both needed a melody. The feel was right up my alley, and once we sat down together he coaxed me to come up with the melodies on the spot. He generously allowed us to split the writing 50/50. Tom really knew how to set me up for my contribution to the project. That's all it comes down to, knowing how to set people up – whether it's producing or co-writing.

Check out Snake Road *at www.boblanois.com, or go to theshackrecordings.ca to hear some* Shack.

Experience

by Stephen Fearing

I wrote my first song in 1982. I had been living in Minneapolis, MN since the summer of 1980 when I finished high school in Ireland and took off out from under my parents' wing. After two years of goofing around the Twin Cities, working odd jobs and supplementing a dishwasher's wage by playing weekends at local bars and coffeehouses, I was ready for a change. In the spring of 1982 I found myself gazing out the dirty window of a Greyhound bus, watching the flat dun-coloured prairies roll over the horizon on my way to the west coast. I was leaving Minneapolis for good this time and as the trip unfolded I was filled with the familiar ache of leaving, the exhilaration of starting a new chapter in my life, and the unshakeable conviction that this was a "classic" songwriter's moment and my first original song was just around the corner. What did I know? I wrestled with that song (finally entitled "Rocky Mountain. Side") for the entire journey. It was one of the most painfully difficult things I've ever done and in many ways the entire experience has proven to be a template for many future songwriting sessions. Since that first wretched attempt, the process has, in many ways, gotten easier.

Experience is a wonderful thing for sure, but what constantly amazes me is how the process of writing continues to unfold and change. Even after working at my craft for almost three decades, I'm still amazed at the very profound changes that occur. One of the things I've learned to trust and not over analyse, is the input of my subconscious. How many times have I wrestled over the delicate and subtle nuances of a particular line or phrase? Armed with my various reference books (I love slang dictionaries and old thesauruses) I'll pour over the infinite number of ways to state an idea, an emotion, or an image, shuffling and changing the words like a rubic's cube until I think I've articulated that line with just the right spin. Then to my surprise (and delight) I might be playing the song a year later, after some dramatic shift in my life has occurred, and suddenly that same line that I thought I knew inside out presents an entirely different perspective to me. This is what keeps me coming back to songwriting. To put it a tad dramatically, it's like finding a way to have a dialog with your subconscious and I love that thrill of discovery.

Recently I released my latest batch of songs on a recording called *Yellowjacket*. In the past I've always started new songs with a word, a phrase, or an image and added the music as late in the process as possible. I find the two to be like musical epoxy; once they're joined together it's very difficult to separate them. This time, I decided to pay attention to those melodies that are constantly bubbling out of me, the sort of thing I whistle as I walk to the corner store. I've never really taken those ditties seriously but this time I decided to record them using Garageband on my iMac. All those years I'd spent slaving over the lyric and adding melodies to finished verses almost as an afterthought and now, I was turning that process around and the effect was profound. As soon as I started to pay attention to the melody first, those tunes started to come on strong. I'd get whole verses, chorus, and bridge with accompanying chord structures and a full-blown arrangement in one short rush. The only drawback was what lyrics to put to these tunes … what were the songs about? I asked my friend Josh Finlayson from the Skydiggers to co-write with me and help uncover these songs. The method we decided on was to work on one song at a session and then for him to take home one of my melodic ideas on disk at the end of the day. Next time he'd show up at my house with a little lyric idea for that tune and we'd be off to the races. Several of the songs on *Yellowjacket* were written in this fashion. I don't know if those songs are "better" than earlier tunes of mine, but I do find them easier to sing and I also think they connect with listeners in a more visceral way … perhaps they are a little more from-the-heart and less cerebral than some of my earlier stuff.

The point I'm trying to make is that it is never too late to teach an old dog new tricks and that the only way to stay out of the ruts and keep the songwriting muscle in good shape is to be willing to play with new ideas – and I do mean play. Nowadays, when people ask me that old chestnut: "What comes first, the music or the lyrics?" I tell them that it changes constantly and either will do so long as the ideas flow. I still struggle with writing, just like I did all those years ago on that dusty Greyhound, but nowadays, I trust my subconscious and I listen to my heart a lot more than I used to. Happily, the songs keep coming.

Stephen Fearing, True North recording artist, is an accomplished singer-songwriter both on his own and as a member of Blackie And The Rodeo Kings.

Songwriting

by Emm Gryner

I have never read a book about songwriting, so to be asked to write a column on songwriting is new for me, and a little frightening. Any advice I've ever received on songwriting has ended up echoing in my head like the useless but acerbic insults of one of my old Catholic school teachers. I fear that if I dish out advice, you might think of my words when you sit down to pen a song, when truly you should be surveying your personal feelings.

This being said, I have often wondered how certain writers come up with their material. I am equally fascinated though unnerved by "professional songwriting," "writing on demand," and "writing solely for money" – all of which, in my opinion, turn the magical craft of putting your emotions to song into something more like the transaction of money for hooch, or the humdrum routine of the door-to-door salesman who pedals people things he hopes they'll buy, but would never in a zillion years buy for himself.

I don't deny that everybody wants to write a song that people love. I do! But to write primarily with feeling, with your senses alive, and your heart in the right place means something very different than to write with your head in overdrive, thinking, "How can I get this to sound like Maroon 5 in 20 minutes or less?" or "If I go to the root note in the chorus, and sing real high-like I might be able to upgrade my Pro Tools system and whoop it up at NAMM next year!"

Instead of telling you what to do or how to write, I'll outline what I do in a day of writing, in hopes that it will be of interest to you.

Most people my age have Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). If you didn't get to enjoy ADD-relieving drugs (because they weren't available when *Magnum P.I.* was in its heyday), you kept your wandering mind busy with video games, building forts, or playing with Lego. Today, the temptations are e-mail, the Internet, and TV as distractions. Whatever happens to be my distraction on a given day, I make a pact to go to the piano first. I work best in the morning so I try to use that time to piece words together – some of which have been lying around for days, weeks, months. Sometimes it's a title, other times it's a theme. I also cancelled my cable, which puts me out of touch with pop culture but sure gives me lots of free time to write! I recommend it!

I go where I can be completely alone and where the instrument I'm playing sounds the best. I write in an old church near my house. I write on an upright piano in the choir balcony, and I make sure no one is around. The combination of personal quiet and the sound of the piano is extraordinary. It gives life to everything. I have not done very well writing in dead rooms, or rooms with wall-to-wall carpet or places where you can't feel the air around your voice or the notes you're playing. Maybe it's a live thing – many bands come alive when they play in a club or a hall, so I apply that to where I write too.

To remember ideas, I'll jot down melody ideas in the form of musical note names (just A, B, C, F#, etc.) next to the lyrics so I can remember melody ideas that go with certain words. I also write down what key I'm writing in, or what the tuning on the guitar is. Sometimes I sing things into my phone, other times I record something roughly on Wiretap. Like, embarrassingly rough!

I also take full pride in my superstitions – I always need to write on lined paper with a nice pen (I'm fond of the Pilot G-Tec-C4 – $3.99 at Staples – try it!) I almost always write the alphabet on top of the page, which helps me come up with my snappy, Juno-nominated rhymes. I NEVER write on an empty stomach. And I try not to worry if in the moment, I've written cheesy words, as they'll usually be revised later – while I'm driving, while I'm cleaning the house. A lot of writing gets done when I'm not near the piano.

I know I'm done when I'm exhausted, or get a good feeling about the song. I always give things time – a day or two or a week – to make sure I haven't re-written "Tarzan Boy" by Baltimora by accident.

My one bit of advice would be to write what you love, not what is trendy. Trends are a trap – I've learned this all on my own. Hope this has been of some help!

Emm Gryner is a writer, musician, producer, and label owner. Check out www.emmgryner.com for more information.

Too Many Ideas

by Tom Wilson

Following the days of Junkhouse, I wrote *Birthday Boy* on the road. As a result, I went after this theme of trying to write an entire album with one chord. So, I tried writing songs with one chord and I was pretty successful, mainly because the band was jamming during sound checks and Junkhouse was a band that could lay down a fantastic groove. As a group during sound check we seldom changed chords, so I kind of wrote the songs around one chord. That was the only real successful attempt writing on the road. I sometimes write in my hotel room.

I just switched over to writing on my computer, which has a lot of pros and cons. For one thing, the computer is a great editor and it's quick to change ideas. I suffer from various ADD and obsessive-compulsive behaviours at my late age and as a result don't like scratching things out, but I like replacing things.

I used to have too many notebooks. My ex-wife, when she threw me out, literally threw out garbage bags of writing cassette tapes. My demise is my accumulation of ideas, or as my girlfriend says, TMI, (too many ideas). She also suffers from some sort of acronym.

I have volumes and volumes of music books that I will turn into a book or something later (actually soon) and two computers full of ideas on Garage Band and Text Edit. Organization is impossible.

Ideas that surface in the moment are the ones that fly. If anyone had the patience to go through it, I certainly don't, it's part of the process for writing. It's also sometimes like working a muscle. If you asked me to run five miles, I couldn't, but if I ran for a half-hour every morning, I could.

