

Second Edition | Revised and Updated

# how to write lyrics

Better Words for Your Songs

Rikky Rooksby



# **how to write lyrics**



# how to write lyrics

**Better Words for Your Songs**  
Second Edition | Revised and Updated

**Rikky Rooksby**



Guilford, Connecticut



An imprint of Globe Pequot, the trade division of  
The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.  
4501 Forbes Blvd., Ste. 200  
Lanham, MD 20706  
www.rowman.com

Distributed by NATIONAL BOOK NETWORK

Copyright © 2021 by Rikky Rooksby

Lyrics to “In the Dark of the Year,” “White as Alaska,” “She Says She’ll Never,” “Pacific Morning,” “On Weymouth Sands,” “Where Lovers Walk,” “Trouble,” “The Rising Sun,” “Repossession,” “Mucha’s Girl,” “Turning the Other Cheek,” “Trojan Like November,” “She Paints the Picture,” “Last Is the Lasting,” “Rainy Day Market,” “Strange Fine Religion,” “Waiting for a Car,” “Blackweir,” copyright © 2021 Rikky Rooksby

Cover design by Paul Palmer-Edwards

Book design by Tom Seabrook

*All rights reserved.* No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote passages in a review.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available**

ISBN 978-1-4930-5615-6 (paperback)

ISBN 978-1-4930-5616-3 (e-book)

∞<sup>TM</sup> The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992

# contents

	preface to the second edition	7
	how to use this book	9
<b>part 1</b>	<b>finding inspiration, learning the craft</b>	
<b>section 1</b>	<b>making a start</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>section 2</b>	<b>30 ways to find inspiration</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>section 3</b>	<b>from sketch to final draft</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>section 4</b>	<b>the magic of titles</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>section 5</b>	<b>techniques and craft</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>section 6</b>	<b>painting pictures with words</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>section 7</b>	<b>telling a story</b>	<b>110</b>
<b>section 8</b>	<b>writing lyrics today</b>	<b>125</b>
<b>section 9</b>	<b>a gallery of lyrics</b>	<b>141</b>
<b>part 2</b>	<b>further exploration, words of wisdom</b>	
<b>section 10</b>	<b>a sourcebook of themes</b>	<b>172</b>
<b>section 11</b>	<b>songwriter interviews</b>	<b>266</b>
	acknowledgments	303
	about the author	304

» *To Paul Ashton-Bridges, for remembering the words, and much else.*

# preface to the second edition

*“I can’t think of anything to write . . .”*

Has this thought crossed your mind, just when you need a lyric for a song you’re composing? It happens to most songwriters at some point.

No aspect of songwriting causes more frustration than writing lyrics. It’s a common scenario: you have the chords together, a melody to sing, an arrangement, but no words. So often, lyrics get left to the final stage of writing a song. Throughout the history of popular music, a lyric is scribbled at the last minute, often in the studio, and vocalists end up singing words they didn’t exactly want to say, didn’t like, or didn’t mean.

Do you find yourself repeating phrases from other songs, using clichés, and searching for rhymes? Are you always writing about the same topics, perhaps the same themes, as everyone else? Do your lyrics seem obscure to others? After a gig, is your audience posting comments such as, “Great music, but I can’t understand the lyrics”?

*How to Write Lyrics* has helped songwriters to write better lyrics, expand their awareness of the craft of lyric writing, and develop their own style, images, and themes. In it, there are suggestions for how to:

- draft a lyric
- rework an old or discarded lyric
- expand your sense of what a lyric can do
- write new types of lyric
- avoid obscurity
- become more aware of variations in style.

This book takes you deeper into lyric writing to grasp common techniques and subjects. Seeing what others have created in lyrics during the past 60 years will evoke opportunities to recharge your creative approach. There are many tips and ideas that can find new life in your own lyrics, and pages of encouragement, whatever your style of music.

You don't have to read *How to Write Lyrics* sequentially. Dip straight into any section of interest.

Do you have a half-complete lyric that's missing a section? Look through these pages and find an idea to complete it.

Stuck writing about the same subjects? Browse the many titles for some alternatives.

Short of inspiration? Open *How to Write Lyrics* at random and see what is brought to your attention.

**Rikky Rooksby**  
**Oxford, England**  
**Winter 2021**

# how to use this book

The book has two parts. Part 1 is an instruction manual that takes you through all the major aspects of lyric writing, and is split into nine sections. Section 1 describes how to start a lyric. Section 2 provides 30 strategies for finding inspiration and avoiding so-called “writer’s block.” Section 3 takes you from a simple sketch through to a polished final draft, and includes specific examples of revising and redrafting. Section 4 looks at the magic of titles, and section 5 considers techniques that affect lyric writing line-by-line. Section 6 deals with how lyrics generate pictures through metaphors and similes, and surveys the commonest imagery in songs. Section 7 examines storytelling, point-of-view, and character. Section 8 discusses some broader issues to do with lyric writing that shape where you direct your songwriting. Section 9 is a gallery of different types of lyric, explaining how they work and are constructed.

