

LEARNING MADE EASY



2nd Edition

Songwriting

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand



Explore songwriting
genres to find your fit

Try your hand at writing lyrics
and discover your own voice

Create demo recordings
of your latest songs

Jim Peterik

Grammy-winning songwriter

Dave Austin

Former record label executive and manager

Cathy Lynn

Screenwriter

Foreword by Kara DioGuardi

Hit songwriter & former *American Idol* judge



Songwriting

2nd Edition

by Jim Peterik, Dave Austin, Cathy Lynn

FOREWORD BY Kara DioGuardi

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Foreword

People ask me all the time, “How did you become a successful writer?” If I were to answer that in the most simple way possible, I’d have to say that it comes down to three things — WORK, honesty and feeling.

I put the word WORK in capital letters to show you just how important this part of the equation is. Every successful songwriter knows that sometimes you write hundreds of songs before you stumble upon anything great, and because of that, WORK in some cases is more important than talent. I wrote for seven years before I made a dollar. And I learned that every bad song you write gets you closer to a good one. As my famous songwriter friend Marti Fredrickson says, “It took me 47 years to write that song.” (By the way, he’s 47; and he co-wrote “Jaded” for Aerosmith, “Sorry” for Buck Cherry, and “Love Remains the Same” for Gavin Rossdale.)

WORK can mean many different things — from the actual creation of the song, to finding the right person to produce or sing it, to networking so that someone in a position to promote it can actually hear it. You may have the best song in your pocket, but if you don’t hit the ground running, it will always just be that — a song in your pocket.

If you want to be a professional songwriter, you should write every day and spend every waking moment finding others who inspire you and are dedicated to a life of music. Every good songwriter I know lives, eats, and breathes music. When they are not engaged in the important task of experiencing life to have something to draw upon, they are honing their craft. A great song is where inspiration meets craft, and craft can be developed only through hard WORK.

If you like a lot vacations, professional songwriting is not for you. If you’re feelings are hurt easily, co-writing is not for you. And if you can’t stand rejection, don’t even think of songwriting as a career. If you think this foreword is harsh, the music business is harsher. It’s my intention to steer you away from this profession now and save you the heartache. I’d rather see you admit to yourself that songwriting is more of a hobby than what you want to do for work.

Now for honesty. Your parents had good reasons for telling you to always be honest. If I had been honest with myself 20 years ago, I probably would not have gone to Duke University to be a lawyer. I got a late start writing songs, and that

was only because no one believed in me enough to allow me to record their songs to showcase my voice. At 22, in the middle of the Bronx, in a crappy apartment, against the sound of two barking pit bulls, I penned my first song with Dave Citron called “Show Me.”

It was horrid.

My verses described what I thought some guy was feeling. (I was into him, but he was not into me, by the way.) It was easier to fabricate someone else’s truth than to deal with my own.

I did not have a handle on my own emotions and, therefore, could not write anything true. It took me years to develop an internal dialogue with myself that I could trust. Hit songwriting is about putting your real personal experiences into melodies and words that are universal and easily digested. You can embellish on your experiences, but there should always be truth at the core. How else would you be able to convey feelings or emotions in a way that the listener could relate? Put your passion for songwriting into exploring your emotions and thoughts. It will be the best therapy you never paid for.

Here comes the part you can’t teach — *feeling*. When a particular subject or piece of music moves you, makes you cry, and brings you to your knees, open your heart — or the *channel*, as I call it — and listen. That’s your soul talking to you. And when that happens in combination with your craft, you are on your way to a BIG song. The more feeling you put into a song, the more the listener gets out of it.

My hope for each and every one of you reading this book is that you, too, will experience the joy and healing that songwriting has given to me. And remember, it’s not the money or the hits that should be motivating you — it’s the music!!!!

GOD SAVE THE MUSIC!!! ROCK ON!

Kara DioGuardi

Grammy-nominated hit songwriter.
Executive VP of Talent/Office of the Chairman, Warner Brothers Records.
Her songs have appeared on over 150 million records.
Over 40 charting radio/retail singles.
Fifteen BMI Pop Awards; Pop Writer Of The Year in 2007.
Three hundred songs released on major labels; 171 of them on platinum albums.

