

How Do You Know When You've Finished Writing A Song?

By Pat & Pete Luboff

Leonardo da Vinci painted six Mona Lisa's. Five of them are under the one who smiles so enigmatically at the Louvre. Perhaps her secret is that she was the one who told old Leo he'd finally caught her on canvas. Some of the hard working songwriters in our workshops bring back four or more re-writes on a song, each time getting more feedback about what's working and what's bumping the song off its track. When we feel that the song is all it can be, we give it The Fork Award. We draw a big fork on the lyric sheet that stands for, "Put a fork in it, it's done!"

We asked the great Don Wayne who wrote "Country Bumpkin" and "Saginaw Michigan," how do you know when the song is done? Even after more than 50 years of writing great songs, his answer was, "That's a tough question." Here's how we answer it for ourselves:

1. SEEK INFORMED FEEDBACK: We always bring our songs to our workshops when we've "finished" writing them. (We know they're not finished really.) We wrote the song to communicate a particular message. The message is not complete until the receiver of the message understands it. So, we play the song and ask the writers in our group to tell us what they got and didn't get from it. No matter how well you try to be a stranger to your song, you cannot totally put yourself in the shoes of that person who has no idea what you're talking about and needs to get all their understanding from what's actually in the song.

Notice we said “informed” feedback. Your Mom is going to love everything you do. Your friends will say, “Gee, that’s great.” Even your fellow songwriters will say, “Nice song.” Unless you are specifically in a situation where people understand that you are seeking and receptive to detailed creative responses, you won’t get them.

We loved it last week when one of our writers was on the receiving end of this information and she made faces and whined in a good-natured way as her favorite lines were unanimously not understood. We’ve found it’s best to say nothing and concentrate on listening when we’re getting that kind of response. It IS hard to take, but it’s vital to the life of the song. Defending the song doesn’t make sense in that situation. We’ve come to see lately that we can’t judge in the moment whether the feedback we’re getting is good, bad or indifferent. That’s why we have everyone write things down on the lyric sheets and we take notes ourselves. The really smart writers in the group bring in little cassettes and record the discussion of their songs. That way, they can capture musical suggestions as well. Days later, we’ll look at the lyric sheets, try on some of the suggestions and find that ideas we resisted in the moment are the solutions!

Make the changes you feel are the right ones and bring it back. Chances are there will still be more areas of confusion to straighten out. Make the changes and bring it back again! When the response you get is that everyone understands the message you intended to communicate both lyrically and musically, the song might just be done. Or not!

2. SING THE SONG, PREFERABLY IN A PUBLIC SITUATION: When you sing a song in public, you’re going to make mistakes. You’ll sing the wrong note, or the wrong word. Then you’ll realize that they’re actually the right ones! Something

in you knows better than you do what that word should be and it leaps out when you're maybe a little nervous and not in total control. Do this more than once to give yourself plenty of opportunities to make the right mistakes.

3. TAKE SOME MORE TIME, IF YOU HAVE IT: Give yourself some time between the writing of the song and the making of the demo. Live with the song a while and see if you still feel it's all as strong as it can be. You know inside when something isn't working but it may take you some time to admit it to yourself. You could ask some non-songwriting friends to listen to it and tell you what message they got. We have a cousin who is great at this. If he responds with the message we intended, we know we've done what we set out to do. Go away from the song for a while and then look at it with fresh eyes. Does something jump out at you as not serving the song? We've found that sometimes that it takes months after we thought the song was done for us to be ready to admit that something just isn't working.

4. LET IT GO, PART 1: If, after all the above steps, you still feel the song isn't quite living up to its potential, chalk it up to a learning experience. You will have already written other songs while this one was ripening. Some fruit just goes from not ripe to mealy! If the song isn't cutting it, don't cut it! Don't make a demo of it. Save whatever pieces of it you might use in another song and move on. We once read a letter from a songwriter who had struggled with a collaborator and one song for ten years! Another songwriter told us he had written one song and wouldn't write another until his very first song was successful. Don't hang onto the song trying to make it work when it won't. You are an endless source of creativity and your next song will be better because of what you learned from this one. You have to write a lot of not-so-good and good songs to get to a great one.

5. PLAN AHEAD FOR FUTURE RE-WRITES WHEN YOU MAKE YOUR DEMO:

This saves the time and expense of a whole new demo. If you have your own studio, you can edit, add bars, change chords or vocals at will. But if you're paying for a demo, be sure you also walk away with a tracks mix minus the vocals, so you will be able to take that somewhere else to put another vocal on it. Tracks only mixes are also useful for performing or for an artist who wants to use your tracks. To have just one line over-dubbed if you can access the same singer, have the original studio save your song in document format so that later someone using the same program (Performer, Pro Tools, Roland VS 2480, etc), could access it. If your original tracks are analog, they can be dumped into a digital workstation.

6. LET IT GO, PART 2: Should you be so lucky as to have a major artist want to record your song, as a friend of ours was recently, you may be asked to allow changes to that now perfectly completed song. Our friend let his song be changed and the result to all of us who knew the song before and after, was a much less powerful song. We saw our friend recently and asked him how he was feeling about it. His grin couldn't have been wider. Seems the money has just started to pour in.

Our short answer for the question, "How do you know when the song is done?" is: When the song communicates lyrically and musically everything you intended to communicate, it's done. Whether other people like your message really doesn't matter. You've done what you set out to do. Give yourself a pat on the back and put a fork in the song – it's done!