Part 2 is split into two sections. Section 10 is a sourcebook of themes, citing hundreds of songs according to their subject matter, as a source of inspiration: find them on the web and see how leading lyricists have handled those subjects in the past. There is a mixture of singles and album tracks from bands and singers from the 1950s to the present day. The sourcebook also gives a sense of which themes have been most popular, and which are perhaps overdone or have become clichéd. This will help you invent titles that are sharper and more interesting than the average. Section 11 contains a number of insightful interviews with some famous songwriters who reflect on their own individual methods and experiences.

Titles alone can inspire songs; they can remind you of a song you know that might initiate a new song of your own. These are not definitive listings. It is inevitable, given the millions of songs in circulation on vinyl, CD, MP3, streaming services, advertising, and on TV and film soundtracks, that each reader of *How to Write Lyrics* will think of different examples. For the subjects that have

the most interest, you could compile your own lists. Lyrics have never been more accessible. In decades past, the only way to get them was to buy sheet music. Today, vast numbers of copyrighted lyrics can be found online at lyric websites and all over YouTube.

*How to Write Lyrics* is part of a multi-volume series on songwriting. To find out more on chord sequences, melody, guitar chords and tunings, and writing songs on keyboards (especially if you're a guitarist), seek out the new edition of *How to Write Songs on Guitar* (2020), *The Songwriting Sourcebook* (2011), *Riffs* (2010; revised 2021), *Chord Master* (2004; revised 2016), *Melody* (2005), *How to Write Songs on Keyboards* (2005), *Arranging Songs* (2007), *Songs and Solos* (2014), and *How to Write Songs in Altered Guitar Tunings* (2010). Information about these titles can be found at [www.rowman.com](http://www.rowman.com) and [www.rikkyrooksby.com](http://www.rikkyrooksby.com).

PART 1

**finding  
inspiration,  
learning  
the craft**

## SECTION 1

# making a start

“ *Sometimes I finish the lyrics the month before we go into the studio. But for the most part, 90 percent of them are done at the last minute.*”

**KURT COBAIN TO GUITAR WORLD, MARCH 1999**

“ *When I look at our first ten years, I just hear unfinished work, lyrics we never finished because we ran out of studio time.*”

**BONO TO MOJO, OCTOBER 2004**

“ *I did the tune first and wrote words . . . later. I called that ‘Scrambled Egg’ for a long time. I didn’t have any words to it.*”

**PAUL MCCARTNEY TO ROLLING STONE ON “YESTERDAY,” JANUARY 1974**

“ *Some songs come quickly and some songs take forever. ‘Sherry’ [Four Seasons, US #1 in 1962] was a quickie. It took 15 minutes. I was ready to leave for a rehearsal we were having, and I sat at the piano and it just came out. Not having a tape-recorder in those days, the only way I could remember it was to put a quick lyric to it and remember the melody and the words together. I drove down to rehearsal humming it, trying to keep it in my mind. I had no intention of keeping the lyrics. To my surprise, everybody liked the lyrics so we didn’t change anything.*”

**SONGWRITER BOB GAUDIO TO FRED BRONSON**

Writing lyrics requires completely different skills to those used in other aspects of songwriting. No wonder so many people find it a struggle.

### **Lyric seems to be the hardest word**

For many, composing lyrics is the most challenging aspect of songwriting. If this is true for you, you’re in good company. Noel Gallagher of the British group Oasis told *Guitar* in May 1996, “The music side of it is easy—it’s the lyrics I can’t stand

writing.” A few songwriters deal with this issue by forming a partnership with someone who can supply words to their music. The common division of labor in songwriting partnerships is along the music/lyric divide: one person composes the music, the other writes the words. Think of Burt Bacharach (music) and Hal David (words); or Elton John (music) and Bernie Taupin (words); or John Barry (music) and Leslie Bricusse or Don Black (words). Occasionally, a songwriter who usually creates both words *and* music might leave the writing of the lyrics to someone else. Brian Wilson asked Tony Asher to write lyrics for the classic *Pet Sounds* and Van Dyke Parks to do the same for *Smile*. But the majority of songwriters write music *and* lyrics singlehandedly.

It was in the 1960s that the separate roles of performer and songwriter often became fused, primarily owing to the success of the Beatles and a growing awareness of how much money could be earned through songwriting copyrights. Before that, there was often a team of creative people with individual roles behind a hit song. Each person in the team only needed to excel at one thing. So, don't think there's anything wrong in seeking a partner to share the burdens of songwriting.

“*Everybody's a singer/songwriter now, but not everybody should be; not everybody can do all of these things, and yet everybody does. And that's why I think music has gone downhill. It used to take three—a great lyricist and a great musician and then a great singer. Like with Frank [Sinatra], and that's why that stuff is so enduring—because you had three gifted people doing it. Now you've got people, they're not really a great singer or a great writer or a great musician doing it, so the standards have dropped severely.*”

**JONI MITCHELL TO MOJO, AUGUST 1998**

Writing lyrics involves shaping the meaning of something that, if left as instrumental music, would stay undefined; there is a change in the level of expression. Lyrics are more specific than music. That's one reason why (to play with an Elton John title) for many songwriters, “lyric” seems to be the hardest word.