I worked with writers in Nashville and worked that muscle, writers like Luke Dusette and Gary Nicholson. My writing muscle is doing pretty good these days.

I usually start with one melody line I keep singing in my head and can't get rid of it, then carry it around for a little while until it grows some words of something around it. It's a process that's always going on – I have two or three in my head usually at one time. They never become all the same song.

I write on guitar and finally found a partner to write songs with: my fiancé. She's a comedian, and from Newfoundland, where they come out of the womb with guitars and fiddles, singing songs with ideas. There's something to be said for artistic freedom in places like Newfoundland, Hamilton, Texas. You're not embarrassing yourself and not putting a whole lot on the line by getting up and singing and dancing. She's able to knock off melodies I couldn't even dream about knocking off that quickly. She just starts singing stuff and it's all there; the songs really write themselves in the moment. Close collaboration is hit and miss, like all relationships.

I use Garage Band because of the journey of garbage bags of tapes – at least I can open up the computer and the songs are there.

Write before you get old. Never trust your memory. If you aren't carrying around a notebook, then be carrying around some sort of recording device because I've found the first melody is the jewel, the most important performance of the song you will ever get – including when you go in to record it.

The guy walking down the street probably has your next great song; the guy sitting beside you on the bus probably has the next great idea. No authority figures anywhere on this planet can bring you anything creatively. No parents, no teachers, no one in a uniform, no one that works for the government has any idea how to write songs with you. The people that you end up thrown together with while travelling, sitting on the GO Train commuting to Toronto, the people that are sitting next to you at the table at the coffee shop or the diner, those are the people who have the next song for you. It sure isn't anybody that works for the record company.

Over the course of a career that now spans three decades, Tom Wilson has put together a body of work impressive in both quantity and quality. Beat Music, *his first full album, was recorded in 1986 with The Florida Razors, a popular band on the Hamilton scene. Tom struck Canadian rock gold in the '90s as the leader of Junkhouse, and then found a whole new audience as a crucial component of roots-rock super-group Blackie and the Rodeo Kings, with whom he now shares a label home in True North Records.*

Atmosphere For Longevity

by Luther Mallory

What makes a song, a record, and a band stand the test of time? The mood of a song and the atmosphere a songwriter attaches to that song seems to be largely missing from current songwriting, and new bands don't even seem to get their 15 minutes anymore. Could be a coincidence … but I doubt it. When I say "current songwriting," I'm talking exclusively about commercial radio stuff – just so nobody wants to fight me. Generally, in contemporary music, a song is built around rhythm and melody. There's a beat, and there's a vocal melody. Atmosphere isn't one of those foundational songwriting elements. It's like a bonus feature. If rhythm and melody are the flesh and bones of a song, atmosphere might more likely be the way that guy dresses. The same person that may look great in a tight black tee, dog collar, 12-inch-blade-down-the-boot, may not be able to pull off the "Off Roadin'," dog tags, NRA-membership look. How you present yourself and your song is crucial. The way Tom Waits makes me feel like I'm cleaning stables in Transylvania, or how Nora Jones makes me feel like I'm living in slow motion inside of a cloud – that's atmosphere.

In the last few years, more people I know seem to be turning off their radios, citing their disappointment in the current state of popular music and how there are no good bands anymore. Well, I think there are plenty of great bands, but it certainly seems to be true that fewer bands are sticking around for any respectable amount of time. Major labels seem to be less interested in developing great bands with great songs and more interested in signing/quickly dropping great looking bands with great haircuts. But why? I think it has a lot to do with this atmosphere thing.

The music industry is still primarily interested in making money, and the most fail-safe way for major labels to appeal to the radio music listening majority, and make the most money possible, is to release to radio their most easily digestible, widest demographic, lowest-common-denominator songs. Unfortunately, that almost always equates to the mood of those songs following suit – songs that people can relate to instantly and effortlessly are most often the "dance-y/fun" mood, or the "aggressive/fun" mood. Either way, it's up-tempo and high energy. Hey, you know that sharp-looking dude who always buys his clothes at Randy River? He's fun right? Nice guy, good hang … for about 10 minutes, until you find out the only thing in his brain is baseball stats. I think a lot of those songs are like that guy. Pretty soon though, you find yourself looking for substance, and the creepy guy in the corner juggling two skis and a chainsaw piques your interest and makes you think a little bit. It's that ability to make you think that makes you feel something, and music has always been about emotion.

For me it's as simple as this: I don't want to dance for 40 minutes when I'm listening to a record. I might want to dance for 10, but I have different moods, so if an artist I like can put out a record with songs creating a lot of those moods then I'll be listening to that record for as long as I'm feeling one of those moods. I'll only listen to a record full of sad songs when I'm feeling sad. It's simple mathematics. The best place to start creating atmosphere for your own songs is developing an interesting lyrical concept. "Thriller" by Michael Jackson has a Halloween-y, dark, creepy atmosphere to support that great lyrical concept. It's hard to develop a mood for "I love you, you love me" – "Thriller" is about zombies! It creates itself. More than writing about how to create atmosphere in music, in this article I wanted to recognize atmosphere as a crucial element of songwriting. This is the element that supplies the emotional part of a song, and I think that's what music listeners are often in search of, which labels and radio just aren't supporting. Bands who do it well seem to be the ones that stick around. So, when it's four in the morning and that dance-y/fun music won't stop and your feet are killing you from six hours of doing the "Macarena" and the Randy River guy has turned into drunk, obnoxious Randy River guy, and you really just want to sit down and cry from the pain of it all – kick off those dancing shoes, put on your favourite Cure record, turn it down nice and low, and just let it all out. 'Cause they know how you're feeling … they know.

Luther Mallory sings and writes songs for Crush Luther and is the Director of A&R for High 4 Records. Contact: www.crushluther.com, www.high4records.com.

Dissecting "Dinosaurus"

by Doug Riley

In the mid-'70s I was commissioned to write a piece for Moe Koffman's upcoming album called *Museum Pieces* for GRT Records. I had just finished arranging and playing on a Brecker Brothers Album in New York for Arista Records. One of the cuts on that album (written by Randy Brecker) was "Tabula Rasa," and it became the inspiration for my original work which I later entitled "Dinosaurus." They have in common the hard driving up-tempo latin jazz/rock groove, but that is where the similarities end. I wanted to incorporate polytonality and the use of polymeters and polyrhythms in this piece.

The intro starts with a unison figure, almost fanfare-like, played by the whole band. This is followed by a vamp featuring three bars of syncopated 6/4 and three bars of 4/4. The harmonies are F/E♭ E♭/D♭ F/E♭ G/D♭ F/E♭ E♭/D♭ F/E♭ G♭/D. So right away, in the intro I have introduced polymeters, polyrhythms, and polytonalities, which are the key elements of this composition.

The first A section lays out the rhythmic foundation for the appearance of the first melodic theme in A2. It is a fast 6/4 latin groove featuring a very active bass line and sustained polytonal chords that cross the bar lines and create a sense of two different meters at the same time. Once this groove has been established, I introduce theme number one in A2. It is basically a tone row (ten notes appear without any note repeating) structured on a cycle of rising fourths and resolving downwards featuring several tritone intervals at eighth note tempo. The overall effect is very angular and dissonant in counterpoint to the equally active bass line and the sustained accompanying chords, which have been placed to sound like a completely unrelated and slower tempo. This eight bar section is repeated in A3 before introducing theme number two in the B section. This bridge section is more melodic and scalar in a swinging bebop fashion (straight 4/4), which incorporates a series of V-I harmonic progressions. These happen in such rapid succession, always chromatically shifting so that they suggest a series of sudden transistions or modulations by passing through several different tonal centres. The bridge climaxes with a one bar descending figure in 9/8 landing back in 4/4 and sustained polytonal harmonies for eight bars before the unison line of the intro is re-introduced and the intro played once again. At this point, you can play A2 A3 B and intro once more before soloing or go straight to the blowing. There are several options for solos. On my solo piano CD (*Freedom* on Duke Street Records), I chose to play a totally free solo using a typical Bud Powell left hand ostinato accompaniment with the right hand expanding on the melodic material presented in the A and B sections, and introducing thematic quotes from time to time. This solo section is open and it ends by returning to B and the intro played as an interlude between solos or the heads out. The soloist can also play on the blowing changes which are derived from the A section. These are as follows in 4/4:

G♭7/C for 4 bars; A♭7/C for 4 bars
G♭7/C for 4 bars; A♭7/C for 4 bars

Photo: Bill King

Doug Riley is a legend among Canadian musicians. His influence is felt through the whole industry in terms of keyboard playing, composition, arrangement, and leadership. CM is honoured to publish this contribution that Doug made shortly before his untimely passing. Thanks Doug!

These first 16 bars should be very spacey with a sense of no time happening – very free and open in the rhythm section, then a smoking hard "4" for the last 16 bars on these changes.

B♭7/C for 4 bars; B/C for 4 bars
B♭7/C for 4 bars; B/C for 4 bars

This whole 32-bar pattern should be repeated four times by each soloist, always playing B and intro as an interlude between solos. This option was used on Moe's *Museum Pieces* album and my B-3 Quartet *Con Alma* CD (Sea Jam Records).

