



SCA
Songwriting
...One Bard's Perspective

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Preface: "So you think you want to write a song..."

There are endless ways to accomplish this. Sometimes that very truth can be what holds you back; no one certain starting point. The purpose of this class is to afford you a sense of direction, give you an example formula to focus your writer's voice, and provide you with practical examples for comparative thought. I have included a packet on poetry techniques to help match the tenor of your meter to the feel of your subject. A list of suggested reading and some quick notes/highlights are also attached.

To follow is one step-by-step process I use when writing my songs. As there are infinite methods to find your voice and communicate your message, know that the following relates to how I accomplish my writing, and may not necessarily be best for you. My hope is that this format will give you a place to start which you can tweak to better fit your own artistic process.

Before I breakdown my songwriting methodology, I want to focus for a moment on inspiration-driven writing. Everyone is different and different concepts motivate and inspire us to share our takes on those concepts. When inspired, our words can find fluidity beyond our standard expression and touch the hearts of others, for good or ill. As a songwriter, you not only have the privilege of communicating some specific value or moral to a willing audience, but you have the opportunity to express *why* said concept is important to you. Whether you are playing devil's advocate or expressing your heartfelt opinion, you are given the floor to *say* something. Whether nonsensical or poignant, it's pretty cool!

Given this opportunity, it is important to consider your true meaning behind your writing; what thought you are trying to communicate. Filler lines, false rhymes, faulty word association, and other copouts reduce the integrity of your voice. It is like the difference between:

"I think that maybe it could be wrong, in selfish circumstances, to steal."

and

"A greedy thief sins."

If your desire is to show hesitation or a lack of confidence in your value, the first example may be ideal. Whatever your message, your poetry should be selected with purpose and care, and not just what comes easily to the mind and tongue. If you do not have to think about your poetry, message, or what you are actually trying to say, you are not likely going to communicate what you really feel on the subject. Being concise, poignant, and poetic is no small feat. The aspiration to attempt such is what makes songwriting in and of itself so honored and inspirational.

Having said that, it is important to point out this does not mean all of your music needs to have an academic flavor. Some of the most entertaining, comedic songs seem utterly simplistic. However, when written with care, and precision, they can endure just as well (if not more so) than their more serious brethren.

The secret is all in the communication; having a working, logical formula. It is the difference between:

“This one time, at bandcamp...”

and

“...you might be a redneck.”

Simplistic and fun does not mean haphazardly crafted. There are reasons good comedians can earn livings in comedy and poor comedians become comic-material fodder.

Now, I am not saying that sometimes you won't get lucky. You may be able to sit down and write a great song and have people love it. But I have yet to meet an honest writer who can create a first draft and, years later, not come back to it and say, “I could have made this better.”

One last concept before we begin. Inspiration can come from anywhere and anything. And when it does, I find it hits me hard. My muse, once inspired, can't shut up. Parts of that are my inherited OCD personality traits, but the rest is simply the nature of the beast. She just screams in my head until I forsake all else to try and appease her. If you consider the muse much like your psychological “id,” you can understand why your first draft can be all over the place (an in my case, seven million verses long!), full of fractured concepts and conflicting imagery. With all my talk of precision and technical craft, this first “Storm” session should not be forsaken.

When inspired, your muse will give you all the creative fodder you need (and then some) for a skillfully crafted song. The trick is taking all of that information, and communicating it coherently to a varied audience. Let the Muse have her say and then translate for her. In your enthusiasm to create, ensure that you are the rider who guides the path of the tale. The Muse is a powerful tool and without her, our music would be lackluster by comparison. But again, it is the skillful utilization of that tool that allows us to truly do ourselves and her justice.

My near-inability to be concise in written format now proven by this preface, I conclude by saying: Fun shouldn't be work and inspiration should come naturally, but true art takes deliberate effort. However talented you are, it takes skill to craft greatness. And why strive for anything less?

May your pens be deft, your minds sharp, and your Muse ever generous.

Step Overview

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- Draft 2, take a nap, final(-ish) Draft
10. Choosing a Melody
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Step Breakdown

Step 1: Finding your Muse: Identifying your Topic

Inspiration can come from anywhere. It can be driven by chance as in witnessing an impressive event or specifically selected as in a challenge or whimsical interest. For the purpose of this topic, I am going to break down one of my past songs. While I'll try to provide a myriad of different examples, this will give you a step by step overview of my process.