Introduction

Welcome to *Songwriting For Dummies*, 2nd Edition. If you're merely flipping through the pages of this book right now at the local bookstore (looking for the fast track to writing a sure-fire hit), do yourself a favor and buy it. You can thank us later! There's simply too much information packed into this baby to get a hold of in one sitting. If you've already purchased this book and are sitting down ready to discover the ins and outs of songwriting, congratulations! It's going to be a great adventure. We're riding the wave of a great songwriting revolution. What better time to be a part of this business? The record labels are still looking for memorable, meaningful, and long-lasting songs for their artists — songs that make a difference — not disposable ditties (at least this is our reverent prayer), and now there is a whole new world to explore since the digital revolution has firmly planted its feet on the ground. What you'll find in this book is a practical and lighthearted look at that impractical and unnecessarily serious subject of writing a song. We hope you get some encouragement and inspiration from our labor of love. We know that with a little work and dedication you can unleash the creativity inside you. Feel free to share it with a friend — who knows, he may be your own Bernie Taupin!

About This Book

This book was written to give you a hands-on, behind-the-scenes look at the noble pursuit of songwriting. It offers basic songwriting concepts, as well as shortcuts and slightly unconventional methods not necessarily found in other books. It's coming from authors who have "been there" and "done that" in all areas of the music business. This isn't for people who dream about writing a song, this is for those who are ready to dig in and try it. The book is also meant to be useful to the already up-and-running or successful writer who'd like to refocus his creativity or gain a little validation on what he's been doing right all along. The text of the book covers all aspects of the business and the pleasure of songwriting from the collection of ideas to the creation of a song, from creating a demo of your song to assembling a team for its marketing. It includes not only the nuts and bolts of constructing a song, but the spiritual or mystical side that gives it wings. It includes a Practice Makes Perfect section at the ends of Chapters 2 through 11 geared toward honing your songwriting skills with methods of practicing your newfound skills. It includes the latest resources to go beyond the bindings of this book and explore the outer reaches of cyberspace and the inner reaches of your limitless imagination. Above all, it debunks the idea that you have to be a virtuoso

on a particular instrument or that you need years of music theory and schoolin' to write a song. All you really need are ears, a good imagination, a lot of determination, and a (reasonably) organized procedure in order to make your bid at enhancing the world through music.

Foolish Assumptions

We're assuming that you are in some way curious about how a song gets written. Maybe you're wondering if you have what it takes to write a song yourself. Perhaps you're looking for the next step in getting your song from your hard drive to the shelves of the record stores. In any case, we don't assume that you're a musical genius or that you have astounding technique, or any technique for that matter, on a particular instrument. Our whole premise is that anyone can write a song with the right inspiration, methods, and collaborators. The genius in writing a song is your ability to bring all your skills into a common focus to create a verse and chorus that, in addition to yourself, the whole world wants to hear.

How This Book Is Organized

This book is organized into six parts, which cover everything from writing lyrics to selling your songs.

Part 1: So You Want to Be a Songwriter

The first section of this book asks you to identify and assess your ambitions, prior experience, expectations, and preconceptions regarding songwriting. You'll take an inventory of the talents and skills you can bring to your own songwriting experience. We will explore the vast smorgasbord of styles to choose from when writing and arranging your songs, and assess which genres suit your style of writing. This part also shows you how to capture song ideas so they can't escape, and gives you an introduction to song structure with a discussion on song forms.

Part 2: Unleashing the Lyricist in You

This part is dedicated to channeling the "word power" and expressiveness within you into the lyrics of your next song. We give you some concrete tips for writing lyrics, including the definition of a hook and where to put it and how to use rhyme in your lyrics. We also show you the successful lyrics of many popular songs, telling you exactly what the lyricist did to achieve greatness.

Part 3: Creating Memorable Music

This part addresses how rhythm, chords, and melody come together to make a great song. All these ingredients are critical to a song's success — and we make sure you don't neglect any of them. We also explore the “cheating” side of town through the use of shortcuts and cool technological advancements.

Part 4: Cooperation, Collaboration, and Community

Our “Three C's” of songwriting might just be the ticket that “lights your fire” and starts you on your way towards a long and successful career as a songwriter. You can collaborate to write the next pop hit or try your hand at country or R&B. You can also write for many different types of arenas, such as the stage, screen, and television. The possibilities are virtually endless as you build your community spirit — just think how awesome your demos will be once you master the art of cooperation.

Part 5: Getting Down to Business

In this part, we examine how the words *music* and *business* can shake hands and be friends. From finding out just who the business players are to filling out paperwork, and from creating goals to meeting deadlines, it's the part you must force yourself to read to assure that your song is on track and being properly looked after once it's created.

Part 6: The Part of Tens

In this section we review some of the great songs throughout history. We also throw in some highly prudent and useful contracts for good measure.

Icons Used in This Book

For Dummies books are nothing if not user-friendly and fun. To this end, we have included various graphic icons in the left margins of the pages. These clever little cartoons give you an immediate “heads up” to nuggets of truth you need right away, plus snacks you can choose to save for later.



