

CO-WRITING: FRIEND OR FOE?

“To my mind, good co-writing is like good sex. Those who enjoy it have usually been introduced to it painlessly. Those who don’t have had some bad experiences that determined their dislike of it for the rest of their lives. ”

I’ve been a published songwriter since I was twelve years old; my first song copyright was registered in 1963. So I’ve been writing a really, really long time.

For the first 15 years I wrote alone. I tried three co-writes over the next eight years; two were great fun, one was a complete disaster. Since moving to Nashville in 1986 I’ve probably co-written with a hundred different people, ranging from fabulously successful writers to complete unknowns, and I’ve learned something valuable each and every time.

No article can *teach* you how to co-write, any more than an article can *teach* you how to write. Like sex, these things need to be experienced in order to be learned well. What this article can do is familiarize you with the process, and maybe make it a little less frightening.

The act of creation

Consider the act of creation. To someone running across a songwriter at work, it makes no sense at all. In fact, it looks pretty boring. The songwriter may play the same line fifty times, or mutter while pacing around the room, or drop everything and watch TV for ten minutes. When I was working on “At Seventeen”, I played the two opening bars for an hour – until a neighbor rang the doorbell and said “Are you ever going to stop? It’s driving me crazy!”

To someone watching a co-writing session, it looks even odder. Here sit two people, sometimes virtual strangers, having a conversation like:

“Got something. ”

“Good, I’ve got nothing. ”

“Girl goes into waitressing to get away from husband and kids. ”

“...maybe in E?” (plays a shuffle)

“Nah... (Long pause) Reba’s cutting. ”

“Ah, she’s done this already.... Wrap-up?”

“Want to twist it?”

(Grins) “Goes home, shoots husband and kids. ” (laughter)

“Never sell... try this. ” (Plays a chord progression)

“Needs to feel sunnier. ”

“Hmph. Sunny waitress hangs on ‘til husband makes good? Serving sunny-side up eggs?”

(Laughter)

They continue with:

(Sings a line, puts guitar down.) “That sucked. Sorry. ” (Slaps self across the face)

“Yeah, it did. Guess you can’t write any more, huh?”

“Nah. Never was real good at it. ”

“Me neither. Let’s go to lunch. ”

I actually had this conversation with a well-known writer during our session. A non-writer could never understand the tension-relieving humor in those last four lines, the relief both of us felt that the other didn’t mind if we came up with nothing useful that day.

It’s a strange situation at best. Take two songwriters, slap them in a room, hope creative genius comes out. Cross your fingers they don’t take an instant dislike to one another. Hope they come up with a song, instead of talking about football the whole time.

My partner Pat once asked what I did all day at home “with those writers”. I said we were writing. “Come on...you guys meet at ten, talk for an hour, take a two hour lunch, then come back and talk for another hour. You barely play. Are you really writing?”

Of course we’re writing! It’s just that *most art takes place in a non-visible mode.*

There are all kinds of songwriters in this world – writers like Joni Mitchell, who have strong enough careers that they can afford to record only their own material. Writers like Nanci Griffith, who do

a combination of both. Writers like myself, who hope for cuts but also record their own material. Writers who never record, writers who can barely talk their way through their own songs, writers who only do drum tracks, writers who only do translations. All songwriters are different, and all co-writing situations are different.

I consider myself a “journeyman songwriter”. That means I can write just about anything you want, any way you want. I wrote “At 17” in my own time and space, straight from the heart. Kye Fleming and I wrote “Some People’s Lives”, platinum for Bette Midler, because we wanted to give a mutual friend some hope. Two days later, we wrote “Skin Off A Snake” for Charlie Daniels to sing on an episode of *Murder She Wrote* – having gotten a call that lead sheets of the melody would be delivered in an hour, and they needed lyrics for two songs the next morning.

I write for film, do translations, provide lyrics for pre-existing tracks, do editing on other peoples’ work, whatever. If you need a 2:38 minute song about a one-footed dog who saves a kidnapped child, you can call me. That’s what I mean by “journeyman songwriter”. A songwriter who can do pretty much anything in their field competently. I don’t say I’m fabulous at all those things, but I’ve worked hard these last decades to learn as much about my craft as possible.

Which brings us to co-writing.