"Who Serve the Soldiers?" was inspired, as many of my songs are, by random chance. I've been writing songs about the honor of duty and the nobility of service for some time now, being inspired greatly by my father, a life-long soldier. This particular song came together because I was so founded in my understanding of my admiration for those who would sacrifice their lives for my freedom, whether I appreciated it or not.

I was driving home in rush-hour traffic, humming along randomly some new melody I was toying with, when I saw this bumper sticker. It read, "All give some, some give all. Go Army." The "duh" light went off in my head as I smugly flipped open my phone to record a half dozen experiments with the line in the melody I was playing with. By the time I got home, my Muse was in full tantrum mode and I went straight for paper and pen. I had my idea and I was off!

Step 2: Muse Storming: A.D.D. Imagery 101

Muse Storming is what I call Brainstorming on socially accepted crack. You know those old DARE commercials? Well, this is your brain (brainstorming); this is your brain on Muse (Muse Storming). Bare with me, my sense of humor is like funky cheese: you may not love it at first but in time you'll either learn to appreciate its unique flavor or gag it off.

Muse Storming is when you let go and let the Muse have her way with you. Write whatever comes to mind. Jump from idea to idea. Write down colors and shapes and scenery and smells and random, archaic words, and likely rhymes, and concepts, and

whatever else she's screaming in your mind's ear. Don't worry about making sense that comes later.

"All Gave Some and Some Gave All," instantly had images flying through my head. Veterans gave way to purple ribbons, gave way to the idea of sacrifice, gave way to the idea of our troupes overseas, loved ones remembering them now and before and later, and the yellow ribbon of memory for soldiers away at war, and on and on and on.

Once I got it all down I couldn't help but write down some scratch lyrics, very little of which I kept in the final draft. But it was all I could do to quiet my Muse before I could focus again.

A teacher and dear friend of mine, Mistress Adelaide de Beaumont, OP (currently residing in the kingdom of Ansteora), used to have what I fondly referred to as "music camp." I would fly out for a week or so and we'd do nothing but drink good coffee, bake some nifty, sweet concoction, and do music. I'd get training in vocals, work with Sir Kenneth (her husband) on recording software and guitar, and watch my poetry be bleed to death with red marker. As my work lay in pitiful shreds, I used to get so frustrated. It seemed for a while, no matter how hard I felt I had worked, I couldn't win.

Then she and Kenneth gave me this book and a concept that changed my poetical world. *TuneSmith* (in the suggested reading below) provided me a formula that allowed me to leap to a new level of writing I'd not known before. No longer were my songs 7-million verses long, no longer were my concepts riddled with contradictory imagery, and happily enough only 2/3rds of my work was now being shredded by Adelaide, whom I nicknamed in jest, "the evil editor."

What was this miracle revelation? Letter Writing.

Step 3: Letter Writing

Once all the creative foundation was laid, the form, I knew it was time to work on the function. The concept of *TuneSmith's* letter writing is simple. You write a letter.

Pick a perspective. You can do this as many times as you need until you get it right, in fact sometimes that's the perfect idea. You know how novel writers create back stories and personality charts for their characters? The reader may never know that Harry Potter's favorite color is green (or whatever) but that the writer knows that can help her write Harry Potter with a more intimate knowledge of who he is, how he'll respond to outside influences, and so on.

Just start writing. Pick someone you know. Put yourself in the character's perspective you're interested in, and start writing.

My dear Elishabeth,

I have done someone a great dishonor today. I was walking to the market, as you know we were planning on a banquet later and I felt the need to get a new shiny. I had just gotten an allowance of two coins and it was just the right amount for this beautiful bonnet I saw the other day, you know, the one you pointed to and said, "Ambra, I don't care if it's cheap. If you never wear it, what's the sense in buying it? Don't you have enough clutter?"

To which I replied, "Blaspheme! You can never have too much stuff! She who dies with the most accessories wins, mwahahahah!"

Anyways, I was walking to the market in proud defiance of your anti-packrat ways, when I came across this old man; a vagabond by the looks of it.

So he says to me, "Do you have any charity in you for a hungry wanderer?"

A part of me just KNEW he was going to spend whatever I gave him on wine, or waste it on some other random sin, and I told him so, continuing on without a backward glance.

I didn't think another thought on it. In fact, my day went particularly better from there on out. Though they'd sold my bonnet already, I found the lovely yellow ribbon that went with my dress, a shopping victory, indeed. And later that evening I'm dancing at the banquet and in walks this soldier the lady of the manor had taken in for the night. He was all spiffed up in his uniform (you KNOW how I love a man in uniform), and he was telling us all these stories of the front and his many acts of bravery. And he was funny! He had us all wrapped around his finger, a willing audience.