Picture this scene: a songwriter at the piano, or with a guitar, plays with chords and creates an emotion and atmosphere that is creatively inspiring. This songwriter invents a melody to go with the chords and this mood. Then comes the moment where words are required, and that means getting specific. This

sad- or happy-sounding chord progression must now direct its general sadness or happiness to a *particular* human situation. A lyric is the place where the emotional suggestions of pure music are defined into concrete human concerns and events. It's like a process of translation, from one medium into another. The general musical mood is focused by a lyric into a context, a voice, a human drama.

But what if you don't have anything in mind? It happens to everyone, including professional songwriters. Around the time of his album *The Soul Cages*, Sting admitted he had found the recording difficult because, though the music came easily, the ideas in his head at the time would not have led to suitable lyrics. The solution came from drawing on memories of his childhood and youth in Newcastle, in the north of England.

A second reason why writing lyrics is often problematic is because it requires different skills to those used for composing. A good lyricist has a multifaceted sensitivity to language. He or she can write memorable phrases, spot a potential hook or good first line, rhyme competently, handle metaphors and images, and reshape a phrase while retaining its sense. A lyricist has an ear for words that are awkward to sing, or too abstract or obscure, and knows how to organize a lyric around a character, an emotion, a story, or an idea so it makes sense to a large audience, even if its origin was personal.

Such language-oriented skills are not automatically granted just because you are a good singer, guitarist, keyboard player, or composer. For most songwriters, it's necessary to acquire these skills. *How to Write Lyrics* will help you to do that.

“It's a great luxury—at least for a lyricist—to write to [recorded] tracks because you have a much better sense of what the musical mood of the song is. If you're writing with a person who plays piano and they're sitting at the keyboard playing, they may have a whole different sound in their head from what you have in your head when you hear what they play . . . although in some ways, it's a little more demanding because you're now having to fit into something that's complete whereas when you're writing lyrics to a song that has no real arrangement done to it yet, theoretically, what you write can influence what that turns out to be.”

**TONY ASHER ON WRITING WITH BRIAN WILSON,  
AS QUOTED IN “THE MAKING OF PET SOUNDS”**

“*The way I write is to sit down with the guitar and keep on writing until it’s finished. I’ve never written a set of lyrics independently of the song. I have to have an idea for the melody and then I’ll choose words that sing well. I’m not proud of seeing the lyrics written out, usually, because they need the music to back them up.*”

**CHRISSE HYNDE OF THE PRETENDERS TO MELODY MAKER**

“*The rhythm of the words is more important to me than the sense at that [initial] stage . . . ‘In the Air’ was improvised like that, and so were songs like ‘Don’t Care Anymore,’ ‘Take Me Home,’ ‘Sussudio.’*”

**PHIL COLLINS TO MELODY MAKER ON IMPROVISING NONSENSE**

“*Depending on whether a song starts with a melody or starts with lyrics, you know if it starts with a melody you just keep playing the melody over and over until you get it down and just throw in any lyrics that fit the verbal flow.*”

**NATHAN FOLLOWILL OF KINGS OF LEON TO TRIPLE J, FEBRUARY 2009**

### **Which comes first, music or words?**

A lyric can be written at any stage in the songwriting process. Each stage has advantages and disadvantages. You can write a lyric first. It doesn’t have to be complete; a few lines and images could be enough to sing when working on the chord progression and melody. Some people find a title as soon as they get an inspiring musical idea, and this title maintains the song’s identity and dominant emotion until it is finished. Some writers develop a lyric with the music: sitting, guitar in hand, writing down lyric ideas and chord ideas, or at a keyboard. It’s a matter of whatever works for you.

The advantage to starting with a complete lyric is that it can be easier to sing a melody and decide on its timing and rhythms with meaningful words. Lyrics written first can be worked on until they make sense, have memorable lines and images, and are easily set to music because they are singable and don’t have awkward phrases or line lengths.

Whichever way you decide to do it, it is a good discipline to keep a notebook and work up ideas so there is a stock of finished lyrics to fall back on.

Another method is to think of words as you invent the melody, or to write lyrics when the music is finished. This could even mean leaving it as late as

having the backing track recorded and ready. In this case, the music may inspire a set of good lines; on the other hand, you will have to return and edit the track if the lyric requires it.

### **What kinds of lyric are there?**

Lyrics can be classified in many ways, especially according to subject matter, as is done in section 10. But at this point we need a more general answer to the question.

Here are four fundamental types of lyric:

- *Feeling lyric*: expresses emotions, moods, atmosphere.
- *Thinking lyric*: expresses an idea, insight, realization, truth, falsity.
- *Experiencing lyric*: expresses a story, a sequence of events, time-dependent.
- *Contemplating lyric*: observes, describes, an object or objects, a scene.

These categories are not mutually exclusive. A single lyric could cover all four. But a lyric will tend to gravitate toward one of these, and a songwriter may have a temperamental bias to write more songs of one type than the others.

