



Songwriting Tips

Being prepared when inspiration hits.

Scenario # 1. You are strumming your acoustic guitar, freshly polished, new strings and perfectly tuned. The sound is bright and crisp. You are playing a few chords that you have learnt from Guitar Alliance when bam! A brilliant chord progression hits you like a bolt of lightning.

You rush to find a pen and paper and grab a pen that hasn't been used since your primary school days. You etch down your chord progression on an old scrap of newspaper dated January 7th 1994 that you found under a pile of magazines, yellowing from age. By the time you finally get the pen working you have forgotten the chord progression and have managed to get blue ink all over your hands and freshly polished guitar.

Scenario # 2. You are rocking out a few riffs that you have seen on Guitar Alliance. Your fingers are in rare form, your axe is smoking, the distortion and overdrive pedals are on, and your amp is cranked all the way up to three because it is too loud for the neighbours at 11pm on a Wednesday night. You think to yourself "what if I tried the riff this way?" Suddenly the heavens rumble and bam! That bolt of lightning strikes once again.

You quickly grab the old tape recorder sitting in the corner and dust off the buttons to find record. You press the record button and play the riff only to find on playback that the batteries are almost dead and you have recorded a Barry White-on-Prozac sounding riff over your missing bootleg of the last ever live concert of AC/DC with Bon Scott (RIP).

Scenario # 3. You are sitting in the car, window down, stuck in traffic, waiting for the lights to change. You are thinking about what you will have for dinner. Will it be the left over pasta from the other night or burgers as suggested by that enticing billboard advert across the street? Your eyes wander to the next couple of billboards when the words from a slogan grab your attention. You think,

“I should write that down, it would make a good chorus for a song.” Suddenly the skies turn dark, rumbling with thick black clouds and, err, well, you know the rest.

Words start filling your head. You scramble to find some paper and end up scribbling down some illegible prose onto an old tatty, parking ticket that has been sitting on the dashboard for five months. The lights turn green and you’re still frantically trying to fit the words onto the tiny space. The guy behind you leans on his horn and in your haste to get moving, you drop the ticket, which in turn gracefully floats out the window. The lights turn red just as you release the hand brake and you stall in the middle of the intersection, much to the disgust and tooting of the other motorists.

OK, these scenarios are little bit dramatic but have any of these things ever happened to you? They have all happened to me in some form at one time or another. Inspiration can come at anytime so my advice to the prospective songwriter is “be prepared.”

Songwriting is all about getting your inspiration recorded in some format, so you can go back to it at a later stage and develop on it. Notice that I said develop on it. Songwriting is an ever-evolving process of filling in the gaps that you haven’t quite completed and polishing the parts that you have. The initial idea of a song may come quickly, but fleshing it out is where the creative and enjoyable part occurs.

The following items are what I would recommend to help you prepare for such an event. They don’t have to be expensive, but make sure that they are practical and reachable at the moment when inspiration strikes.

A notebook – for jotting down words, lyrics, chord progressions, and ideas.

A pocket-sized notebook – as above but keep this on you at all times.

A file with clear-plastic sheet holders – this will become your song file for works in progress.

At least two pencils – preferably the mechanical style to go with each notebook. Mechanical pencils are good because you don’t need to sharpen them.

A pencil sharpener – OK, if you prefer normal pencils you will need this.

A tape-recorder – to record any chord progressions, riffs, tunes, words, lyrics, or ideas. Tape recorders are a very handy tool for the songwriter.

Cassette Tapes – for the tape recorder.

Batteries – for the tape recorder.

Ok, you are now prepared. Lets apply these items to scenarios one, two, and three.

Scenario # 1. You are strumming your acoustic guitar, freshly polished, new strings and perfectly tuned. The sound is bright and crisp. You are playing a few chords that you have learnt from Guitar Alliance when bam! A brilliant chord progression hits you like a bolt of lightning.

You grab your pencil and notebook and jot the chords down. You play around with the chord combinations and work out the verse, chorus, and bridge progressions, writing these down. The beginnings of a song are in the making. When you have exhausted your ideas, take that page, rip it out, and slide it into your song file for future reworking.

Scenario # 2. You are rocking out a few riffs that you have seen on Guitar Alliance. Your fingers are in rare form, your axe is smoking, the distortion and overdrive pedals are on, and your amp is cranked all the way up to three because it is too loud for the neighbours at 11pm on a Wednesday night. You think to yourself “what if I tried the riff this way?” Suddenly the heavens rumble and bam! That bolt of lightning strikes once again.

You quickly grab the tape recorder sitting next to your amp. Batteries new and fully charged. You press the record button and play the riff to you tape recorder containing the new cassette tape labelled “originals tape 1”. You play back the riff and begin creating your next original tune, writing notes about the song and the chords used for the riff. You also write down in your notebook the songs working title and the cassette tape it was recorded on.

Scenario # 3. You are sitting in the car, window down, stuck in traffic, waiting for the lights to change. You are thinking about what you will have for dinner. Will it be the left over pasta from the other night or burgers as suggested by that enticing billboard across the street? Your eyes wander to the next couple of billboards when the words from a slogan grab your attention. You think, “I should write that down, it would make a good song.” Suddenly, the skies turn dark, rumbling with thick black clouds and, ok, ok, you get the picture.

Words start filling your head. You grab your pocket notebook and pencil from your shirt pocket and write down the inspirational prose, filling up line after line. You read back the words and see the lyrical beginnings to your next song. The lights turn green and you head home to put the idea in motion.

Below are a few guidelines that I follow when inspiration hits.

Write down or record your ideas when they happen. That way they remain fresh and you won't forget them when something else sidetracks you. Believe me, something else will sidetrack you and the idea will be lost. Sometimes when I am at work, I will sing my tunes onto my home answering machine, so when I get home, I can develop on the idea further. My wife thinks I'm crazy!

Expand on these ideas. Keep expanding on the idea until you can't think of anything more to write or play. When you look back at the material you have created, there may just be a diamond in all of that rough.

Don't rub or scribble anything out. Notice I didn't have an eraser in that item list. There are no wrong or bad ideas in songwriting. Everything that you write or record could be usable in your current song or a future song. Skim off the cream and accept that not all of your material will be used for this song.

Be honest and play from the heart. Writing with honesty and playing from the heart will provide you with so much more inspiration. Sometimes reading back what you have written may cut too close to the bone, but that is what sets great songs apart from good songs. Often, it is these types of songs that people can most relate to because they find something in the song that fits their own situation. Think about the songs that you really relate to. Why do you relate to them? What is it about them? Now that you are aware of this, use it to your advantage.

Have fun and experiment. After all, songwriting is creative and is not meant to be a chore! If something doesn't quite work, drop it or experiment until it does.

