

# ON THE WRITE TRACK

The Write Stuff section of *In Tune* looks at songwriting and composing from a variety of angles. **BY KATE KOENIG**

“Songwriting is much like trying to catch a wild animal,” Sting told *American Songwriter* magazine in late 2016, following the release of his latest album, *57th & 9th*. “Only you cannot kill the beast—you have to somehow trick him into being captured. And you can never use the trick twice. There is no repeatable method. Every time it is different.”

As one of the most versatile and acclaimed songwriters of the 20th century, with 16 GRAMMY awards to his name, Sting knows a thing or two about the art of songwriting. And yet, if the above quote is to be believed, that knowledge seems to boil down to *not* knowing. In other words, the only rule is that there are no rules.

We at *In Tune Monthly* agree with Sting’s assessment. That’s why our department called The Write Stuff, which is devoted to songwriting and composition, doesn’t get too hung up on rules. Practical applications

do get discussed, and we do think it’s important that beginning students of songwriting are made aware of some essential guidelines. But our preference is to offer a wide mix of content over a season. Some articles give readers new ways of thinking about the craft; others provide advice that they can put to use as soon as an opportunity arises; others encourage them to learn by observing the habits of successful songwriters. All, ideally, will point them in the direction of gradually discovering what works best for them.

Here are summaries of our three favorite recent Write Stuff articles, along with some suggestions on how to best use them in your classroom.

## MAKING THE TEAM

In the November 2016 issue of *In Tune*, the focus of The Write Stuff is on how to write



## Making the Team

**F**ROM GEORGE AND IRA GERSHWIN in the 1930s to the Beatles’ Lennon and McCartney, Motown’s Holland-Dozier-Holland, and modern conglomerates like Stargate (see our “Made in Sweden” feature), the songwriting team has been a cornerstone of popular music. But finding the right co-writing partners isn’t easy. It usually takes a lot of trial and error, leading to a lot of songs that are just okay. If you’re interested in going down the collaborative path, here are six tips to help increase your chances for success.

**Seek out someone with complementary skills.** You may be a better collaborator than a solo writer. A lot of us are either strong lyricists or more facile with melodies. So co-writing, like all relationships, becomes a matter of finding someone who completes you musically. How do you do this? Go out, hear bands, meet people, let it be known you’re looking to collaborate. From this networking, opportunities will emerge. Also, don’t be afraid to approach someone whose writing you admire. Don’t

be pushy, but let them know you’d be honored if they’d consider writing with you. From a business standpoint, it’s good to agree up front on how you’ll split ownership of a song. Unless it’s some special circumstance, most co-writes are even splits (50-50 for two writers, a third each for three, a quarter each for four, and so on).

**Bring some snippets.** Writing sessions go more smoothly if you both bring ideas to the table: bits of melody, a title, a few lines of lyric. Think of it as a creative potluck

**Songwriting doesn’t have to be a solitary occupation. Here are six suggestions for forming and maintaining a co-writing partnership.**

dinner. Although great songs can emerge from scratch, that’s usually the result of being more experienced and at ease with your co-writer. But if you have four or five snippets in play, which do you follow? The one both of you can best relate to. Trust your gut.

**Stay positive.** Del Close, founder of the Second City comedy troupe, had a basic rule of improv: Just say yes. If your partner throws an idea your way, embrace it, then toss it back. This idea of the creative volley is at the heart of co-writing. Back-and-forth energy helps propel an idea forward, and sidesteps the internal editors that might keep you from voicing an idea. Nothing kills a session faster than a few repeats of “No, I don’t like that.” You can be more critical later in the writing process; at the start, just get that ball in the air.

**Be diplomatic but decisive.** Making decisions in the moment is crucial for co-writing. The basic rule is that whatever’s best for the song is the right decision, but the problem is that egos are always involved. You may become attached to a clever rhyme or chord change that doesn’t really belong in the song. At those moments, you have to learn to let go. Always listen closely to the song. It’ll tell you what it needs.

**Don’t rush.** In Nashville, where I live, it’s common for professional writers to finish a song in three to four hours. Sometimes, on a really good day, that happens and the song turns out great. But not often. So don’t be afraid to say, “This is a good first draft. Let’s keep working on it separately, then meet again later to put the finishing touches on it.”

**Expect nothing and hope for the best.** That’s a good approach to both songwriting and life. **T**

**Bill DeMain’s** recent credits include co-writing all 10 songs on Teddy Thompson and Kelly Jones’ critically acclaimed 2016 album *Little Windows*.

**You can be critical later in the writing process. At the start, just get that ball in the air.**

songs with a collaborator.

Collaboration is a crucially important skill to learn as an artist. Stereotypically, artists struggle with ego. Of course, artistic personalities are endlessly nuanced, but there is some truth to the stereotype: It’s hard to have a special creative mind and, at the same time, be able to share creative control with someone else. It’s even harder to do this when you’re young and haven’t yet had the opportunity to prove yourself, or receive formal validation of your talent from peers and mentors.