Most songwriters lean toward the feeling lyric, if only because emotion is the greatest spur to creativity. If we bring in other types of lyric, such as the confessional, comic, satiric, protest, or romantic lyric, you can see that these are subsidiary; they can be experienced through any of the four main types. This is one aspect to lyric writing that it may help to keep in mind.

“ It was . . . Rob [Collins, keyboards], and a microphone in the middle of the room, and I just sang the first thing that came into my head, based on the sort of mumbo jumbo feeling you get from like a huge crush on someone. Basically, that simple. I just had, like, ‘not the same as everybody else’ and ‘why talk to her?’ written down . . . and that was the way it was left. It was supposed to . . . get a feel of the song but it just ended up being the song. It was completely spontaneous.”

**TIM BURGESS OF THE CHARLATANS TO MELODY MAKER ON  
THE RECORDING OF THE BAND'S SONG "SUBTITLE"**

**Simply write**

There are times when writing a lyric is easy. Sometimes, songwriters have an urgent sense of what they want to sing about. Perhaps the likeliest time for this to happen is when they're in love. As Rufus Wainwright once told *The Word* magazine, using the metaphor of a volcano, "When you have a crush on someone, when you're moved by someone's physical presence, lyrics come like Mount St. Helens, songs come out of your ears!"

This can lead to attempts to be spontaneous in the studio, so that a lyric is improvised during recording. One example of this "wing-it" approach would be U2's "Elvis Presley and America," where Bono's first-take improvised melody and mostly garbled lyric were left unchanged when the song was released on the album *The Unforgettable Fire* (1984).

The listening public has often been largely unaware of the hit-and-miss nature of so many lyrics. Cream's "Badge," for instance, got its title because of a misreading of the word "bridge" on a piece of paper.

The hope in such situations is that inspiration will strike. In 1998, Willie Nelson told *Mojo* magazine, "Writing is—I don't know—an instinct, an intuitive thing, you have to be in a receptive mood. Sometimes an idea comes along, and you have no control over it. It just overwhelms you, so you just sit down and get on with it."

Such inspiration will quickly fill a blank page with jottings—complete phrases, incomplete phrases, lines that rhyme, lines that don't rhyme, isolated similes or images, maybe a title. This is what I term a "sketch," and it can be as haphazard as you like.

Here's the important point: once the sketch is done you are no longer looking at a blank screen or sheet of paper. This makes a big psychological difference.

The hardest part of lyric writing is to get past the intimidating inertia of that blank paper. Once there is a sketch, you have surmounted that horrible feeling of, "What am I going to write? I can't think of anything." The sketch can be expanded, rewritten, and generally fiddled with. Gradually, through a series of drafts, decisions are made about the most effective beginning of the lyric, what will be its conclusion, how many lines make a verse, which lines belong to a chorus or a bridge, what is the title, et cetera.

But songwriters don't always feel inspired. So, what to do when you have no theme in mind and can't think of what to write? The answer is to do anything that

will result in a sketch—anything that gets you writing. Nothing inhibits creativity more than the struggle to start. You need to find a way round this that suits, as an artist stuck for ideas might simply throw paint at a canvas to initiate a painting. It usually helps to move into a playful state of mind, willing to experiment and not too concerned with what the outcome may be.

One exercise is to write from the present by asking yourself:

- Where are you?
- What can you see, hear, smell?
- How are you feeling?
- What's been on your mind?
- What time of day, week, season is it?
- What happened yesterday?
- What's supposed to happen today?
- What would you like to happen tomorrow?
- What do you think likely to happen tomorrow?
- What's been on the news?
- What's going on in the lives of your partner, friends, family?
- What music have you been listening to recently?
- What do you like about it?

Write anything about any of these things. Don't evaluate what you put down. Just write. The fear of getting stuck can be inhibiting. But if you can develop the ability to play your way into a creative flow, you will find the process of songwriting more pleasurable and more productive.

## SECTION 2

# 30 ways to find inspiration

“ Ideas, titles for songs, I would definitely do at home because I would watch the news, the goings-on in the world, movies and listening to conversations between people on the street or in a restaurant. I was always looking for material. . . . When you're a songwriter, you're always very observant of the world around you.”

**LAMONT DOZIER OF THE MOTOWN SONGWRITING TEAM**

**HOLLAND-DOZIER-HOLLAND TO SEAN EGAN**

“ Lyrics usually come to me in the morning, in the first 15 minutes of the day, or when I'm out in the middle of the night. I carry a notebook, and I'll write a line down in a bar, then maybe the next day I'll look at it and think, Ah, that's interesting, I'll put this in a song.”

**ALEX TURNER OF ARCTIC MONKEYS TO NEW YORK MAGAZINE, AUGUST 2018**

The inspiration for a lyric can come from many sources. As Ed Sheeran explained to *Interview* magazine in 2011, “My inspirations came from love, life and death, and viewing other people's situations.” It is said that Roy Orbison wrote one of his biggest hits, “Pretty Woman,” when his wife Claudette went out one afternoon shopping. Orbison asked Claudette if she needed any money, but fellow songwriter Bill Dees interjected, “A pretty woman never needs any money.” Dees was struck by the phrase, thinking it would make a good title. Meanwhile, Paul McCartney got the title for the Beatles' “Eight Days a Week” from a casual remark by a taxi driver on the way to a recording session.