Think about a person who goes to the same job, five days a week, for twenty years. Boredom is the bane of their existence. Businesses spend millions figuring out how to keep the guy on an assembly line from losing his mind because of the repetition.

Now think of yourself. Chances are you’ve been writing since you were a teenager. Sure, it’s an endlessly creative job, but what do you do when you get into a rut? More to the point, what do you do when the joy runs out?

When we first begin writing, it’s *all fun*. There’s huge satisfaction in the mere process – after all, that’s why we do it! We keep lists of the songs we’ve finished, counting how many we wrote last year. We finish everything, certain each idea is brilliant.

As we become more experienced, we realize our every utterance is not so dazzling. We learn which songs ought to be finished, and which should never see the light of day. We become skilled at recognizing when to cut our losses. At this point, a lot of the original delight we took in the *process* of writing becomes delight based at seeing our work improve.

We compete on a higher level, no longer content with writing something our friends like. We learn to edit during the process, and reach the point where we are our own harshest critics. By the time anyone else hears our song, it’s as perfect as we can make it – even if we’ve had to throw away a favorite line, an entire verse. We absorb tricks from other writers – making the second verse the first, twisting a well-known phrase so it’s new. We become real students of our craft.

Still later, part of the satisfaction comes from hearing our material on someone else’s voice. We discover patience, learning that water seeks its own level. When Kye and I wrote *Some Peoples’ Lives*, we *knew* it was a great song. So did our publishers. Despite that, it took five years for it to be recorded. One of the things we learn is that great songs find their way home – but sometimes it’s a long trek.

If we’re lucky enough to have success, other songwriters come courting. Producers call, asking if we have anything for their next project. Movie studios hope to snatch a hit from our mouths. At that point, we’ve learned discernment. We don’t pitch inferior work; we study the artist and make certain whatever we send is appropriate. We recognize that what hits the charts may not be our best work, or even close. We draw a distinction between commercial success and songwriting brilliance. We grow up.

Okay, you’re now a really good songwriter. Commercially successful or not, when you stack your work up next to your heroes’ work, you’re satisfied. You’re at the peak of your game.

Now think of the songwriters you admired when you began composing. How many of them are still writing as well now, ten or twenty years later? A handful if you’re lucky. We get tired. Life beats us up. We learn the tricks of the trade, and forget how to make everything new again.

Co-writing can change all of that. It really can. I know songwriters who loathe it. Usually, they’ve done so much co-writing that they’re burned out, or they’ve had a few bad experiences and are scared to try again. But for someone like myself, it’s a wonderful tool.

Two quick stories to illustrate the opposite poles; then we’ll get down to business.

My first co-write was with Albert Hammond, writer of *When I Need You* and dozens of other hits. I was extremely nervous, but my publisher insisted there was “something more in Janis Ian than you can pull out of yourself alone”. I fought it for a year, saying things like “I’ve had two hit records; why do I need this?” Luckily for me, the publisher cared more about my future as a writer than he did about my own hits.

Albert, knowing I was a “young co-writer”, showed up prepared. He had three or four melodies to play me, and a bunch of ideas for titles and subjects. When he sang a simple melody in C major, I knew it would sound great on my voice. I started singing melodies back to him as he changed the chords around. We hit what seemed an obvious place for a chorus, and he explained that part of the reason for his commercial success was that his choruses always “lifted” (they were higher in timbre than the verse.) Instinct told me the chorus would work better his way than mine. Besides, I knew I was weak on chorus writing, so we went with his idea.

Then he said “Let’s have lunch.” We sat around the local deli, talking about families, traveling, touring, anything but the song. In other words, Albert led me gently through the first half, then took my mind off my fear for a while. Afterwards, we went upstairs and finished the song. And that was that.

It was a fabulous experience for me. Here I’d written my very first “happy love song”, with a cool name (*The Other Side of the Sun*) instead of my usual cryptic title like *Page Nine*. Best of all, I liked Albert, I liked the process, and I’d learned a lot.