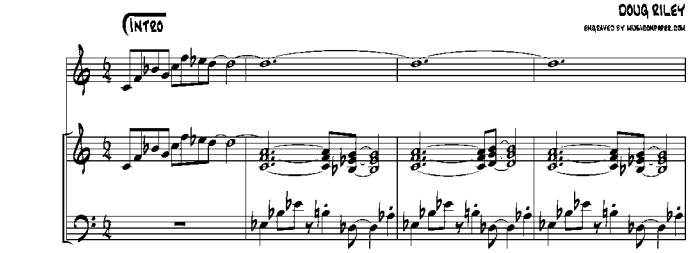
After all solos have been completed, there is a recapitulation of A1 A2 A3 B and intro, then one last burst of the first 13 notes of the theme in A. I had a lot of fun writing this piece for Moe and have had the pleasure of playing it with many other musicians over the years, but I think it was best described by a good friend (a bass player) who remarked after one performance: "Well, that was a delightful romp through the harmonic overtone series."

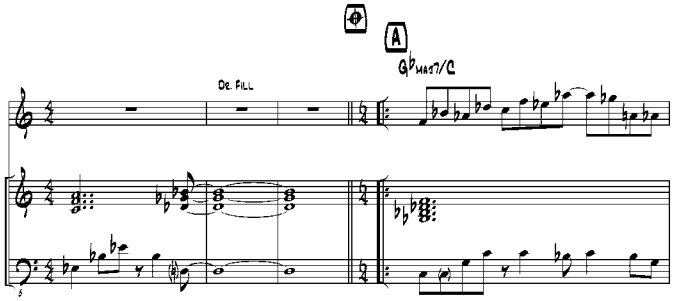
ORGAN

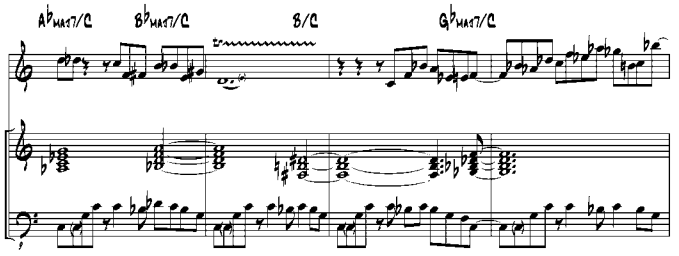
DINAH SORRASS

WRITTEN BY:
DOUG RILEY
ENGRAVED BY MUSICOMPOSER.COM

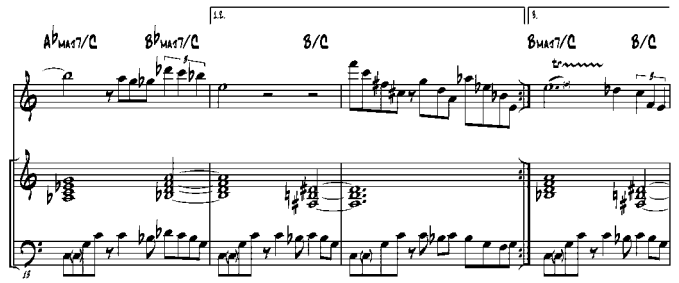
Engraving by Hemme Luttjeboer

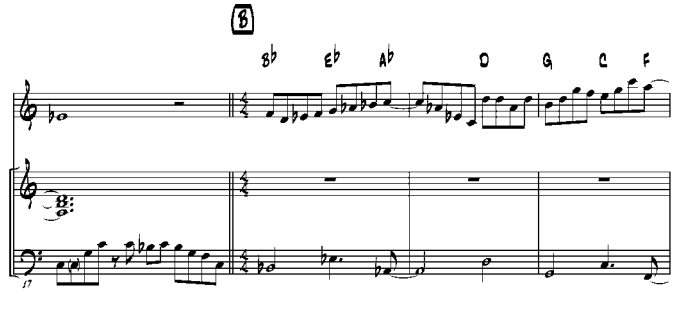


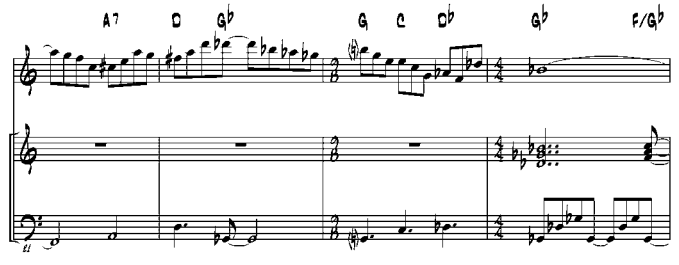




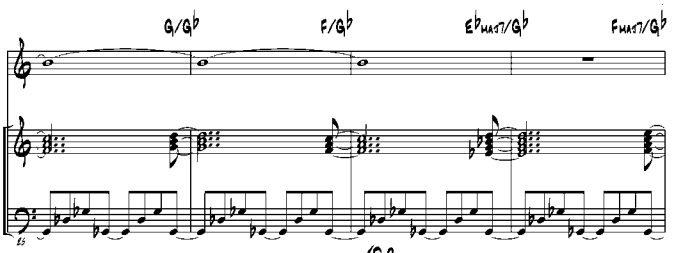
2.

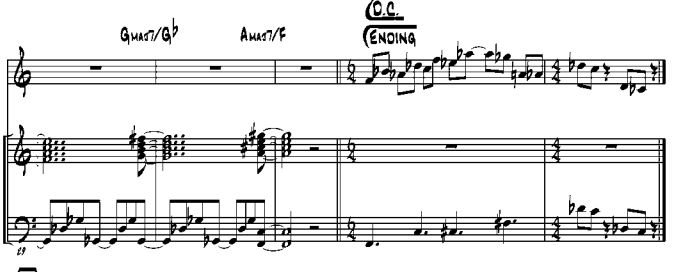


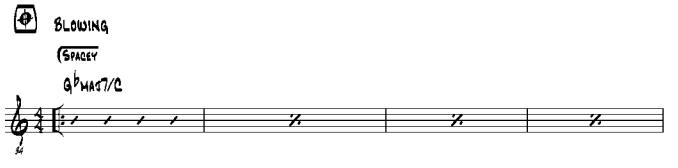


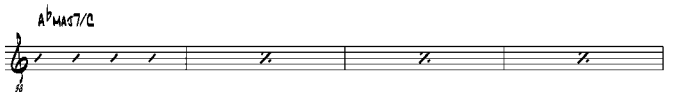


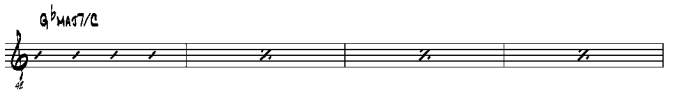
3.



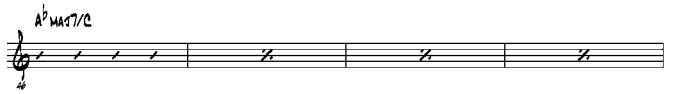


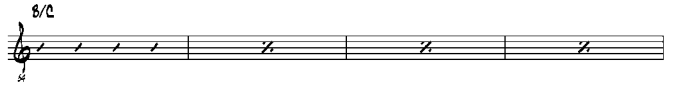


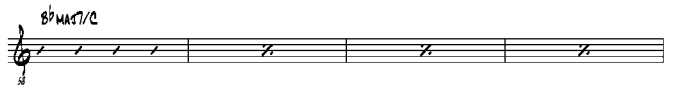


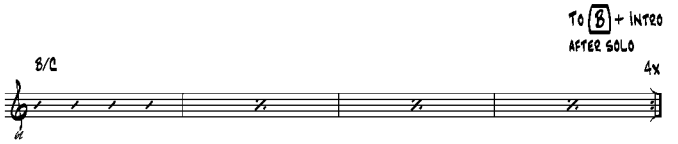


4.









Interpretive Lyric Writing

by Luther Mallory

Songwriters use lyrics to make a point and to give a song a specific purpose. The style in which you choose to make your own point in your lyric writing will drastically change the way you write, what you write about, and who may or may not get it.

Let's consider that at least 60-70 per cent of music listeners are passive music listeners – meaning they're generally non-analytical of the music they listen to. They take the honest approach of "if it sounds good, then it's good." They don't particularly care why it's good. Their ears like it and that's enough. Passive music listeners are also responsible for deciding what music is going to be most popular, precisely because they're the majority. Well, pop music is popular with passive listeners because you can't **not** get it: you don't have to work too hard to get what Whitney meant when she sang, "I will always love you." The small remaining percentage of music consumers are active music listeners. These people concern themselves very much with why music is good and absorb everything about what they listen to. Active listeners often look elsewhere for a bit more of a challenge. They are the music fans who want to play lyrical detective, and by writing interpretively, you're catering to those active listeners.