Inspiration can come from an idea, a feeling, a phrase, a title, a person (real or imagined), or a story (true or fictional). You can start with a clear theme or none; with words, images, or different types of statement; and let the theme arise from them.

Joanna Newsom has said of her song “Divers,” “It’s a little simplistic for me to say that I write down the images that are in my mind, because it’s not like I just have a frozen image that I’m illustrating with the language. But it’s maybe a set of . . . visual imperatives and feelings and ideas that feel connected to me, and feel like they’re waiting to be connected.”

From eavesdropping to watching TV, there are many well-tried techniques that can help you overcome the inertia of the blank page. Here are 30 strategies to try.

### 1 Listen to people talking

“*I get ideas from almost everywhere, but especially from supermarket queues—I have a talent for eavesdropping, and it’s amazing what you learn waiting to pay for your fruit juice.*”

MORRISSEY TO *MELODY MAKER*, 1987

### 2 Write a single, evocative phrase

Neil Tennant of the Pet Shop Boys claims that most of his lyrics begin with a phrase he’s jotted down or an idea for a title.

### 3 Keep a small notebook and pen in your pocket

Write down ideas immediately as they occur.

“*I write passing thoughts, overheard conversations, discovered quotations, advertising signs, mumbled threats, and words of kindness and endearment, on scraps of paper. Sometimes I mutter them into Dictaphones or record them on my answer-machine when there is not even an eyebrow pencil in hand in order to commit them to the page.*”

ELVIS COSTELLO TO *THE WORD*, FEBRUARY 2005

“*It all usually starts with a riff on a guitar, and then I decide I want to write about something, and I look through my notebooks and find all the phrases and rhymes. I constantly write down things I like, like “bereft and adrift.” If I’m missing one line I just flick through my notebook and there’s one there.*”

EVAN DANDO OF THE LEMONHEADS TO *MAKING MUSIC*, 1996

#### 4 Sketch a lyric in a public place

Bob Dylan is just one of those who would sit in a coffeehouse for days at a time, looking at the other customers, making up things about them and writing down whatever came into his head.

Nowadays the public space can be a virtual one. Social media, if used wisely, can also be a source of lyric ideas, either through comments people make or images supplied to your feed via membership of groups likely to post pictures of artistic or historical subjects. These arrive in random ways, and occasionally they may form an unexpected but colorful juxtaposition that will start a lyric.

#### 5 Listen to music to alter your frame of mind and encourage a receptive mood

Write down the thoughts, feelings, and pictures the music evokes. Brian Wilson famously wrote the whole of the “Mount Vernon and Fairway” song sequence from the Beach Boys’ *Holland* (1973) while listening to Randy Newman’s *Sail Away* album from the previous year over and over again.

Listen to songs in a language you don’t know and write down phrases that the unfamiliar sounds suggest. K. T. Tunstall’s “Suddenly” was written in thirty minutes after the singer had been meditating on the cover of Patti Smith’s album *Horses*.

#### 6 Glance through a newspaper or a magazine

Paul McCartney once said that the first line of his Beatles lyrics often came from reading a book or looking at newspapers.

#### 7 Put your pen down and go to your guitar or keyboard

Make some music first.

““ You get ideas for songs from all sorts of situations. I just start playing the piano and the chords start telling me something. Lyrics for me just seem to go with the tune, very much hand in hand.”

KATE BUSH TO *RECORD MIRROR*, FEBRUARY 1978

**8 Write with the TV on but your back to it, so you can't see the picture**

Keep an ear open for odd phrases you could use, or that collide with what you're writing in fruitful ways. John Lennon got the idea for "Good Morning, Good Morning" from a TV ad that was on in the background as he sat at the piano.

**9 Watch the TV with notebook and pen**

Manic Street Preachers' Nicky Wire has said he writes "mostly when it's raining or dark, usually after ten at night. I get a lot of inspiration from watching TV."

“*At night . . . [John Lennon] loved to channel-surf, and he would pick up phrases from all the shows. One time, he was watching Reverend Ike, a famous black TV evangelist, who was saying, 'Let me tell you guys, it doesn't matter, it's whatever gets you through the night.' John loved it and said, 'I've got to write it down or I'll forget it.' He always kept a pad and pen by the bed. That was the beginning of 'Whatever Gets You Thru the Night,' an American #1 and UK Top 40 hit for John.*”

**MAY PANG TO RADIO TIMES, DECEMBER 2005**

**10 Write randomly**

Use the first things that come into your head. This could be prose; keep going until you have filled every line of the page. Then look for the nugget.