Jump to a month later. In his enthusiasm, my publisher phoned a hot Broadway lyricist living with her main co-writer, and asked her to write with me. He hoped she would provide me with an *entrée* into musical theatre with our co-written songs. Her publisher hoped I’d give her lyrics a depth they were lacking. But instead, the meeting was catastrophic. She walked in forty minutes late and we eyed one another – me in jeans and T-shirt, her dressed to the nines in Chanel. She plunked herself down and proceeded to tell me why she detested the man she lived with, going into graphic detail about his size and performance. An hour later, she pulled out eight folders of lyrics, said “Pick one you like”, and left. She told me at the door that she’d be back in a few hours to get the remaining lyrics, and she hoped I’d have a melody ready for her to approve by then, since she was leaving town.

That’s the other side of the coin, the co-writing appointment so painful that all you can do is hope to laugh about it one day.

So why do I co-write?

1. I’ve heard a great song, admire the writer, and wonder what we could accomplish together.
2. I’m stuck. I have something I think is wonderful, but I can’t get anywhere with it, or can’t finish it to my satisfaction.
3. The other writer has something I want, be it a talent for the commercial chorus or a bone-country feel I’ll never have on my own. I want to learn more about it.
4. I get a request from an artist or producer for a specific type of song, and know it’s a *genre* I don’t do well in melodically, or one I’m not familiar with. I call in a co-writer who can help.
5. A new artist’s manager wants part of their album to be written by the artist. They genuinely believe the artist has something to say, something personal, that belongs on the album, and they’re hoping I can help bring it out.
6. I get an “assignment”, be it TV, movies, or whatever, that interests me or pays enough to make it worthwhile. But the assignment is on a deadline so tight that I can’t make on my own.
7. Someone offers me a chance to do something I’ve always wanted to do, but I have to do it in conjunction with another writer they’ve already hired.
8. I’ve looked at my publishing statements and panicked. I think to myself that if I can hook up with someone who’s getting a lot of covers right now, I’ll have their publisher and mine working the song, and their name on it to make producers listen twice. I also figure, if they’re riding a wave of success, that they’ve got a finger on the pulse of the market, which I rarely can do. This may seem venial and greedy, but there it is.
9. I’ve been on the road so much that I’m literally out of the habit of writing, and I hope sitting down with a favorite co-writer can remind me.

10. I'm bored with my own work, and can't get out of the rut.

These are all valid reasons, and they work for me in part because *I know my own voice*. As a songwriter, I've been doing it long enough to know what's authentic and inauthentic to me when I write. I know exactly what "Janis Ian" can bring to the table, and I rarely lose my sense of personal integrity, no matter which of the reasons I listed above takes precedence.

I also think every writer should know everything they can possibly know about their craft, and I learn something new every time I co-write, even if it's a bad experience. There are a lot of things I'd still like to do as a writer, and I want to make sure I know how to do them when they're finally offered to me!

There are, however, some things I *don't* like about co-writing.

1. The failure rate. I'd say of every five co-writes, only one clicks well enough that we both walk away sure we wrote as good a song as we could write on our own. Maybe one in twenty leaves both of us feeling we wrote a *better* song than we would have written on our own. It's for that one in twenty that I keep co-writing.
2. The pressure to be commercial. When I write with someone who's had a lot of hits, there's enormous weight on their shoulders to produce another top ten song (and unfortunately, sometimes the unspoken pressure is from me). This really cuts into the fun.
3. The pressure to be profound. I know it sounds like whining, but when your hits are songs like *Society's Child* and *At Seventeen*, people expect you to be brilliant every time. If I were Diane Warren, I'd feel a great pressure to be commercial every time. As Janis Ian, I feel a great pressure to be "deep".
4. The number of younger writers who are scared of their publishers. Fear hamstring creativity! Young writers need encouragement and help with editing; they don't need to live in terror. A publisher is supposed to help make you a better writer, not treat you like dirt.
5. My own tendency to over-edit myself, which co-writing throws a harsh glare on. Sometimes I edit myself right out of a good song. When Deana Carter and I were writing *Memphis*, our second verse began "The streets were filled with cotton, and music filled the air." Deana came up with "All the paddle boats came rolling" and I followed with "from East of everywhere." I immediately tried to censor it, thinking it was too ethereal for the kind of song we were writing. Deana looked at me like I'd lost my mind and said "That's a *great* line! What's the matter with you?" What's the matter with me is that after twelve years in Nashville, I'm leery of interjecting "Janis Ian Moments" into an otherwise straight-ahead song. What's stupid is that sometimes those are the best and most heartfelt lines.
6. Asking. I *hate* asking people if they will try to co-write with me when I've never written with them before. I'm always positive I'll be turned down, or they'll laugh at me for asking.