Literal writing means writing lyrics that are straightforward, with no disguises, to make your point effectively. Avril Lavigne wrote, "I don't know who you are but I'm with you." Okay, so she doesn't know who he is but she's with him. Got it. Pretty straight up. **Interpretive** writing, however, is about building visual images for your audience and pushing them toward the point you're trying to make – but never defining it for them. Where literal writing survives only on complete clarity, interpretive writing insists on being unclear, making up for its ambiguity by being rich in imagination and image. Bernie Taupin wrote beautiful lyrics for "Tiny Dancer" by Elton John. It seems obvious that there is a love theme there, but I haven't got a clue what exactly he's singing about. Even the mention of a "tiny dancer" creates an intriguing image and although I don't completely get it, the song makes its point.

Making a point. This is a serious rule of songwriting for me, whether you're writing literally or interpretively. In interpretive lyric writing, the point doesn't have to be obvious; it just needs to feel like it exists. If you're making a statement, give your audience a chance at figuring out what you mean. Sometimes the point may just as easily be that arbitrary hook seemingly designed to torture you but does indeed give a song its purpose. "Who let the dogs out?" I don't know, but thanks for asking. Perhaps the best place to make your point is in the chorus. The verses in "Penny Lane" by the Beatles are loaded with colourful lines about the fireman and the banker and the pretty nurse, and none of it means much of anything to me except for that triumphant chorus. The guy is enjoying observing the people and what they're up to on the street. That's a point enough for me. But the reason I keep wondering about those lyrics is nouns.

Nouns are an interpretive lyricist's best friend. Nouns are things, and things are generally something you can picture, and something you can picture creates interest. Remember the Backstreet Boys' hit song "I Want it That Way"? This hugely popular song does not work on a visual level. While it makes its point it is almost completely noun-less. Here's an absurd experiment to demonstrate the power of the noun using lyrics inspired by "I Want it That Way": "I love you girl/let's be together for always/I'm totally serious." Here's the re-write using nouns: "I love you girl/let's combine our sword collections/I'm totally serious." Alright, so those are the worst lyrics in all of fake-lyric-writing history, but the point is the same. The first version requires no interpretation and the second version immediately intrigues. Characters start to develop in your imagination, which are interpreted by you based on how you personally deciphered that lyric, and your brain poses questions: Will she go for it and combine their collections? Who even has a sword collection? How many swords constitute a collection? …Gravely important questions like those. It's all about creating the image that asks questions of your audience. Hopefully yours is better than that.

Interpretive lyrics are for the very invested music listener, but can work for the passive listener too. Be as colourful as you want, but make sure your song has a purpose that can at least be sensed, and use nouns to create images in the brains of your listeners. Like everything else, writing interpretively takes practice to move from writing what sounds like gibberish to writing interesting, purposeful lyrics.

Luther Mallory sings and writes songs for Crush Luther, and is the Director of A&R for High 4 Records.

STEELY DAN:
Jazz Harmony In Pop Songwriting

by Don Breithaupt

In popular music, prosody is almost always melodic ("But Beautiful" puts the word "funny" on a cheery major ninth a whole tone above the implied destination pitch, and the word "sad" below it on a flattened seventh) or rhythmic (the "lonely winter" in "All the Things You Are" feels positively interminable when the phrase-ending word "long" lands on a note with two bars to itself). One of Steely Dan's lasting innovations was the use of **harmonic** prosody. From the beginning, Fagen and Becker insisted pop harmony should not simply be wallpaper on which melody notes are hung, but a distinct real-time stream with meaning of its own.

On *Aja*, listen to the way "Black Cow"'s E♭maj^{7}, a chord related only tangentially to the verse key of C Major and related not at all to the chorus key of A Major, adds to the sense of alienation in the line "Where are you," and the way the subsequent transition chord, an E^{9sus4} that lasts for two measures, gives way to a fresh tonic Amaj^{9}, emphasizing the narrator's coincident change of mind (if not heart). Listen to the downward pull of the harmony in the chorus of "Deacon Blues": not by accident do its nine consecutive descending chord changes underscore the sax-toting antihero's death wish. Listen to the open fourths and fifths spelled out in the guitar and horn figures in "Home at Last": they recall pre-Christian music appropriate to the song's Homeric – ancient Greek – conceit.

"I would always be studying pieces, looking in harmony books," says Steely Dan co-founder Donald Fagen, "so sometimes [the harmonic constructs] would be something I'd seen in a book. Or a couple of chords I liked the sound of together. If I was writing something at the time, I'd try it. If Walter and I were working on a lyric, and we needed a certain effect, I'd try something that I thought would enhance the lyric. Or sometimes go counter to the lyric, just to keep ourselves from getting bored." In the counter-to-the-lyric category, the line "Can't you see our love will grow" in "I Got the News" not only descends melodically and diminishes dynamically – it also walks down a rickety staircase of quirky quarter-note chord changes that return the song to its C^{6} vamp. So much for love's growth (yes – it's a bit of a boner joke, too).

Becker and Fagen give their audience credit for being able to hear, if not analyze, their subtly shifting colours. Even in an area of harmonic tranquility, like the eight measures of Bmaj^{9} that make up the intro of "Aja," there are sharp elevenths floating around, hinting at the less stable (and more exotic) Lydian mode. At the top of the double verse in "Deacon Blues," we hear G^{6} and F^{6}, two relatively neutral chords. Halfway through, when the moment comes around again, the two chords recur as a G^{13} and an F^{13} by virtue of the flattened sevenths in the horn voicings. The difference is hard to quantify, but let's say the second pair of changes is 33 per cent bluer.

Steely Dan records contain harmonic motifs, the way other records contain melodic, rhythmic, or lyrical motifs. *The Royal Scam* (1976) had been conspicuously packed with minor vamps; *Aja* (1977), by contrast, was Becker and Fagen's half-step record. "I had always thought chords going down in half-steps were corny-sounding," says Fagen. "But I think I just decided I was going to do it anyway." "Deacon Blues" begins with this downgrade sequence – Cmaj^{7} G^{2}/B | B♭maj^{7} F^{2}/A – then repeats it up a whole tone before pausing on the deceptive cadence that sets up the verse. "Peg" begins in a similar fashion – G$^{6/9}$ F#$^{7(\#9)}$ | F$^{6/9}$ E$^{7(\#9)}$ | E♭$^{6/9}$ D$^{7(\#9)}$ – but introduces dominant function to every second chord. "Aja" includes a similar, but strictly parallel pattern near the end of its repeated solo form – Fm^{11} Em^{11} | Ebm^{11} Dm^{11} – and concludes its chorus with another half-step move: Dbmaj$^{7(\flat5)}$ to Cmaj$^{7(\flat5)}$. Related but ascending fragments include the set-up to Fagen's synthesizer solo in "Home at Last" (D♭^{9} to D^{9}), and this juicy intro-ending flourish in "Josie": E♭maj^{7} E$^{7(\#9\flat13)}$ | C/F G♭$^{maj7(\flat5)}$.

All these chord progressions flouted prevailing mid-70s pop trends. Steely Dan wasn't the only exception – Michael Franks's 1977 bossa-manqué "Down in Brazil" was built on a 24-bar descending cycle with six tonal centres, and Gino Vannelli's 1975 prog-jazz epic "Where Am I Going" had enough chromaticism for a Debussy tone poem – but Steely Dan was surely the best-known. Even more than its stunning production values, photographically specific lyrics, and unconventional instrumentation, the harmonic content was what set Dan apart. In the Dan canon, and especially on *Aja*, harmony isn't mere framework: it's the thing itself.

Excerpted from Steely Dan's Aja, *volume 46 of Continuum Publishing's long-running "33-1/3" series.*

SOCAN Award winner Don Breithaupt is a studio musician and songwriter based in Toronto. He has written extensively on music and film for the National Post *and other publications.*

Songwriting With A Purpose

by James Linderman

Last summer, Blair Packham did an amazing job interviewing me at the Humber College Summer Songwriting Workshop. He titled our interview "Songwriting with a Purpose" in the program.

We talked about what internal or external forces might drive us, as artists, to write songs. We were looking beyond the sole purpose of having something that is of our own design to perform and we also discussed what effect purpose might have on us as people and on the songs themselves.

The main point I tried to make at Humber that day can be distilled down to one simple statement – that my objective is always to write what is most authentic (but since I have a notorious habit of fitting the smallest number of ideas into the largest number of words, it took me all morning at Humber to explain this and I will undoubtedly write about it here that way too). Authenticity is also a very complex quality.

I like the way singer/songwriter Jody Cross puts it when he states, "We write what we worship." This makes a lot of sense as a deeper purpose for writing when we consider that songs are created from our spirit – born from what we feel deeply with a motive to inspire that same deep feeling in our listener.

For instance, I do believe that hopeless romantics write songs so that other hopeless romantics will have some artistic representation and that the songs will offer up lots of useful language as well as a soundtrack to romantic notions and possibly actions (oh, behave!). Our worship of all things romantic – love, longing, lust, devotion, infatuation, heartbreak, and even the denial of romance – is already framed very nicely in the 20th-century songbook.