“*Lately, I get in a room by myself. No telephone, no TV, not much to look at. I usually by writing down random phrases. Maybe I'll start writing about a certain subject and there's a phrase that strikes me, so I'll spin off from that.*”

**DAVID BYRNE OF TALKING HEADS TO MELODY MAKER**

“*'Madame George' is a stream-of-consciousness thing, as is 'Cyprus Avenue.' Both those songs came right out. I didn't even think about what I was writing. There are some things that you write that just come out all at once, and there's other things that you think about and consider where you'll put each bit.*”

**VAN MORRISON TO RITCHIE YORKE ON HIS 1968 ALBUM ASTRAL WEEKS**

“*I often sit at a typewriter and knock out stream-of-consciousness stuff; it helps clear the head, but often brings forth ideas for songs and so on.*”

**PETE TOWNSHEND OF THE WHO TO ROLLING STONE, NOVEMBER 1977**

### 11 Travel by the transportation of your choice and watch the world shift to reveal new things

During June 2020, long car drives from an apartment in New York up to the Catskill Mountains inspired Robin Pecknold of Fleet Foxes to write lyrics for the band's fourth album, *Shore*. He recited the lines into his phone or wrote them down when parked. This produced 15 lyrics in about a month.

Tori Amos's 2017 album *Native Invader* was partly inspired by spending time in the Smoky Mountains, an area linked to her maternal grandfather. In an interview with *Songwriting* magazine, she observed, "Taking pilgrimages to places that might break the routine can shake things up a bit and trigger something that will help them [the muses] to find me."

“ I've written most of my best songs driving on a long journey, scribbling lyrics on cigarette packets whilst steering.”

NEIL YOUNG TO VOX, NOVEMBER 1990

“ I wrote 'Black Hole Sun' in my head driving home from Bear Creek Studio in Woodinville, a 35-to-40-minute drive from Seattle. It sparked from something a news anchor said on TV and I heard wrong. I heard 'blah blah blah black hole sun blah blah blah.' I thought that would make an amazing song title.”

CHRIS CORNELL OF SOUNDGARDEN TO UN CUT, AUGUST 2014

### 12 Imagine an ending or a punch line, and work backward from it

What needs to happen or be said to get there? Stephen Sondheim says that he finds it useful to write backwards, starting with “a climax, a twist, a punch, a joke.”

### 13 Punch the clock: write on a regular, timetabled basis

Pretend you're a Brill Building songwriter expected to knock out songs every day. Randy Newman worked for years in an office from nine to five. Chris Difford of Squeeze consciously imitated him by establishing an office near his home. Nicky Chinn and Mike Chapman disciplined themselves to start work at 10am every day, beginning with a title and working from there.

St. Vincent (Annie Clark) has said that she approaches her work as a musician “as I would a day job. If you're a writer, you have to write. If you're a musician, you have to make music. I wrote a lot of [*St. Vincent*] in a shed behind my friend's

house in South Austin.” Bryan Adams has also stressed continual effort: “A songwriter writes songs all the time, whereas just writing a song can be done by anyone, anytime.” The more songs you write the more you will improve.

““ *I would say, you can never do enough gigs and you can never do enough songs . . . every opportunity you can, write a song. The more you write tunes, the better they will become.*”

ED SHEERAN TO INTERVIEW, DECEMBER 2011

#### 14 Cross-fertilize: try writing more than one lyric at a time

““ *Lyrics are manna from heaven, and you have to interpret them. I always have three or four songs going at once. It’s more competitive than confusing; they fight for my attention.*”

RUFUS WAINWRIGHT TO THE WORD, MAY 2007

#### 15 Think of a childhood memory and either write about it or take the core feeling of that memory and project it into an imaginary situation

Describing a childhood stay in a hospital overlooking the Thames to *Q* magazine in 2005, Ray Davies of the Kinks recalled, “I remember looking at the river and thinking how happy I was to be alive. Waterloo Bridge has featured so prominently in my life that I have taken potential girlfriends there just to see how it felt.”

““ *I had an uncle who used to tell me stories. It seems to me now his sole purpose in life was to scare me witless. A recurring character in his stories was this spider-man. When I was about six or seven, he used to try and scare me and my sister, arriving late at night and whispering. He was my bogeyman.*”

ROBERT SMITH OF THE CURE TO MELODY MAKER ON “LULLABY”

““ *A lot of early Move lyrics came from a book of fairy stories for adults that I wrote at school. It ended up in a folder in my bedroom, and I drew on it for songs like ‘I Can Hear the Grass Grow’ and ‘Flowers in the Rain.’*”

ROY WOOD OF THE MOVE TO MOJO, JANUARY 2007

**16 Go out and watch what goes on in stores**

“ I was looking for something for the kitchen in New York, in one of those long stores with cookers and fridges and microwaves and a wall of TV sets all tuned to MTV. There were these guys who delivered the kitchens, and there was this one who had his own little audience and he was going on. I sneaked behind the microwaves and just peeked through, then I went and borrowed a pen from one of the shop assistants and sat down in the kitchen display and just wrote down the things he said.”