Yes, I'm afraid people will laugh at me, or find me lacking when we write together. So is everybody else. The first day I wrote with Deana, she was so anxious that I finally said "Am I doing something that bothers you?" She grinned and replied "I just keep thinking that if we don't get a good song, everyone will say 'Oh, Janis Ian's a great songwriter. If you couldn't come up with something decent writing with *her*, you must be *awful*.'"

And I replied "From my viewpoint, you're a new writer; no one has any expectations. If the song is awful, people will say 'Boy, that Janis Ian used to be a good writer... too bad she's over the hill.' They'll figure if I couldn't pull something good out of a young, talented artist like you, *I'm* the one at fault, because I'm the one with experience."

It always cuts both ways.

Here are the basics

To my mind, good co-writing is like good sex. Those who enjoy it have usually been introduced to it painlessly. Those who don't have had some bad experiences that determined their dislike of it for the rest of their lives.

Co-writing requires all the things love-making requires – a willingness to learn each other’s likes and dislikes. A readiness to abandon yourself, and your preconceptions, while somehow holding onto your own vision of what you want and need in order to be satisfied. The ability to reveal yourself; to let go of your fear. It’s extremely intimate, because it involves great passion.

Co-writing is a different process from writing solo; make up your mind to that at the start. All artists must have confidence in their own talent, but co-writers need confidence in their ability to share that talent at its rawest, most sensitive stage. It requires throwing away any sense that what you write is yours and yours alone; you have to sublimate the natural artist’s ego to the greater good. One hopes we all do that in our solo writing, but co-writing is a real test of our ability in that area.

Learning to co-write is, again, much like learning about sex. When we’re young, we masturbate alone in our rooms. As we grow up, we have to learn to allow the same excitement to be wrung from us in, and by, the presence of another. Some people never get it. Some aren’t interested in getting it, some are scared to get it, some are embarrassed by it from the start. They’re all valid feelings.

Co-writing is also hard to break into. In Los Angeles, where writers’ leisure conversations consist of comparing royalty statements, finding someone successful who’ll co-write with you often depends on whether you’re hip enough to look good next to them in a Billboard photo. In New York, songwriters try to make sure you’ve got connections of your own to artists and producers, so they won’t have to use up their favors on your song. Co-writing becomes something you do for prestige and politics, rather than for the writing itself.

In Nashville, where I live, writers talk about three tiers: the “A list”, the “B list”, and the “C list”. The “A list” are the songwriters everyone wants to work with, either because they’re on a hit streak, or because they’re amazing writers. The “B list” are up and coming writers who may have had one hit, or written one brilliant song; time will tell whether their talent holds up. The “C list” are writers who show promise but just aren’t there yet. Getting to write with an A-list writer is a C-list writer’s dream. They think a co-write with a well-known, powerful writer will immediately catapult them onto the charts.

It’s problematic that way. I try to co-write to improve my work, but I have the luxury of earning my living through other outlets. And I was lucky that I moved to Nashville as an established writer, with a good list of recordings by well-known artists. As Thom Schuyler (recipient of 3 BMI Pop Achievement Awards and 18 BMI Country Achievement Awards) pointed out during my first week, “You have no idea how many steps you’ve skipped.” It took me a while to realize just how true his words were, as I watched people like two-time Grammy winner Don Schlitz and Jon Vezner (*Where’ve You Been?*) slowly make their way to the top of the tier.

What older songwriters always tell younger songwriters is this: if you’re going to co-write, try to co-write with people above your level. They don’t mean people above your level of success; they mean above your level of experience, of talent, of ability. It’s important to remember this.

One of the things Don and Thom both told me was that if I were going to co-write on a regular basis, both they and the rest of the songwriting community would expect me to write with people who were less successful and less experienced than myself. They said “It’s part of your obligation to the community. We need to help younger songwriters learn to be better songwriters, just as others helped us.” That attitude was one of the things that made me love Nashville.

I don’t say that Joe Blow can walk up to Diane Warren and say “Hey, I’d like to write with you”, and expect a positive response! Heck, *I* can’t walk up to her and expect that. But part of the debt an experienced co-writer owes is to continue the educational process; to seek out newer, younger writers.