The evening grew on and eventually I got him enough alone to offer him a favor. I used that ribbon I told you about that I'd bought earlier at the market? It was new, and shiny, and pretty, and heart all a-glow I told him how taken I was with him and hoped he'd take my favor into battle with him for luck and a memory of me.

But then he told me how he didn't want something so kind from someone so cold as me. He told me he was heading back to his brigade the next morning and that he had been the man in the forest, worn from the road. When I told him I thought he was some random beggar, he said he didn't see how that mattered. He'd sacrificed his life, the hope of family and frivolity, so that I and mine could be safer. I'd never done anything to earn his charity but he would give his life freely for me because it was a soldier's duty to spare others from harm. But I was too concerned with my petty, civilian ways to save a starving man from an early grave.

Elee, I was shamed. He was right of course. Perspective came and punched me in the face. He was true to his word. He left the next morning. I tried to keep after him, to keep track of him but it wasn't easy. The other day I got a letter from his commander telling me how he'd fallen in battle, bravely. As if he could go any other way.

I'll never be able to undo what I've done or regain my honor in his sight. I will forever bear the shame of my selfishness, heightened by the comparison to one who gave his life to keep our land safer. As penance, though it is far from enough, I will bind my hair with that yellow ribbon from now on, and remember his sacrifice.

This is the lesson I have learned and what I write to warn you of that you will not make my mistake: "Think you so kindly on all those in need, and on those who would choose for to server. Honor each man with a soldier's intent, and the charity all men deserve."

*Your friend,
~Ambra*

Step 4: Determining your Message

Sending a first scratch lyric draft to my father (based on the above letter), he pointed out something very important. He reminded me that a good writer has the power to invoke an emotional response from their audience. First person meant that my audience could personalize the story. Though it was powerful to invoke shame, it was far more inspirational to invoke nobility. My story didn't match the message I was going for, and it easily could. I made the following changes:

...A part of me just KNEW he was going to spend whatever I gave him on wine or waste it on some other random sin, but I couldn't bear the chance that he might actually need it for food. I didn't really NEED a new bonnet and my father raised me to be generous so I tossed him one of my coins and continued on. Bonnet or no, I found this beautiful yellow ribbon that would work and was quite pleased; fashion extraordinaire and philanthropist all in a day, go me!

And

(Soldier:) "No greater gifts have I known than your charity, my good lady. But please, keep the ribbon instead as a reminder of me and never forget me.

Thus

A Yellow Ribbon/Memory tie in concept.

Now, this particular song was rare in that the chorus is now almost exactly what it first began as. Trust me, this almost never happens. But, being an army brat and raised by a green beret, I had one or two verbal logs in my head that fit the theme:

"All Gave Some and Some Gave All"

"Best of the Best"

"Be All That You Can Be"

Okay, so that last was pushing it. I was also just itching to add in my father's fealty speech. Ever since he first shared it with me when I was a child, it has moved me. Though I have used it as a constant with many of my soldier songs to date, I thought that in this venue I could really have it shine through:

"Honor, Duty, Kingdom, Loyalty, and Humility..."

So, as I had begun with a tale of shame to point out that we can too easily take for granted the sacrifice of our military soldiers and the freedoms they afford us (including

the freedom to be vapid and accessory oriented), I ended with a more inspirational telling of a sacrifice honored by good hearts on both sides.

I had found my message.

Clean-up and Concept Honing: Cutting the Fat

“Slice to Concise.” Be poetic, be artistic, have fun, but get to your point.

Review your work. While descriptive sounds and scents and notions lend character to a piece, beware the Mercedes Lackey approach. If you write a 300 page story in a thousand pages, you can't get mad at the speed reader. Imagery is crucial to a successful piece. It can also kill it.

It is hard, sometimes, to let go. There are lines or verses, or concepts that are just too awesome to scratch out. You are convinced they will make or break you as a writer and be the end all of how you are judged in the writing community. They will be the line that influences SCAdian song writing for the next decade, you're sure of it! But if it doesn't drive your underlying theme; if it distracts or over shadows your main message; if it doesn't serve the higher purpose of the song... LET IT GO!

Save it. Write it on colored paper and put it in a shrine box if you must until the right song comes along to unearth it once more and let it see the light of day it so justly deserves, but nix it. The nitty and the gritty can only endure so much fluff, however high-brow.