I recently dug up a real old Joan Armatrading song that was from an album that my wife Lynda listened to obsessively back when we were first dating. She had not heard it in 25 years, and so I secretly loaded it into her MP3 player and waited for her to eventually find it. When she did, it had the desired effect. (How hopelessly romantic is that?) It never occurred to me that I sometimes even use other artists' music with an ulterior motive as well.

We sometimes write songs that honour values such as honesty, integrity, tenacity, compassion, and we also use the beat of our favourite drum to worship material things with songs about money, jewelry, cars, trucks (see country music), and even a few rappers have songs expressing their love for a certain kind of running shoes. (Obviously not the same running shoes I run 5 km in every morning. My sneakers are definitely not inspiring anyone in my house to break out in song!)

Certainly, when we write about what we are passionate about, (even if it's sneakers) our songs become more than just musically transactual, as we hope they bond us spiritually to our audience through some greater unifying cause woven into our art. If we are winning new listeners over, our music, and the cause it represents, can actually become transformational. That's pretty cool!

But is there a problem with this kind of writing?

Let's imagine we are writing with a nonmusical purpose in mind. Let's say we are hoping to write **the** great song about the global environmental crisis. Is our agenda to write about this cause so prominent that we lose sight of our primary job, which is to write a good song, period?

Can we even control our creativity in that way, and still produce the musical magic trick that is the fully inspired song – you know, the song that appears out of thin air, much like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat?

I also wonder if we are as affected by being artists, as people, as our art is by what we pour into it. I've met brooding artists who rarely show emotion or ever speak, as if they are saving it all up for the moment when music might strike. I also know very gifted artists who seem relatively unaltered by the fact that their muse overtakes them on a fairly regular basis and spits them back out into reality, song in hand, as if this were the most natural and normal thing in the world.

I know that my faith and beliefs will trickle through most of my lyrics simply because they are the central features of my life. I believe my songs are not just what I decide but are intrinsically who I am; my values reside in my songs because my songs in many respects **are** me. I do, however, often wonder if I am more compelled to write the best song I can, or the most genuine song I can, or perhaps the song with the most compelling sales pitch for Christianity I can muster up. I deeply hope it is never just the latter.

The question is…what are you writing and why are you writing it?

James Linderman lives and works at theharmonyhouse, a music lesson, songwriting, and recording preproduction facility in Newmarket, ON.

Three Rules To Improve By

by Luther Mallory

Musicians very rarely ease into the title. The transition from "high school student" to "music fanatic/aspiring musician" is not like coasting delightfully down a hill on your 10-speed. It's usually more like being hit in the face with a missile launcher, and that missile usually shows up in the form of a particular song. In my case it was "Cuckoo for Caca" by Faith No More. I was 14 years old, just minding my own business trying to be a basketball player when my brother put that record on. In three-and-a-half minutes I forgot how to play basketball and was bound to a life of making music and living with no stability – so it goes for most musicians missiled in the face once upon a time and thrust into the creative pursuit. Some of us become songwriters, little rock n' roll saplings trying to sprout into something really impressive. It's important to set yourself up for that. Here are three very basic rules that could be soil for your sapling.

Remember when your girlfriend/soulmate broke up with you after you graduated high school because she wanted to see "what else was out there?" Well, she was right to do that. People need new reference points and you get those by trying new things. Plus, it was 10 years ago so you can stop cutting yourself. Remember your good buddy in college who covered "Black" by Pearl Jam surprisingly well at open mic night? Yeah, then he showed you his "original" stuff and it sounded strikingly similar to "Black" by Pearl Jam. This guy should have listened harder when you cried to him about your ex-girlfriend and broken up with Pearl Jam before it was too late (Vedder tattoo). Rule number one for setting yourself up to be a good songwriter is **LISTEN TO EVERYTHING**. Like your ex-girlfriend, your college buddy was in serious need of some new reference points. If you listen to nothing but Pearl Jam, you're going to start writing Pearl Jam songs. If you start listening to old country, well, then you'll be writing twangy Pearl Jam songs, and the more influences you add, the less similar to something particular you will sound, and then, hopefully, you'll just sound like you. Songwriters learn by listening, and any writer who says they have no influences is either confused or stupid.

There's a pretty amazing imbalance when it comes to young bands. The average music listener is almost always listening primarily for the vocals, and often judges the quality of a band solely on whether the vocalist is good or bad. Meanwhile, there is a very apparent trend of young bands having great instrumental sections and horrible vocalists. I'm not talking about singing; it doesn't have to be technical – it only has to be consistent. Tim Armstrong from Rancid is a horrible singer, but he's a great vocalist because whatever it is he's doing, he's doing it with control and consistency, and he's unmistakable. As a songwriter, it's helpful to be self-sufficient so you don't have to track down your singer and guitarist to try out new material. As a singer, your voice is going to be the first thing people love, or write off your band for, so **DON'T TAKE FOR GRANTED THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING A GOOD VOCALIST**. Refer to paragraph two to learn how to not end up sounding like your favourite singer.

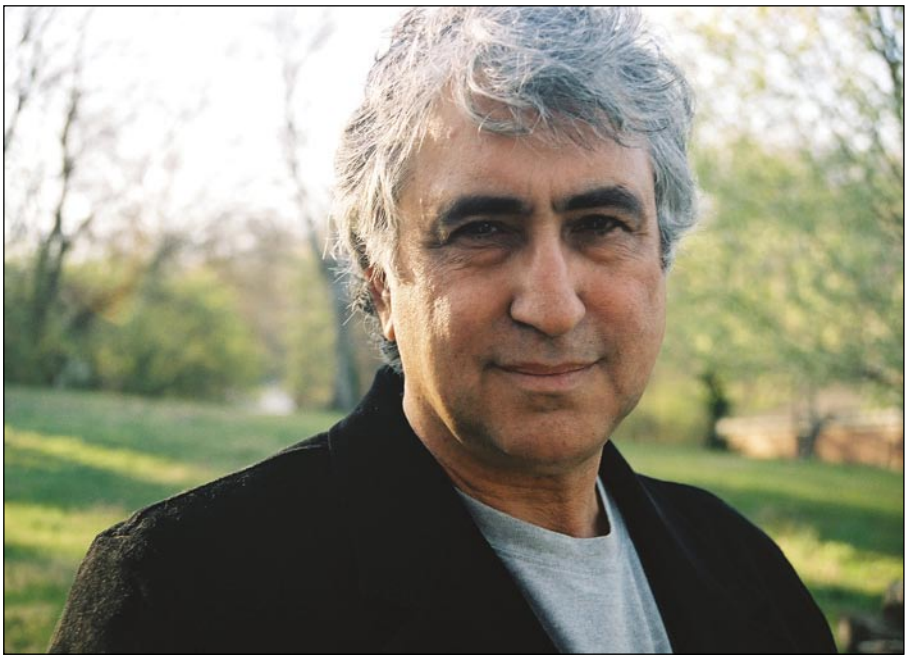
For all young bands currently in the negotiation process with your friend at school who has a "home studio" (computer), and who has generously offered to record your 3-song demo for only $500, please go back on Facebook and say you've reconsidered. This might sound contrary to this next rule, which is **DEMO EVERYTHING YOU DO**. Don't worry about it sounding great. While you're learning how to write, "purchase" a recording program for your computer and a mic, and get to work. This is crucial for a few reasons. First, you need to know what you sound like and you need to be able to show other people your music so you can get feedback and get better. Second, fundamentally you should be learning about recording as a musician because it's part of the business you're trying to be a part of. Third, you won't have an excuse not to be working on your music – you have everything you need in your mom's basement. No more saving up to record professionally. There will be a time when you'll want to get a really good demo together, but while you're learning this is the best way to get great and in 10 years you'll want to hear your old demos.

When the missile hits, you need a proper plan. Learning how to write good songs can be as confusing as my ridiculous missile/sapling mixed metaphor. These rules are simply meant to help you build your own musical identity from explosion to giant redwood.

Luther Mallory is a singer/songwriter and Director of A&R at High 4 Records.

The True Song

by Eddie Schwartz



The shortest distance between two points is **not** always a straight line. At least, that's not my experience in the strange and occasionally wondrous land we call the music business. That's not to say that you as a practitioner of the art and craft of songwriting can't find a direct route to fame and fortune, if that's what you're after. Even as I write this, there are hundreds of pilgrims on the road to "radio ready," crafting the perfect track for country, urban, or pop radio, and God bless them, some small per cent of all those who travel this "direct" highway will achieve what they define as "success." Their songs will be cut by established artists signed to major labels, or if they perform their own material, they will get a deal themselves. They will chart in *Billboard*, and some might even sell a few million downloads on iTunes. All well and good, and sure to swell the bank account substantially, not to mention that thrilling walk to the stage to pick up that glistening new SOCAN award, or Juno, or Grammy.

It's a sweet trip, but alas – more often than not – a short one. Yes, you can have a very good year or two by writing the perfect radio track, and that's fine. Of course, now you have to do it again, and the pressure is on. You have that big advance from your publisher or label to recoup, and what they want is, well, the same thing you did last time. Welcome to the machine. Take your place over there next to all the other cogs.