Ree Guyer of Wrensong Publishing has a rule of thumb when she signs a new writer – they co-write for six months. Not to the exclusion of solo writing, but they must make a six-month commitment to try co-writing as well, and form new relationships. It doesn’t matter how experienced the writer is; that’s Ree’s preference.

Why make a solo writer go through a bunch of co-writes that may never work? Why force an established writer who already has good co-write affiliations to shop around again? Guyer answers “I would still encourage an experienced writer to do it, just to find out if there’s a new relationship out there, someone they wouldn’t have been exposed to before. Harlan Howard is a good example of a successful writer willing to take a gamble – he looks at the landscape. That’s part of why he’s still so successful....

Even if it doesn't click with someone, you always come away learning something from that person. It may help you write a song by yourself better. You even learn from the bad situations. ”

But what make a good co-writer? What are we looking for?

A good co-writer...

1. ...knows lunch is important! Silly? Not at all. A great deal of the creative process takes place on a non-conscious level; scientists have mapped areas of the brain that don't seem to do anything the rest of the time, but light up when we're inventing. That part of the brain needs time and space away from the rest of our thought processes. How many times have you been stuck on a song, let it go to do some mundane chore, and come back with the solution? Lunch gives both writers a breather, while allowing the “back of their brains” to continue tackling the problems of the day.
2. ...does not intimidate or run roughshod over you. Even the lamest idea can lead to greatness.
3. ...understands that some days, you can't write anything but crap. They know no one's always at their best. It doesn't make them crazy; they just suggest you finish early, or try again another time.
4. ...knows you don't have to be a good singer or player in order to be a great songwriter. In fact, it's often just the opposite.
5. ...is open to change, and to changing something they love. Jim Photoglo (who's written for Faith Hill, Dusty Springfield, The Everly Brothers, and James Ingram) says “I had written a piece of music I loved. The feel, the changes, and the melody fit perfectly together...up-tempo, positive, surely a love song. I took it to a session with Wendy Waldman, who'd just finished listening to *Prairie Home Companion*. I played the tape for her, and she said, ‘Let's write a song about fishing.’ My first reaction was to run away screaming. But I trusted her. The song, *Fishin' In the Dark*, was a number one record for The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. It's among *Billboard Magazine's* Top 200 Recurring Country Singles of All Time, and won two BMI Million-Air's awards. The lesson: trust. Say yes. You can always go back and change. Say no, and everything comes to a halt.”
6. ...doesn't believe their ideas are set in stone. When I first worked with Buddy Mondlock (recorded by Nanci Griffith and Peter, Paul, and Mary, among others), he was brand new in town. We wrote a first verse starting with a few wonderful lines he'd brought in, and when we were done with that verse, I said “Feels like a chorus should come now.” Buddy demurred, saying choruses were old-fashioned and he didn't write them. I thought about it for a minute; the song *needed* a chorus. “I didn't move to Nashville so I wouldn't write choruses!” I argued, and suggested we go ahead and write one; we could always ditch it later. The upshot was *Amsterdam*. His publisher loved it, his audience loved it, and best of all, Joan Baez recorded it, giving Buddy his first cover record. So the less preconceptions and expectations you bring to the session, the better the work will go - and that includes preconceptions about your own work.
7. ...doesn't take it personally when it fails. Gary Nicholson (who's written for B. B. King, Bonnie Raitt, and a host of others, and also produces Delbert McClinton) is very dear to me. He's someone I would call if I were in trouble, and I always love seeing him. However, we've tried to write four or five times now, and never been able to finish anything we liked. I still like Gary though!
8. First and foremost, a good co-writer is enthusiastic about the process – both the process of creation, and the process of creating with you.

Finding the right partner

For me, writing with Kye Fleming was like coming home. Kye and her former writing partner, Dennis Morgan, had been stupendously successful in country music throughout the late 1970's; at one point, their songs occupied four of the top five country single slots. She'd been BMI Writer Of the Year with him for three years running, and was arguably the most successful female songwriter in country music history. A few years earlier, she'd decided to take some time off. When we met, she was ready to write again.