TIP

This is a lesson we've learned in our decades of experience. It can be as crass as a shortcut to success, or as heady as a gateway to your soul.



REMEMBER

This icon is the mother of all icons. This is the reminder of what you should already know through reading this book. Fight the temptation to slam down the book and cry, “Give me some credit for brains, ma!”



WARNING

This needlessly ominous icon is reserved mainly for blatant no-no’s in either the creation of a song or with the business and legalities of songwriting.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

This is the icon that tells you there is more to know if you really feel the need. However, you have our permission to skip over this stuff if you’d rather stay immersed in the creative flow of an artistic mindset. For those of you who love gadgets and want more techie info, these are the areas to note.



WORDS OF
WISDOM

This icon indicates a “pearl of wisdom” or a quotation from one of the top experts in the various areas of the music business that we have corralled just for you.



OFF THE
RECORD

This icon indicates the under-our-breath, down-and-dirty truth that you now have the dubious privilege of knowing. With whom you share these boardroom secrets is entirely up to you, but please, act responsibly!

Where to Go from Here

Please note that it’s okay to skip around in this book. Although we had some crazy notion about a logical unfolding of information, truth be told, it works even if you throw all the chapters into a blender and hit “frappé.”

Beyond the Book

In addition to what you’re reading right now, this book comes with a free access-anywhere Cheat Sheet. To get this Cheat Sheet, go to www.dummies.com and search for “Songwriting For Dummies, 2nd Edition” by using the Search box.

1

So You Want to Be a Songwriter

IN THIS PART . . .

We all have songs inside us just waiting to come out. The real key to songwriting is not only figuring out the combination to what unlocks that music within you, but also developing methods to capture these little gems of inspiration before they fly away. And like most gifts, there is some assembly required, so it's vital to discover the what-goes-where of a song. Also important is knowing where your taste in music might lie? Are you heavy metal, easy listening, or one of the hundreds of shades in between? It's easy to argue that a great song is a great song; still, every song seems to live and breathe best in a particular style, or *genre*. In this part, we not only look at many of the different directions your song can take, we give you everything you need to get started in your songwriting journey.

- » Gathering song ideas from anywhere
- » Organizing and tracking your thoughts and inspirations
- » Documenting your ideas

Chapter **1**

Capturing That Solid-Gold Nugget

This book is for everyone who shares the dream of harnessing the songwriting power we all have within. You've come to the right place if your heart keeps telling you to write a song, but your mind is uncertain as to the process of the craft or what's required to create a really good song. You bought the right book if you're wondering how to collect and organize your ideas. You have found the right resource if you have pieces of songs lying in notebooks and on countless cassettes but can't seem to put the pieces together. This book is for you if you have racks of finished song demos but don't know what to do next to get them heard. When you know the elements that make up a great song and how the pros go about writing one, you can get on the right path to creating one of your own.

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

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

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

Ground Zero — Before You Write a Single Note

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

Is formal music training a must?

Music training is not a prerequisite for songwriting. However, if you don't at least have some ability on the piano or guitar to help put the ideas from your head into some tangible form, you *may* be at a disadvantage. (Notice we said "may." Funnyman Mel Brooks composed the musical score to his hit Broadway show *The Producers* by humming the melodies into a tape recorder and having someone translate that into musical notes on a page.) Even if you're solely a lyricist (the one who puts the words to the music), it may be helpful to you and your collaborator (the person writing the music to go with your words) if you have a working knowledge of a musical instrument. Musical ability could also help you with the rhythm of your words and the structure of your songs. That being said, even though musical expertise is advantageous, it is not required by any means.

Although songwriting is more than just an assembly line of components to be bolted together, it doesn't hurt to know what's available in the "parts bin." A song is made up of chords (a combination of two or more tones sounded together in harmony), a melody (the arrangement of single tones in sequence — the part you sing), a rhythm (the beat or pulse of the song), and words (often called *lyrics* in the context of a song). Many successful songwriters excel in one area or another. Rare individuals can do it all. Even the ones who are a songwriting one-man band often choose to collaborate with others to come up with that magical song that comes

from a blend of styles and personalities. It's your task at hand, if you are challenged in a given area, to find writers to complete your vision and contribute the expertise you lack.



WORDS OF
WISDOM

Most of what I know about songwriting, I learned by being a fan of music. Truly the best teacher is listening. I emulated the styles of songs that inspired me, and gradually, over the course of many years, integrated these influences into a style of my own. The Beatle's songwriting, to cite a notable example, was heavily influenced by the American rock 'n' roll of Chuck Berry, Carl Perkins, The Everly Brothers, and Little Richard. The Beatles created songs by absorbing those influences and adding their own unique personalities. The fact that they could barely read music hardly mattered at all. They had ears!