Never be afraid to reuse old homework and revamp it for your needs. If you've done hours of research and your newest piece has a similar flavor, see what concepts you can cross-reference.

In fact, it is a great idea, when starting a new piece, to review your old work and try to hone your own process, saving time, gleaning wisdom from the past, and stealing unused, archaic phraseology. Work smarter, not harder.

Box it Out: Outlining your Story Structure and Creating a Formula

This is arguably my favorite part. Take a highlighter or simply circle/box an outline around main concepts of your song. This will help condense (logically) key concepts of your song. This will also help you finish cutting the fat because it will make it painfully obvious if you have managed to write 3 paragraphs about “her golden hair and azure eyes” and only a verse about the actual plot. I'm not saying that couldn't fly and make a successful song, but the most important concept in songwriting is whatever “mistakes” you make, make them on purpose.

Poetry Formatting: Choosing the Tenor of your Voice

Now you have to choose how you're going to write it. If you write a song that has a horse or chase theme, $\frac{3}{4}$ is nice because it mimics the sound of hooves hitting the ground. If you are writing a war song, $\frac{4}{4}$ is a great time measure to write in for the simple reason that most people can clap/stomp along with minimal rhythm.

You could choose a period style or an ethnic style. You could choose to fashion it after another song. Be careful of that last as if the meter is too stereotypical of a genre you may give your song a connotation you don't intend.

Figure out the perspective of the main voice or message, and format your rhythm appropriately.

Also, beware of putting your emphasis on the wrong syllable. Just cause it fits the syllable count and you can squish it in, doesn't mean you won't sound fake when you say it. If you choose the path of "making it work" you will make it look like work and it won't flow. Your audience will be too busy thinking, "That's weird" to hear what you are saying next and it will throw the magic of the proverbial tapestry you're weaving off.

Writing: Draft 1

Draft 1. Inferring there will be more drafts. If you are still singing the very first version of a song you wrote on the fly with no edits and no re-workings, you are in denial. Go ahead and get out all the reasons why your song is the best song in the world and there is nothing you could change or that should be strengthened, and embrace the concept that you are the parent who looks at their drug addict kid in the principal's office with graffiti in the parking lot and spray paint on their hand and say aloud, "he's such a good boy, couldn't have been him..." D-Niy-A!

Beware the easy/filler rhyme. It's like exercise; you get out of it what you put into it. You are only cheating yourself!

If you want to write a song that will be forgotten in a year, go ahead. There are a handful of songs that have been pulled out of some bard's brain on the fly that can and will endure the test of time. I will bet you dollars to dimes yours won't be one of them. Mine won't be one of them. And if you think otherwise, you're wrong.

You don't have to agree with me. But you're taking this class to get better. Or because you're bored. Or because you were bored and are now even more so because you've figured it all out and are now wasting your time. I wonder what they're serving for feast...

Bottom line is what you write first is the foundation of what can and will be a beautiful well-structured song if you let it. Don't get too excited and share it too soon so that you feel like you're stuck with it the way it is (I do that all the time). Don't get tired of futzing with it and just call it "good enough for government work" (I do that too). Don't give up on your song and you. I have and I'm sure will do so again. But there is a reason that some of my songs are sung around the Known World, and why some of my songs will probably only be heard by accident on my website while searching for something else. Maybe. If I'm lucky.

Take your time to make it right. You and your art deserve it. Being defensive is the biggest disservice you can do yourself.

On a lighter note, here is a dirty trick for a quick hit: Use a catch. Give your audience something to hum all the way home. They've listened to dozens of songs. Make sure yours sticks in their heads by reworking a well known phrase or play on words.

Bumper Sticker on the Back of a Car in Rush-Hour Traffic:

"All gave some. Some gave all. Go Army."

Ambra's Refrain/"Catch" in the song "Who Serve the Soldiers?":

*"Who serve the soldiers who serve all the rest?
The few and the brave and the best of the best
In honor and duty and humility-
They've all given some, and some give all for thee."*

The concept is in the bumper sticker, the poetry/catch in the refrain. The concept is the spark that the mind will eventually return to after the prose has been stated. If your foundational concept is solid, it can strike a cord in your audience without them even knowing why.

Write everything in pen and keep it all. If you have to scratch something out, make sure you can still read it. Keep your old drafts and half written stanzas. You never know when a forsaken line will make or break your next piece.

Checking your Math Literally: Translating Muse to Prose to Layman

- Draft 2, take a nap, final(-ish) Draft

So you have it all written the poetry. And you are done for the most part and think you have what will be considered your final soft draft. Now its time to go back and clean up the edges.