There is another approach – but be forewarned. You have to wander off the straight, safe, narrow, and-all-too-trodden path. You must venture into the deep, dark forest in search of a rarer, but ultimately much more rewarding creature. Let's call it the true song.

Now, it would be nice if I could tell you exactly what you are looking for. Unfortunately, I won't and really, I can't. If I could, the journey wouldn't be unique to you, and that would defeat the whole purpose. But I can tell you this much: it's something real; something deeply felt; something undeniable. You may find it inside yourself if you look hard enough, or sitting next to you on the last subway home in the middle of the night. It may pop up in a dream. It may flitter by on the highway as you drive home from your day gig. If you can describe it in a few words, then veer to the side of the road and write them down. If you can express it in a melodic phrase, then get out the handheld and sing it. If the words and the melody fit together take a moment to thank the personal deity of your choice. You are on the path to the true song.

I "found" "Hit Me With Your Best Shot" just outside a therapist's office after hitting pillows for a while, which was part of that particular therapist's approach. I stepped out onto the front porch after the session and the title hit me (okay, but it's true) like a ton of bricks. I was despondent about my life at that time. No one in the industry wanted to hear my music, and there wasn't a day that went by that I didn't think about giving up. That title gave me hope. **Through it, I articulated my own defiance in the face of adversity. I affirmed a personal refusal to give up**.

And the idea that it could be a hit song someday didn't occur to me.

It took more than two years to write that song, to take that epiphany and realize it as a developed song. True songs are "crafty" things. Like most natural finds (an uncut diamond, say), in its artless state, it may not seem like much. It almost always has to be honed, and it has to be right. So, once the intrepid songwriter has discovered the essential raw material of the true song, he or she has to go to work. Whether it takes an hour or years, they will only have succeeded when the lyric, the melody, the groove, and finally the arrangement have become a compelling delivery vehicle for the personal "truth" of the song. And a transformation can now take place. The writer's own take on reality, his or her personal truth can become anyone's, or most everyone's.

The true song doesn't chase fame and fortune, but sometimes, not always, but more often than one would ever imagine, fame and fortune chase the true song.

The true song is not written for the radio, but if and when the true song is broadcast on radio, it justifies radio's existence, not the other way around.

And when and if it becomes a "hit," the true song makes a difference to the lives of others, not just to the songwriter's. And not just for a year or two.

Eddie Schwartz is a Canadian songwriter, artist, and record producer who has written such classic hit songs as "Hit Me With Your Best Shot" recorded by Pat Benetar, "Don't Shed A Tear" recorded by Paul Carrack, "The Doctor" recorded by the Doobie Brothers, "All Our Tomorrows" recorded by Joe Cocker, and "When There's Time for Love," recorded by Lawrence Gowan. As an artist, Eddie has garnered international acclaim and top-20 singles in the US and Canada, and is a recipient of multiple BMI, SOCAN, and Juno awards. Eddie currently serves as the President of the Canadian Songwriters Hall of Fame, President of the Songwriters Association of Canada, and continues a longstanding involvement with SOCAN as a membership consultant in Nashville.

Putting It All Together

by Danny Michel

Tools Of The Trade

I kick it old school with an acoustic guitar and record ideas on anything I can. If you phone my answering machine, you have to skip through 14 messages of me going "da, da, da" using the answering machine as a dictaphone to record an idea. I don't really write the melody on the guitar – I'm getting better at just belting it out in my head. I'm after a vocal melody first. Sometimes I get just little licks – little lines stuck in my head and they become the hook or the riff. After that, I go into Pro Tools and lay down a drum track, building the foundation of a song and seeing how it feels.

I may lay down a drum track with a software-based virtual instrument or a drum machine – sometimes both. I start with an acoustic guitar and then get into laying down a beat. I think that's where the rhythm really comes in.

I make my own solo records and I've produced them in my own studio for years, and I play a lot of instruments on them. On the last record, I called in some players and we tracked a bunch of tunes. And other tunes where I play everything on, I just start multi-tracking and just go crazy. The biggest thing I've learned about recording music is just that – this is the time to record, not write. I used to record and then at the end I would sing the vocals when I was all done. I'd get everything sounding great, and then I'd sing it. I now work the opposite way. I sing the vocal, and I'll accompany myself on the acoustic guitar to just a drum machine, and when the vocal is killer I'll put everything else on and I'll work around the voice.

That just comes from me learning that the voice is the most important thing in a song. The second I hear the voice is when I decide whether or not I like the song. I can hear someone's voice and decide, "I don't like that person's voice," and then no matter what I just can't like it. If I like the person's voice right away, then I'm open and I'm willing to go wherever it's going to go. So, I've just learned that getting the killer vocal sound, take, and energy is paramount.

Lyrics & Melody

I usually fuss over lyrics. I get a melody and chords, and then I pick at the lyrics, fine-tuning and tweaking them until I'm happy. I've always said, and I've heard other people say this, too, that the best songs, my favourite songs, the songs that get the best reaction from people, are songs that I write in 10 minutes. That happens maybe once an album. I don't know how it happens or what makes that magic moment, but I live constantly hoping that it's coming. And other times you have to work on it more, and go back and fix stuff and slave over it.

A Change Of Scenery...

I don't have a recipe for inspiration. I don't say, "Okay it's songwriting time, and I've got to get inspired. I'm going to rent some movies." Just being in life, and – if you're writing those type of songs – reading the paper and keeping aware of what's going on is key. Other songs are just about the heart. I think a lot of that stuff comes from me when I'm keeping busy and keeping adventures happening in life and travelling. When you're not at your house, you see the world, and you're seeing things in a different way.

I think it's actually really bad when people say, "This is my writing room; it's where I hang out and work on music." For some people, I'm sure it works great. Personally, if I sit in a room and I'm writing a song, and all the things are there that are in front of me all the time, my mind starts seeing all those things subliminally – my mind is not as active as it could be. If you get in your car, go park in the middle of a grocery store parking lot, and sit there and work on the song, things are different all of a sudden. Your mind is working in a different spot. Be aware of what's in front of you and you might see things differently.

I also try to go away every year – down to the Caribbean or somewhere nice. I'll take a guitar and I'll go on a writing vacation. If you go and sit in some beautiful places in the world, it's a lot better for your songwriting than sitting in your apartment.

Danny Michel is an Ottawa-based singer/songwriter/producer and has recently released his latest record, Feather, Fur & Fin. *For more information, check out www.dannymichel.com.*

Arranging Strings

by Sarah Slean

Strings, glorious, strings. Who can resist them? In my view, their power to manipulate emotion is unsurpassed. The timbre of the violin is closest to that of the human voice – and perhaps this is why we find it so irresistibly, painfully beautiful.

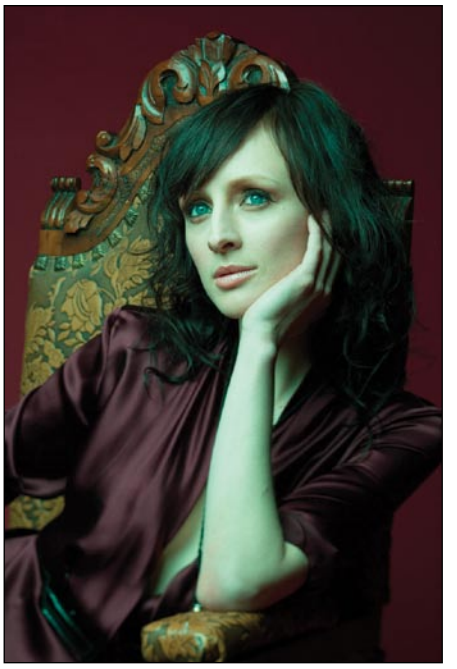
My love of the string sound blossomed into "utter besotted-ness" when I started investigating the wealth of incredible string repertoire out there. Like anything in music, if you want to learn you have to **listen**. While textbooks are great for grasping the basics such as range and technical terminology, no amount of reading can teach you the tonal qualities of each instrument or how they change with varying registers and techniques. You have to **hear** it, and you have to hear it in context. I've always maintained that if you can read music, you can write music, but before you start "painting," you need to know what colours are available. So, while "Orchestration 314" at the University of Toronto lit the flame, the old classical vinyl bin at my used record shop really poured on the kerosene. Thus, my first point is to **become familiar with what the instruments can do**.

Barber's "Adagio," Mahler's "Adagietto," and Max Richter's "On the Nature of Daylight" are good examples of strings doing what they do best – that is, "kill you softly" by journeying between consonance and dissonance, light and dark, profound peace and heart-wrenching tension. For interesting effects, check out the eerie, glassy **ponticello** in Bartok's "Concerto for Orchestra," the feathery **sul tasto** in Debussy's "Pelléas and Mélisande," the spritely **spiccato** in Mendhelssohn's "Midsummer Night's Dream," or the bone-rattling **con legno battuto** in Berlioz's "Symphonie Fantastique," to name a few. For register references, rhythmic ideas, and to hear soloists and smaller ensembles, I recommend the Shostakovich quartets, violin concertos in D by Beethoven and Brahms, and Walton's viola concerto.

