

Thoughts on songwriting

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My response to a Reddit post asking these questions on songwriting.

How did you learn to write lyrics?

First and foremost: read lots of books. Read poetry and prose. Preferably fiction.

There are no great writers who aren't obsessive readers. Most great lyricists are. Then do the same with music.

Listen to the artists you love. Find the songs that you love lyrically. What are they saying to you? What feelings do they evoke? Take note of how they use or avoid using rhyme.

Note the cadence and flow of the words and how it fits with the music. Study them.

And then write, write, write. Never use clichés. Never take the easy rhyme. (Fire / desire).

When you feel yourself writing filler (and you will) just to get a song finished, that's fine - but go back and fix it. Find topics that you feel most strongly about on a personal and emotional level, and then use those feelings with characters in a lyrical story about something new. You can write a song in first person that is not about you. (In fact, that's the best practice.)

You will write terrible songs that you will throw away. And most you will be unsure of, but there may be parts that you are happy with. Regardless, you will slowly see over time what works, what doesn't, and gradually improve along the way, probably without even knowing it. Keep at it. And remember that you are always your own worst critic.

I tried for so many years, and I still suck. I'll never be good.

It has never occurred to me to quit. How could I do that? If you're a painter, you paint. If you enjoy knitting, you knit. If you're a woodworker, you build.

I write songs. Good or bad, whether or not anybody but my wife hears them, these things do not matter. It's what I do because I enjoy it. It is the nexus of my self-expression.

I play guitar. For years I took lessons to become a better guitar player. Then one day, I decided to learn classical guitar - and how to read music and also music theory. It was then that I'd come home, see my guitar in the corner, and instead of being excited to play, I'd think: 'oh crap, I have to practice.'

As soon as I recognized that I wasn't enjoying 'practice,' I returned to playing guitar for pleasure. I accepted that I wasn't going to learn to read music or learn classical guitar. I really didn't want it badly enough to slog through what it would take. It's not that I avoided doing difficult things along the way - I did. But I better understood my limitations and leveraged my strengths - what I was good at, and what I truly enjoyed. If the sole reason you are creating is to get attention, make money or achieve fame, then perhaps songwriting isn't the creative self-expression you should be focused on. Artists create because it lights a joyous fire inside of them. That is all. Whatever may or may not happen after that (recognition, fame, awards, etc.) is something different.

Kurt Vonnegut wrote:

"When I was 15, I spent a month working on an archeological dig. I was talking to one of the archeologists one day during our lunch break and he asked those kinds of 'getting to know you' questions you ask young people: Do you play sports? What's your favorite subject? And I told him, no, I don't play any sports. I do theater, I'm in choir, I play the violin and piano, I used to take art classes.

And he went WOW. That's amazing! And I said, 'Oh no, but I'm not any good at ANY of them.'

And he said something then that I will never forget and which absolutely blew my mind because no one had ever said anything like it to me before: 'I don't think being good at things is the point of doing them. I think you've got all these wonderful experiences with different skills, and that all teaches you things and makes you an interesting person, no matter how well you do them.'

And that honestly changed my life. Because I went from a failure, someone who hadn't been talented enough at anything to excel, to someone who did things because I enjoyed them. I had been raised in such an achievement-oriented environment, so inundated with the myth of Talent, that I thought it was only worth doing things if you could 'Win' at them."