By breaking the collaboration process down to its nuts and bolts, this Write Stuff article can provide students with some insight into how to get past these hurdles. It points out the advantages of working with someone

who has skills that complement yours, coming to songwriting sessions prepared with rough ideas, being receptive to the rough ideas of your partner, and knowing when to let go of an idea that you may like—but may not be what’s best for the music. These skills—recognizing your own strengths and weaknesses, sharing responsibility, respecting others’ thoughts, and putting your ego aside for the sake of an all-around better experience—are ones we’re taught from the time we first learn to work with other people. They’re also skills that lead to great musical collaboration, and the likelihood of even greater songs.

Share these concepts with your students. You can also have the class participate in an exercise inspired by the article: Divide the students into groups of two, and assign each of the groups to write a verse and chorus of an original song. If possible, ask the students who among them identify as lyricists and who identify as composers, and pair them accordingly. Afterward, discuss with them how they felt about the experience. If your class has access to computers or other devices, there are a number of software applications that can help with this exercise. For the composer half of the duo, digital audio workstations (DAWs) like Audacity, GarageBand, and Pro Tools may come in handy. For the lyricists, there’s MasterWriter, a program that combines several useful tools including a thesaurus, a rhyming dictionary, and an alliterative dictionary.

**DISSECTING THE (EAR)WORM**

The January 2017 installment of The Write Stuff, an article titled “Dissecting the (Ear)worm,” examines what makes catchy songs so catchy, referencing a recent academic study that identified significant formal similarities between many hit melodies.

Every person—musician or not—has an opinion about pop music. Some love it shamelessly, while others might prefer major oral surgery over hearing that Top 40 hit *one more time*. We’ve all had songs get stuck in our head, and have probably wondered why—especially when we might not even like the song.

“Made in Sweden,” another article from

**AN APP FOR THAT**  
Software applications that can help with both solo and collaborative songwriting include Avid’s digital audio workstation program Pro Tools (top) and MasterWriter (bottom).

the November 2016 *In Tune*, discusses the work of Swedish songwriter/producer Max Martin—someone who’s arguably not only dissected the earworm, but harnessed it and trained it to earn him millions (a hard thing to do to a worm after you’ve dissected it!). For songwriters, the thought of Martin and his 22 No. 1 hits can lead to an almost moral question: Does writing a song by adopting a commercially successful formula make it art? And by extension, is it honest to write melodies using similarly tried and true methods?

In the end, it’s not really about the process or methods you might use to finish a song, or even about the money it makes—it’s about how it makes listeners feel when it’s done. (Listen to the Backstreet Boys’ “I Want It That Way,” co-penned by Martin, and see if it doesn’t entertain while also burrowing into your head.) With that in mind, students can absorb the information in “Dissecting the (Ear)worm” and apply it whenever they so choose. As the article points out, not every hit song is an earworm.

For an exercise, have students come up with two or three songs that get stuck in their heads, and analyze their catchiness



using the criteria mentioned in the article. How well do they fit those criteria? Do the songs that get stuck in their heads also happen to be their favorites? Would they want to write songs like these? Why or why not?

**JEAN-MICHEL JARRE**

French electronic composer Jean-Michel Jarre is the subject of our third and final Write Stuff example, from the March 2017 issue of *In Tune*. This article, the most theoretical of the three, features an interview with Jarre that exposes a lot of his ideas on composition, including his belief in the benefits of self-limitation. In his opinion, giving yourself fewer options at the start of a project can lead to more creative results.

Before Jarre began work on his nineteenth album, *Oxygène 3*, he decided that he would only record on eight tracks (meaning instruments or sounds to an individual song). He then started the process by writing pieces only for what he considered the “middle” of the album, rather than worrying about beginnings and endings. Within these boundaries, he took an organic approach—for him, melodic ideas tend to suggest a defined structure, whereas sonic or textural ideas inspire him to write more in the abstract.

The concept of setting limits has a great deal of resonance in modern culture. Those

born in the ’60s, ’70s, and ’80s grew up in a world governed by curators: To discover new music, they looked to the radio DJ, the magazine editor, the staff at their local music store, their parents, siblings, friends, and teachers. Today, young people are submerged in information that’s often only curated by the flimsy and impersonal filters of YouTube, streaming platforms, and social media. In a world where there don’t seem to be any limits to what you can access, use, and do with technology, setting your own limits can be, as Jarre says, creatively stimulating, even therapeutic.

Compared to the other Write Stuff articles, the profile on Jarre is far less direct when it comes to offering advice. Students can mimic Jarre’s writing techniques, or just wonder about why it is they work for him. Do they agree with or relate to his idea



of setting artistic limits? Why or why not? Have them write down and/or share with the class an example from their own lives of how they were more creative when they had more limits in place.

**DO THE WRITE THING**

What makes a great songwriter? The right mix of talent, confidence, and experience. By providing students with more angles from which to observe the writing process, we hope to help them come closer to learning their own personal tips and techniques—ultimately, the only “rules” that matter. T

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