The most important concept to maintain is consistency. You can have a song in which every line in a verse has a different syllable count. But EVERY verse should be that way.

Example:

V3:
I
Suggest
All your songs
Will be better
If you choose the path
Of academic strife

V2:
You
Will see
All your work
Will endure as
All this time will lend
Your songs a longer life

You'll not there are equivalent syllable counts for both verses. Unless you're writing modern music, you're not going to write a song like this and have it feel medieval unless you do it troubadour style and add in a million trills. But you could, and you would be consistent! The key to longevity and universal transposition!

So mind your syllable count, double check your emPHAsis, and make sure you rid yourself of any feminine rhymes.

Key Note: A feminine rhyme, to the academic, infers you weren't bright enough or didn't care enough to fight for the eloquent true rhyme. I dare ya to find it.

Enunciations over communities vary greatly, especially over seas. How you pronounce one thing here is said totally different there. But it's hard to fight a consonant. Keep your work looking and sounding true to form by maintaining non-feminine rhymes. Bet you can. The "it works fine" or "it says what I mean" is a cop-out. Say what you mean in proper poetry. Isn't that what song writing strives for? If you are going to give in to the temptation, do so sparingly. And be honest with yourself that you are doing it.

Another tip: If you can't find a way to make it work, rewrite the verse. There is no reason "Carrot" needs to be at the end of the line. Don't make it hard on yourself. This is supposed to be fun, remember?

Having said that, while it is immensely important to listen to feedback from your audience and fellow writers, don't let it drown out your own voice. Even if the song is final, their comments and suggestions may serve you in a future song. As you gain your feet, fight for your poetry but don't be afraid to consider critique. If nothing else, be courteous. Your audience gives you the appreciation that often fuels your desire to continue to create. Do not meet opinion with condescension. Take great care in your response. As a writer and performer, your words have power. They can often flavor your future audience's response to you as well. No one really knows a Rockstar. But everyone loves the star that rocks! ;)

Choosing a Melody

There is another whole class on modes and transitions and period melodies verses filk... but that is another class.

What I will say is this: Don't think. Let the rhythm drive the melody. Think of concepts in your head and think of songs that make you feel like what you are trying to make other feel in your song. Sing them and let them meld into the mixing pot.

Experiment. Play. **RECORD WHAT YOU ARE FIDDLING WITH!!!**

I cannot tell you how often I loose a GREAT tune because I never recorded it. Spend \$10 at Walmart and get the cheapest handheld thingy they have, but get something. It will save you regret and help you in future songs too.

Don't let your favorite melody be your only melody. I got the nickname "Am" because my favorite key is A-minor and you can play most of my songs in 3 chords on the guitar (mainly because for a long time I only new 3 chords).

If you are having a hard time coming up with something original, start puttering on another instrument. If you normally write with the guitar, pick up the recorder or the harp or the violin or even the drum. Though honestly your best choice is the piano because you can pick something out completely random with little training at all.

Don't be afraid to use scratch melodies and lyrics to flesh out your ideas. Just be sure to accept up front that they must and will change for the final format.

DO NOT MEMORIZE WORKS IN PROGRESS!!! It is hard enough to memorize a song correctly without having the dozen cut/snip-it lines trying to tag-team in and out of the final version.

Performing your Song: "Are we there yet?"

Especially if you are planning to record it or perform it for competition, do NOT let your first performance be in front of a group. It's painful; for you and for your audience. No matter how much you practice it, SOMETHING will come across raw.

Practice it for a friend or a group of friends; get their critique. More importantly, LISTEN to their critique. Again, don't hold too close to the concept that this is your baby or your soul. It is a part of both, but suck it up. Tough Love, baby. It is all for a good cause.

For god sake, memorize your song. If you want a hall full of people to shut up and stop visiting the friend they won't see for another 2 months and pay attention to you, do them the honor of looking them in the eye. The eyes are the doorways to the soul. Close them, and it is harder to reach your audience.

Quick Notes and Final Thoughts

And most importantly, HAVE FUN! Songwriting can be work. But it can also be one of the most rewarding experiences you'll ever have. My greatest joy in life is being part of a clean harmony. And if I never sing another day in my life that others sing the songs I write would be more than enough to make me happy till my dying day. We all end. What we leave behind us, what is remembered... That is our final and true merit.

Write Well!

Suggested Reading

TuneSmith by Jimmy Webb