**MARK KNOPFLER OF DIRE STRAITS TO Q ON WRITING**

**“MONEY FOR NOTHING,” JANUARY 1989**

“ Hudson’s was hip, the biggest and best department store in downtown Detroit. The holiday hustle and bustle . . . got me to feeling a little better. I avoided the toys and baby department, heading straight for the jewelry counter. Picked out some pearls for Claudette. ‘They’re beautiful,’ I told the saleslady. ‘Just hope my wife likes them.’ ‘I second that emotion,’ said Al [Cleveland, fellow Motown songwriter]. What a funny phrase, I kept thinking on the way home, dodging in and out of the holiday traffic. That afternoon we wrote the song.”

**SMOKEY ROBINSON, SMOKEY INSIDE MY LIFE**

**17 Then, when you’ve finished eavesdropping on the sales assistants, go buy a book**

“ I went into a shop and picked [Peter Reich’s *A Book of Dreams*] off the shelf, and really liked the title and the picture on the front. I’d never bought a book before which I hadn’t known anything about; I just felt I’d found something special. And nine, ten years later, I reread it and it turned into a song.”

**KATE BUSH TO MOJO ON WRITING “CLOUDBUSTING,” NOVEMBER 2005**

“ Sometimes a word or a turn of phrase excites me. I’ll see a word and think, Hmmm. That’s a cool word. Like ‘hipshot,’ that’s a cool word. I think I used that in a song once. That’s why I like reading. I’m hoping through osmosis I’ll become a better writer, since you have to read a lot if you want to be a good writer.”

**CARL NEWMAN OF THE NEW PORNOGRAPHERS TO**

**SONGWriters ON PROCESS, FEBRUARY 2015**

### 18 Keep a notebook by your bedside, in case inspiration strikes in the middle of the night

Freddie Mercury of Queen used to scribble ideas at night without even putting the light on.

“It was 3am when Bobbie Gentry woke up, inspired to write a song for her first Capitol album. A sentence scribbled on a pad of paper supplied the seed: ‘Billie Joe McAllister jumped off the Tallahatchee Bridge.’”

FRED BRONSON ON THE ORIGINS OF BOBBIE  
GENTRY’S 1967 US #1 “ODE TO BILLIE JOE”

### 19 Play some favorite songs by other people to get yourself into a different frame of mind

Many famous songs were inspired by their writers hearing other people’s songs and hoping to emulate them. Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil got the inspiration for “You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feelin’” from the Four Tops’ “Baby I Need Your Loving.” Brian Wilson’s “Don’t Worry Baby” was inspired by his love for the Ronettes’ “Be My Baby.”

“By attacking [Love’s] ‘A House Is Not a Motel’ or ‘Seven and Seven Is’ in a rehearsal room, I’ve actually found the means to start writing my own songs again. I always carry a notepad, pencil, rubber, and a French penknife, in a little Shure microphone bag, and these old songs have given me back [inspiration], and now I’m scribbling all the time.”

ROBERT PLANT TO MOJO, DECEMBER 1994

### 20 Go for a walk around an art gallery

“He did every gallery, every statue, every monument, took the imagery from that experience and turned them into songs. All those songs’ characters came from that.”

JEFF DEXTER TO MOJO ON MARC BOLAN’S MYTHOLOGICAL  
SONGS WITH TYRANNOSAURUS REX

**21 Find an exciting title from a film**

Browse a copy of *Halliwel's Film Guide* (or similar). It's optional whether you watch the film or just work with the title.

“*It's about a relationship being a very finely balanced thing that can be easily thrown off by a third party. The whole thing really came from a line in The Godfather, during some family argument, where Marlon Brando says, 'Don't interfere, it's between a man and a woman.'*”

**KATE BUSH TO NME ON THE INSPIRATION FOR HER  
SONG “BETWEEN A MAN AND A WOMAN”**

**22 Free associate to some music and record what you say**

Mike Stoller once recalled that he would hammer away at the piano while Jerry Leiber paced around the room shouting out lines and phrases that came into his head. Anything promising would be worked on. They wrote “Hound Dog” in that way. It took only ten minutes.

**23 Turn on the radio, at home or in the car**

Hear accurately *and* inaccurately. John Gourrier, writer of the 1968 John Fred and the Playboys' hit “Judy in Disguise (with Glasses),” invented his song's title after mishearing the Beatles' “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” as “Lucy in *Disguise* with Diamonds.” Bobby Hart's lyrics for the Monkees' 1966 hit “Last Train to Clarksville” were sparked by a mishearing of the Beatles' “Paperback Writer” as “take the last train.”

“*It's always coincidence [that gets creativity moving]. You hear a song on the radio and hear just the word that you've been looking for for three months, or you go to a movie and get something going on in your mind . . . all these fluke things that happen that turn into good songs.*”

**PER GESSLE, WRITER OF “JOYRIDE,” A US #1 FOR  
ROXETTE IN 1991, TO FRED BRONSON**

**24 Have an emotional crisis (this method carries a health warning)**

“ I was arguing with my girlfriend. I said, ‘Stop in the name of love,’ and we both started laughing and stopped arguing. I said, ‘What did I say?’ and she said, ‘Something about stop in the name of love.’ ”

LAMONT DOZIER TO SEAN EGAN ON WRITING THE SUPREMES HIT

**25 Become a new person . . . or a little bit of a new person**

Bruce Springsteen once said that a new song requires a new idea, and a new idea comes from being a new person. Not a *wholly* new person, but a person with new psychological growth.