Once you have a handle on the tonal colours available, then you're in a better position to navigate the next step: how strings can be used in a song – which, of course, has an existing sonic palette of its own. What registers will best compliment the existing palette? What techniques might enhance the song's mood or atmosphere? Do I need to prioritize a vocal or an important motif or hook? Are the strings themselves a hook? My second point is to **decide what role the strings are going to play**. This will dictate how you write.

In Radiohead's "How to Disappear Completely," the strings hover in a kind of atonal mist around the band. Quartertone clusters surge and retreat without ever really surrendering to the song's harmonic structure, and the effect is chillingly disorienting. Compare that with the Nelson Riddle-style arrangements of the '50s and '60s where strings would melodically decorate gaps in the vocal, almost like another "singer." Two very different aims; two very different scores.

When I started, I was interested in using strings to widen and open up a chorus (another well-used pop technique), but one of the things I noticed about my first attempts was that they were excessively pianistic. The first violin would take a very vocal-esque melodic line, the cello took the role of bass player, and the others would merely fill in the harmony following the basic rules of voice leading. They sounded great as a quartet, but within a song already dominated by piano, the sonic result was impossibly dense. I had to put my excitement at writing strings aside and assess **what their inclusion was going to contribute to the song.** If I want them to "sing" a line, I need uncomplicated harmony, thinner voicing, and appropriate space within the song. This is what I was aiming for in "Sound of Water," where the strings play a returning "motif." If I want the warm blanket effect, I thicken and broaden the voicings, such as in my song "The Rose," the score of which is basically a page and a half of whole notes with no real melodies. If strings are going to be the central architecture of the song, rhythm is essential, as well as reigning in the other band elements. Great examples of this are PJ Harvey's "Man Sized Sextet" and Björk's "Bachelorette."



All of this leads me to my third point: **learn by revising**. By far, my best teachers have been my abundant and inevitable **mistakes**. I set out pencils with good erasers on the stands of each player whenever I do a session or rehearsal. There are **always** numerous edits, sometimes complete deletions, or even brand new sections written on the fly. With each adjustment, I gain new understanding – not only of these incredible instruments – but of music itself, our endlessly fascinating and complex art.

March 2008 saw the release of Sarah Slean's fifth studio recording, The Baroness, *on Warner Music Canada. A collection of paintings and a second volume of poetry by Sarah accompanied the album's release. Formerly a classical piano major, Sarah has maintained ties with her classical and academic roots by collaborating with several of Canada's finest orchestras and ensembles (TSO, National Arts Orchestra, CBC Radio Orchestra, The Art of Time Ensemble) and by composing, as well as conducting, all of the string arrangements for her material. Check out www.sarahslean.com.*

Collaboration

by Ron Sexsmith

You should take advantage of opportunities to go into a quiet space and write with other people. Go in there and bring a couple of ideas with you, and sometimes you'll only work on one of them. Sometimes, the other person will have an idea that he or she is really keen to work on. The hardest part about collaborating, I find, is if neither one of you has any lyrical ideas because then you're just really stuck. What was helpful in writing with Leslie Feist and with Jill Barber was that they both had ideas – Jill had notebooks of just lyrical ideas. Music has always been the easy part for me – to take a lyric and make something out of it – but it's different every time.

The Process

I don't even have anything to record on at home. I'm kind of primitive that way. With Jill, we were sitting in a room with a piano and that was it. She would have a lyrical idea, or she'd have a melodic idea and I would try to find the chords for it. At certain points, she had a line or two, and I would find a melody for it on the piano. You just work together.

I've written with other people and I've felt like I've done all the work. Sometimes, on the other hand, you feel like you've been absolutely no help at all. It can be such a hard thing. I honestly prefer to write for myself and by myself because nobody has to hear all the dumb stuff that you don't end up using or you throw away. I think that in a collaboration situation, you're always a little bit self-conscious that you're going to suggest something stupid. If you know the person it could be a lot easier.

Usually when I collaborate, the person that I'm collaborating with has some sort of tape recorder or perhaps it's GarageBand on a computer, and I'm thankful because otherwise it would be kind of tricky for me. I don't have a problem remembering my own stuff when I'm writing, but I've collaborated with a lot of people and I probably could not remember how to play any of, say, those six songs if I had to right now. I've been doing it long enough that I think I understand the craft side of songwriting. I like the challenge of collaborating, but it can be sort of hit or miss.

Compromise

The thing with co-writing that kind of bothers me a little bit is that there's an element of compromise – things that you just have to let go because it's touchy, or you don't want to hurt anyone's feelings, or oftentimes there's a paint-by-numbers thing to it as well. In the experiences I've had down in Nashville or in writing in England with people, it's like you're trying to find a hook or you're trying to write a hit chorus … and for me, writing has been a lot deeper than that. Every song I've ever put on my own albums has been inspired by something, or it's come to me, or I've had an idea. It can be really derivative sometimes – you're just batting around this possibly cliché idea and trying to make it into something that sounds like a song. Every now and then you get a decent song out of it – but I don't really enjoy that part of it too much.

Collaboration Makes Good Business Sense

Business is my main motivation for collaborating, actually. It's not my motivation at all when I'm writing for myself. I keep going to England or Nashville because I know some songwriters who've gone and they've had some success – perhaps other artists have covered a song. Being a songwriter is not the most secure job in the world unless you consistently have something. I get royalty cheques all the time, but they're not house-buying ones or things that set you up for a nest egg of some sort. I always tell myself that I'll just keep going down until I get lucky once – then I won't have to do it again.

Ron Sexmith's Exit Strategy of the Soul *has been nominated for a Juno in the Adult Alternative Album of the Year category. He is currently writing songs for a new record. Check out www.ronsexmith.com.*

Murphy's Laws Of Songwriting Part I

by Ralph Murphy

"May you live in interesting times" is an old Chinese curse. As a songwriter, every day is an "interesting time" for us. As an effort to demystify what may be coming our way in the future, the best place to start is what just happened in the past. Paying the bills doing what we love doing is not only essential to us and to our families financially, but we need the approval and validation that having a hit brings on a creative level.

Bearing in mind that this is the music "business," lets take a look at what held the listener for the amount of time necessary for radio to "move those microwave ovens." In other words, to connect the jingles so that the pockets of songwriters and publishers could jingle.

2008 was 12 months of amazing change on a lot of levels. As I hadn't done a "what happened at number one" in country since 2004, I thought that 2008 would be a good window to look at the "new" business of what holds women from the burger commercial to the car jingle. Basically, how creators do their best to help our radio friends keep their listeners and make a living at drive time.

Writers follow their hearts and write what they write, but when it comes to pitch time we have to think like horse breeders. We have to be smart about which of our ponies are capable of functioning in the situation we place them. Some will be brilliant at harness racing, some have personalities that make them great for children to ride, some will be perfect at pulling carriages, and a few, very few, will be entered in the Kentucky Derby. Even fewer will win! Well, some songs work at drive time, most don't!

As all of you who have read the "Murphy's Law" articles have heard me say before, more people are struck by lightning each year than have a number one record on the *Billboard* country chart. So now lets get started.

So with 50 per cent of the '08 number ones written by the artists, more songs achieving number one status, songs spending less time on the charts and sales plummeting 24 per cent from '07, "may you live in interesting times" takes on a new meaning for the non-performing, or stand-alone, writer and the publisher working in the market.

Tempo/Intro

Well, there was only one waltz, "I'm Still A Guy" (Paisley/Miller/Lovelace). All the rest were in 4/4 time. Sixty-five per cent were mid- to up-tempo, which is a drive time staple. Strangely enough, all the ballads were written by the stand-alone writers. Generally, according to label A&R folk, the ballads tend to be written by the artist/writers.

As we have been told since the dawn of radio, the expectation for the intro is 13 seconds. In '08, after adding all the intros up and finding the average, the length was 15 seconds. Only two songs, "Should've Said No" (Swift) and "You Look Good In My Shirt" (Martin/Shapiro/Nesler), were longer than 20 seconds – the rest stayed in the teens.

In line with "get me to hook/title on time," i.e. 60 seconds from the top of the record, 62 per cent did just that. If you consider the intro separately and start timing from the vocal, all but one, "Cleaning This Gun" (Cannon-Goodman/Beathard), arrived right on time.

Theme & Person

The pronouns used in 14 of the songs were strictly first person "you and me," which means the writer made the song a conversation between the singer and the listener, inviting the listener in on a personal level.

As for the mantra, a country song should never whine, preach, or vent at drive time, UNLESS it's done with humour, irony, and detail – most of the number one's did that very skillfully. For instance, using the third person pronoun in "Just A Dream" (McEwan/Lindsey/Sampson) allows the singer to tell the story but not be the main character. "You're Gonna Miss This" (Gorley/Miller) made Trace Adkins not preachy by having the mom, dad, and plumber doing the preaching. Carry Underwood got to brag about an "All-American Girl" (Gorley/Lovelace/Underwood) without it really being about her. And those that were simply young and dumb redeemed themselves in "Back When I Knew It All"(Willmon/O'Donnell/Hannan).