— JIM PETERIK, PERFORMER, SONGWRITER, AND MULTI-INSTRUMENTALIST
FOR THE BANDS IDES OF MARCH AND SURVIVOR, PLUS WRITER OF
HITS FOR .38 SPECIAL, SAMMY HAGAR, AND OTHERS

Studying music theory, history, and arrangement can only enhance your abilities as a writer, but it would be a mistake to infer that formal training is a necessity to write a great song. Music appreciation classes can open your eyes and ears to what you should be listening for in songs, but you really don't need anyone to tell your foot when to start tapping or your lips to break out into a big smile when the chorus hits — that's just the power of great music. Start with your love for the songs you hear and then tap into all you have to express in your soul.

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



OFF THE
RECORD

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

— JIM PETERIK, WRITER OF 18 BILLBOARD TOP 10 HITS INCLUDING THE
PERENNIAL FAVORITE "EYE OF THE TIGER: FEATURED IN ROCKY III



TIP

Although some songwriters do well with the trial-and-error method, the more you know about music, the better chance you have to write a great song. The more adept you can become at an instrument, the easier it will be to create and demonstrate the ideas in your head. You do not need to enroll in a college course to study music, because there are other ways to get instruction in music theory, composition, instrumental performance, and voice at a per-session rate. Qualified, reasonably priced private teachers can be located through your local music shop or record store or in the back pages of the local “freebie” entertainment newspaper and through a simple Internet search. Finding someone who inspires you will make songwriting a lot easier.

Being prepared when inspiration strikes

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



TIP

When a melody or a lyrical idea pops into your head, make sure you have a way of freezing it in time. Try to carry with you, at all times, a notebook to jot down ideas and a digital recorder to capture your musical phrases. Never fool yourself into thinking you’ll remember the ideas when you get home. And don’t think that “If it’s really so great of an idea, I won’t forget it.” Some great songs will never be heard because the songwriter couldn’t reconstruct some once-in-a-lifetime moment of inspiration. Those cool ideas that you know you’ll never forget will be “dust in the wind” if you don’t have the discipline to write them down or hum them into the recorder when they hit.



REMEMBER

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

Finding you own inner voice and expression

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

In the meantime, take a look at the unique ways you look at and feel about the world around you, the moods you project in life, and all the emotions will undoubtedly be projected in your songs. These emotions are a great place to tap into when you are looking for ideas and inspirations to begin your songs. In other words, write about what you know and feel, and you're sure to come up with something unique (because even though you thought your mother was lame when she said it, there really is only one you).



WORDS OF
WISDOM

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

— GEOFF BYRD, SINGER-SONGWRITER, PRODUCER, AND CREATOR
OF [THESONGWRITINGACADEMY.COM](http://thesongwritingacademy.com)

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



REMEMBER

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

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

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

CAPTURING THAT LOVING FEELING

In a survey based on performances, sheet music, and record sales, *Variety*, the entertainment trade paper, once named the 100 most popular songs of all time. An analysis of the themes of those 100 titles showed that about 85 percent of them were love songs. And many of those blockbuster golden oldies are still generating new recordings after 50 years.



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

— JIM PETERIK, WRITER OF 18 BILLBOARD TOP 10 HITS



Whatever moves me to write a song is usually a pretty good reason. I can really only write about what I feel in my heart. On September 11, 2001, I received a call from a good friend of mine who works on the rooftops in Manhattan. He was just witness to one of the great tragedies of our or any time, as he heard a huge explosion and watched helplessly as the first of two jet aircrafts crashed into the World Trade Center. He called me and said that when he looked around, all of his co-workers had tears streaming down their faces. I said to him, "This has got to be the day America cried." As I watched the images of destruction all that day, I started to sing a melody that seemed to mirror my emotions at the time. The next day I called up my good buddy Jim Peterik and told him that there was a song to be written here that could possibly do some good. I sang him a piece of the melody I had in my head. The first words out of Jim's mouth were, "In the shadow of the Statue of Liberty" to which I added, "In the torchlight of the land of the free." From there, with the help of Ma Bell, digital recording, and the grace of God, a song was born. We are proud to say that the fruits from our labor of love became the title song to The Day America Cried album, helped raised some money, and hopefully expressed a few emotions locked in so many hearts. That's the power of a song.

— JOHNNY VAN ZANT, LEAD SINGER OF LYNRYD SKYNYRD AND VAN ZANT