**26 Write with members of your band, using a random strategy**

“ ‘Hallucinating Pluto’ came out of this game we sometimes play when we’re writing. It’s called *Exquisite Corpse*—the Surrealists invented it, I think. They’d do it with a drawing: one person would draw a head, then they’d fold the paper, and the next person would then draw in a torso. We do that with our lyrics. Everyone writes three or four lines . . . it leads you to a place you wouldn’t normally go. ”

KEITH STRICKLAND OF THE B52’S TO MOJO

**27 Read the lyrics, and listen to the music, of the pre-rock ‘n’ roll era**

That was a time when the craft and purpose of lyrics was perceived differently. Or go outside the Anglo-American tradition to songs from other countries.

“ I was listening to Noel Coward last night—incredible, incredible craft, incredible wit, incredible social commentary with humor. Stylistically, the language is a bit more formal than certainly this generation would understand. But beautiful and correct, and internal rhyme, and so much skill and so much to say without being heavy. ”

JONI MITCHELL TO MOJO, AUGUST 1998

“ In the past . . . there was more talent and there was more intelligence when it came to writing a lyric. There was more depth of feeling . . . [the present] generation was brought up on TV. They didn’t read as much as our generation did. ”

BARRY MANN TO SEAN EGAN

**28 Find someone to write with**

“Lyrically, it doesn't come as naturally as the music. When you do an album it's 12 sets of lyrics and it's quite intense, so I enjoy writing things with other people to see what they bring out in me.”

**IAN BRODIE OF THE LIGHTNING SEEDS TO MELODY MAKER**

“As far as my songwriting is concerned, I believed in working with anyone who had something to offer and although I had some regular writing partners like Mike Valvano and Morris Broadnax, I'd work with virtually anyone.”

**MOTOWN PRODUCER CLARENCE PAUL TO THE YTF NEWSLETTER**

**29 Write a group of lyrics around a theme, story, or concept**

“The older I get, the more sense it makes to write several songs about the same subject, and the LP [Stevie Wonder's *The Secret Life of Plants*] taught me that a good title is an important launch pad for any project . . . I just don't think there's the space sometimes to deal with the whole of a subject in a single song.”

**PADDY MCALOON OF PREFAB SPROUT TO MOJO, MAY 1997**

“I didn't want this to be the type of double album that's about randomness. I almost felt like I had to be more rigorous in a way, so that the themes and the songwriting pointed in the same direction.”

**EZRA KOENIG OF VAMPIRE WEEKEND TO PITCHFORK ON  
THE BAND'S 2019 ALBUM FATHER OF THE BRIDE**

**30 Write more than you need—perhaps in prose—and then edit it down**

“If there are four verses in a song, I'll write 24 verses, then almost line by line I'll go them and cross them out: that's too clever, that's too stupid, that's too arch, that's too cute . . . and then with the detritus I'm left with I put a song together—which might lead to things that are disjointed, unclear, or whatever, but which would be, if not illuminative of a condition, expressive of it.”

**GREEN GARTSIDE OF SCRITTI POLITTI TO MELODY MAKER**

## SECTION 3

# from sketch to final draft

“Don't let the critic become bigger than the creator. Don't let it strangle you. Go ahead and say, 'I saw this girl / She was the best girl in the world.' Let it go. Put a string of stuff together. Go ahead.”

**RANDY NEWMAN TO THE WORD, 2008**

After you've started a lyric, the next stage is to shape, clarify, strengthen, and finally polish the words until you have something that is coherent and self-sufficient and will fit your music.

### **Silence the perfectionist within**

If you want to write and don't feel inspired, recognize there is an outer and an inner aspect to the initial difficulty. The outer aspect is the inertia that blank paper or a blank screen embodies. The inner aspect is the perfectionist voice most of us have in our heads. This is the internalized critic who, in Newman's words quoted above, must not be allowed to become greater than the creator. In an interview with Beats 1 about her songwriting, Lorde revealed, “As a young songwriter, I would put a lot of pressure on myself. I'd write a line and then aggressively backspace . . . I would just censor myself so heavily. I felt like there wasn't room for me to write a bad song or write something that didn't necessarily fit with my vibe or whatever.”

In my experience, the worst scenario is to have to write a lyric on a particular theme (for instance, if writing on commission, or for a story). Your inner critic will provide a stream of unhelpful comments, along the lines of “that's stupid,” “that's been done before,” “that's not very interesting,” “you'll never find a rhyme for that,” “it's not as good as the one you wrote last week/month/year,” (and last but not least) “that's not perfect.” But there is a simple phrase that will stop that inner voice interfering with your creativity: *Shut up, I'm not done yet.* You write a cliché—so what? *Shut up, I'm not done yet.*