

# What to do BEFORE You Write a Song

By Pat & Pete Luboff

Take out the trash, sharpen all your pencils, clean the toilet, read your junk mail, clip your toenails...but seriously... Once you've gotten past your avoidance behavior, what you gotta do before you write a song is think!

We've listened to thousands of songs in our capacity as consultants, workshop leaders, Taxi screeners and judges for various songwriting contests. And, as Stephen King says about books in "On Writing" (which has many good transferable ideas to the songwriting process) we learn from every song. We learn either what to do or what not to do in our own writing. We remember distinctly the first time we learned about thinking before you write. A writer showed us a song in a workshop in Albuquerque. After we listened, we were nonplussed, so we asked, "What did you want us to feel about the person in the song?" We were amazed by his answer, "I hadn't thought about that."

Why are we writing songs if not to communicate feelings? How can we communicate a feeling if we haven't clarified it for ourselves? Let's face it, we're all nuts here and our brains are swarming with a primordial soup of confusion. Here comes that idea for a song... whoosh! It's gone if we don't write it down. We scribble it on napkin. Now we have the seed of what could be a mighty tree of international income! But what do we really mean by that idea and how can we set it so that the words show it in moving pictures and the melody is the perfect soundtrack? We got to ask ourselves a lot of questions.

Let us digress for a paragraph to tell you some back-story. We have developed a method for thinking through the process of writing a song. This was the serendipitous result of an experiment in “teaching by doing.” A group of writers who had been coming to our workshop in L.A. for more than a year agreed to try writing a song together, all 10 of them. Faced with the challenge of getting 10 minds on the same page at the same time, we were forced to talk about every little detail of the intention of the song. We were delighted with the first result of our efforts. The song was recorded by Sue Terry on her “Heart for the Broken” CD and has been used at Mother's and Father's Day celebrations, weddings and funerals. Maybe that was a fluke, so we tried again. And again, the song we wrote was strong and they just kept getting stronger. We took our show on the road and have since taught our “12 Steps to Building Better Songs” to groups all across the country, some as large as 100 and to kids as young as 6 with good results every time.

Back to the questions we need to ask ourselves. After the initial inspiration, if it is not a title, we need to ask ourselves: What is the title of this song? Why? How do you build a wheel without a hub? The title is the focal point of everything in the song. OK, there are some songs where the title appears not at all, or only at the end. But these are the exceptions. How do you ask for a song to be played on the radio or to buy a CD if you don't know the title? Can you imagine the impact of an interesting title on the professional listener who has to go through a box of hundreds of CDs?

Once you have your title, you can then ask yourself: What is the basic message of this song? We call this the TV Guide synopsis. Check out the back pages of the TV Guide for what we mean. Movies that cost millions of dollars to produce are reduced to one sentence on which you judge whether or not you'll watch. What is the one sentence that your song wants to get across?

In our 12 Steps workshops we'll get as many as 50 different ideas from one title. We pick the one we like the best, which is to say the one that makes us feel the best.

Having made that choice, we now can flush out some more of the 90% of the iceberg of the song that remains below the surface, but without which the song won't float. Who is singing? To whom is s/he singing? What just happened to make this person want to burst out with this emotional message? Where are they and who are they: age, gender, relationship, socio-economic status, geographical location, time of day, point in history? We go on with these questions until we have built real living breathing characters in our minds. If you make the singer a creep or a loser, which artist will be willing to take on that persona and sing that song?

Now that we have a general idea of the situation and the characters, we're ready to decide how we're going to express these ideas within a song structure. Some titles and ideas seem to call for a Verse/Chorus structure, others for Verse/Bridge and others could go either way. We pick one (for example, Verse/Chorus) and forge ahead, again using a cue from Hollywood: the storyboard. With each piece of the structure as a blank space to fill, we ask: Which part of the story are we going to tell in the first verse? What is the message of the chorus? What different thing can we say in the second verse that will move the story along and, hopefully, re-color the chorus when we hear it the second time? Does the song need a little bridge to add another thought? We answer these questions in plain English sentences, much like the general TV Guide synopsis. Now that we know what we're trying to say, we can go ahead and try to say it. Here's where the actual writing of lyrics starts. If you were that specific person in that particular situation, what would you honestly, from your heart, want to say?

And here's where we'll leave you, faithful readers, with our good wishes that you will Write On! Pat & Pete © Pea Pod Music