With only a couple of exceptions, the songs behaved exactly as they were intended: to make the singer look good to women at the worst time of day possible, i.e. drive time. Professional writers are all very much aware that singers, unlike actors, are fairly consistent character-wise, from song to song. They are not irredeemably bad in one song and then good in the next. So, if the song is out of character for the artist, having it in third person (he, she, them) makes the singer the commentator, and not the main character. This allows the artist to sing about losers and old people, and not be one!

Themes were pretty much as you would expect:

- Love, Romantic
- Love, Of Family
- Love Lost
- Good Times/Party
- Revenge/Satisfaction
- Life Lessons
- Morality Play

So, there you have it. Love in all its glory: romantic love, love of family, love of good times, love of country and God, plus love lost, revenge, life lessons, and morality plays.

Now there's your country!

Born in England and raised in Canada, the well-travelled Ralph Murphy has worked extensively on both sides of the Atlantic during his music career. His first #1 song in Europe was "Call My Name" by James Royal (1966). After several years as an artist and producer, Ralph moved to New York in 1969 to produce the band April Wine (two gold albums; one platinum). In 1971, Ralph had his first country hit Nashville with "Good Enough To Be Your Wife," #2 for Jeannie C. Riley. By 1976, Ralph and business partner Roger Cook opened Pic-A-Lic Music in Nashville. During the decade of its existence, the company prospered, more of Ralph's songs became hits ("He Got You" for Ronnie Milsap; "Half The Way" for Crystal Gayle), and Ralph served as president of NSAI. Ralph is now VP of ASCAP Nashville.

Born in England and raised in Canada, Ralph Murphy has worked extensively on both sides of the Atlantic. He's written for and produced several internationally-known acts and is now VP of ASCAP Nashville.

by Ralph Murphy

MURPHY'S LAWS Of Songwriting Part II

Song Length

The writer and artist of the longest song on the *Billboard* charts '08 was Alan Jackson, who spends the full five minutes of his record having a "Good Time" (Jackson). At four minutes plus, seven of 26 (or 27 per cent) stood proud at four or more minutes in length. I would assume that sometimes, as at the end of some of these records, as there is 39-45 seconds of instrumental that just plays on with no vocal, the on-air personality probably used it to talk over. Some definitely could have been a lot shorter! The rest of the records were between three and four minutes. Not one squeezed in at under three minutes.

Song Forms

Much as movie scripts follow the same format, there are six basic song shapes that the listener expects. The five that were used in '08 were:

Second Form [verse-chorus-verse-chorus-instrumental-chorus.] The variations on this form are infinite, but the above is what it basically is. The great news for writers is that this form is forgiving and flexible. In rock, it accommodates musical riffs that become a major part of the record (think heavy metal). In folk, urban, hip-hop, etc, it is expandable to include as many verses as necessary to tell the story and is very arrangement-friendly.

Third Form [verse (optional)-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-instrumental-chorus.] Hanging with the comfortable Third Form seemed to be the message carrier of choice with almost 50 percent (12 out of 26) songs written that way.

Fourth Form [verse-lift-chorus-verse-lift-chorus-bridge (optional)-instrumental-lift (optional)-chorus.] Fourth Form was used in five of 2008's number ones. For those of you unfamiliar with the term "lift," it is also called a climb, channel, pre-chorus, etc.

Fifth Form [the old AABA form] [verse-verse-bridge-verse-bridge-verse (optional)] sent five songs to the top.

Sixth Form [chorus-verse-chorus-instrumental-bridge-chorus etc.] Sixth Form, or rondeau, snuck in almost at years end. Zac Brown and his co-writer Wyatt Durette bent it a little bit, much like the Oak Ridge Boys used to, and ended the year in fine style.

Repetition

As noted before, as a record gets more airplay, the repetitions get more wearing and create a "burn factor." Repetition was important 30 years ago in order to grind the title into listener's memory, because back then a record got fewer spins on radio. Now, repetition is not always a good thing. Less has become more.

Representing traditional country, Alan Jackson's "Good Time" had 25 uses of title. The closest to that was Blake Shelton's "Home" (Foster/Buble/Chang) with 14. Well over half had three to seven repetitions of title (15 out of 26).

Aside from the repetitions, humour, irony, and detail are major items in a hit song – humour, because smiling and feeling good is apparently not a bad thing; irony, because irony and humor go well together; and detail, because women are detail-oriented and that is country radio's key audience.

Story/Conversational

Ten of the number ones were story songs pure and simple, like "Waiting On A Woman" (Sampson/Varble). Three were mostly conversations with perhaps a little story included for detail and illustration. Thirteen were conversations.

Your Best Bet

As the number one country songs for '08 reflect, humour, irony, and detail rule. So, if you catch the listener's ear with a 4/4 mid- to up-tempo riff or two for about 15 seconds, put some humor, irony, and detail in your story/conversation to get their attention, get the listener to the hook in 60 seconds, then give the audience more story/information in the second verse, after the second chorus hand them a middle eight/bridge that gives them a perspective on the song, with either information not heard in the song before or the other side of the story, then wrap it up possibly adding new information on the way out, and move them to the Burger King commercial in under four minutes, you're a winner!

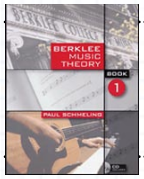
Conclusion

Craft is alive and well in Nashville. The songs still reach out to the listeners, and work well as they are designed to do. They are "calling cards" that invite the listener to take a closer look at an artist. Perhaps we as an industry have been too eager to pack the whole album with "calling cards" and failed to go a little deeper. In my life, after the initial attraction of the "hit single" I would go buy (yes, I said buy) the album or CD, and listen at my leisure to get to know more about the artist. Most of the time it was just OK. Some of the time it was magical.

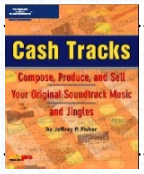
Longevity for an artist has always revolved around a song, and that song always has to invite the listener "in." Many thanks to the men and women who invited us in during 2008.

RECOMMENDED READING

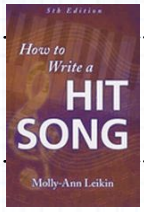
6 STEPS TO SONGWRITING SUCCESS, REVISED & EXPANDED BY JASON BLUME
This book provides a concise analysis of the six steps essential to songwriting success – developing successful song structures, writing effective lyrics, composing memorable melodies, producing successful demos, taking care of business, and developing persistence.
http://musicbooksplus.com/steps-songwriting-success-revised-expandedb-p-5274.html



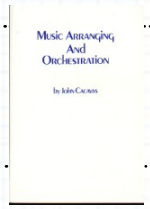
BERKLEE MUSIC THEORY – BOOK 1 BY PAUL SCHMELING
Berklee Music Theory features rigorous, hands-on, "ears-on" practice exercises that help you explore the inner workings of music, presenting notes, scales, and rhythms as they are heard in pop. jazz and blues.
http://musicbooksplus.com/bberklee-music-theory-book-p-5860.html



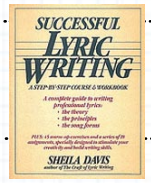
CASH TRACKS: COMPOSE, PRODUCE, AND SELL YOUR ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK BY JEFFREY FISHER
Learn everything you need to know to make jingles and score video productions with this new, updated second edition of this popular book.
http://musicbooksplus.com/cash-tracks-compose-produce-sell-your-original-soundtrack-p-6455.html



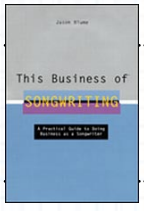
HOW TO WRITE A HIT SONG, FIFTH EDITION BY MOLLY-ANN LEIKIN
Covering all the essentials of craft and marketing for launching and sustaining a long, successful writing career.
http://musicbooksplus.com/bhow-write-song-fifth-editionb-p-11558.html



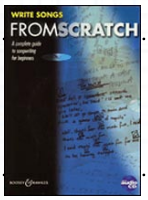
MUSIC ARRANGING AND ORCHESTRATION BY JOHN CACAVAS
Topics incude: writing at the piano; the arranger as a composer; modulation; scoring for strings; writing for woodwinds; arranging for brass … and much more.
http://musicbooksplus.com/bmusic-arranging-orchestrationb-p-1781.html



SUCCESSFUL LYRIC WRITING BY SHEILA DAVIS
The only practical self-contained lyric writing course available in book form, with an introduction to principles and techniques.
http://musicbooksplus.com/successful-lyric-writing-p-1168.html



THIS BUSINESS OF SONGWRITING BY JASON BLUME
This Business of Songwriting gives a detailed, comprehensive examination of business-related topics and issues that all songwriters need to understand.
http://musicbooksplus.com/bthis-business-songwritingb-p-7219.html



WRITE SONGS FROM SCRATCH BY CHRISTOPHER NORTON
Written by an expert songwriter and recorded by top artists, *Write Songs from Scratch* is the ideal choice for any aspiring songwriter.
http://musicbooksplus.com/write-songs-from-scratch-p-6754.html

MusicBooks+Plus

www.musicbooksplus.com • 1-800-265-8481