It was magic from the first. Our publishers' instincts were correct; putting a writer like me with Kye, whose great strength to date had been in the commercial arena, lent our work a universality I'd rarely touched. Putting Kye, trained to sacrifice all for the hit chorus or refrain, with someone like me, who forced her to take right angles to that, lent her work a depth that had never been apparent before. It was the ideal co-write relationship, where each person's weakness is hidden, and each one's strength is amplified. Magic such as that is rare.

And long-term co-writing teams are rare. Sometimes both parties get burned out, tired of working together. There have been teams notorious for their loathing, never speaking to one another unless actively writing a song. Sometimes the team are a married couple who get divorced; the writing always suffers. Most of the time, people who've had huge success as part of one co-writing team never repeat that financial or artistic success with anyone else. Richard Rodgers, who wrote scores of hit songs with both Lorenz Hart and Oscar Hammerstein, is a notable exception.

Some songwriters are brilliant, but they're only as good as their partner. I have a friend who's a brilliant lyricist *when he writes with me*. When he writes with other people, his tendency is to veer off into the tried and true. Unfortunately, those formulas, set in place decades ago when he spent most of his time at the top of the charts, no longer guarantee airplay. But when we write, he boldly goes where he's never gone before, and he's staggeringly good.

A good co-writing team is seamless; it shows off the best of both parties, and covers up the worst. If you're weak on choruses, they're strong. If they can't do lyrics, you can. But just as all solo songwriters are different, no two co-writing teams are alike. My own limited experience reminds me of this. Bruce Roberts likes starting with a drum machine is handy, Jon Vezner usually starts with a title or concept. Gary Burr's voice is so good that you go with his suggestions just to hear him sing. Teo Macero won't allow you to change an eighth-note of his melody, while Giorgio Moroder doesn't care so long as you leave the chorus alone. Maurice White gave me a track with full-blown melody and title, while Nick Mundy's track didn't have a melody at all. When I worked with Vince Gill and Kye Fleming, Vince spat out chorus after chorus into the tape recorder, each one better than the last, but he was bored with verses. Every situation is different. And mind you, each of those people also works in other ways. There are no hard and fast rules here.

Two types of writers

To my mind there are two types of songwriters – those who write mainly from feelings, and those who write mainly from the charts. There's nothing wrong with either; they're both good to work with. I believe the ultimate reason for this is our talent – we're born leaning toward one or the other. I'm a pretty good songwriter, but I can't write "for radio". I just don't have that ear. Diane Warren has a gift for the commercial moment that few of us are born with. Just as Lennon-McCartney were completely in tune with their times, Diane taps into a universality and timeliness that keeps her work at the top of the charts.

It's important to know which way you tilt when searching for a co-writer. Even if it's someone to work on a specific song or project with you, ask yourself whether they need to be strong lyrically or musically, whether you require a commercial bent, or someone who'll give the idea more depth. For instance, a writer looking for a commercial melody to a pre-existing lyric would be a fool to contact me. It's not my strength. In the same vein, I don't need a co-writer to add complication or intensity to my work; I do that naturally. What I usually need is rhythm, and an overview, because I tend to lose the forest for the trees. It's always good to break out of your box, to have someone who turns right angles to your natural talent.

The different types of co-writers

Co-writers can be divided into a few general categories, though none of them fit anyone precisely enough to turn it into science!

a) Younger or inexperienced writing partners

I'm using this to denote writers who haven't been writing songs for very long themselves, or haven't co-written much before. This is a scary position for both parties. An inexperienced co-writer is much like a virgin – you have to reassure them that the first time probably won't be anything to write home about. When I worked with Albert Hammond, my first co-write experience, he immediately said

“Y’know, I don’t really care if we come up with anything today. I like your work, and I’m looking forward to hanging out with you.” That took a huge amount of pressure off me.

Young writers are usually very possessive of their ideas, hating to change things or throw anything out. They worry about sounding cool and making their mark, rather than just writing well. Perhaps their greatest weakness is the tendency to see the process as a competition, however unconsciously. Sometimes they count *coups*, checking how many lines they’ve contributed.

On the plus side, they’re *excited*. They hear with fresh ears, taking things an older writer would discount as having “been done already” and using them in new and exhilarating ways. They bring a lot of joy to the table, and that’s invaluable.

There are many things an experienced writer can give a young co-writer that are helpful to the community as a whole – self-confidence, for example. The feeling that someone is listening. Suggestions and hard-earned lessons on etiquette and morality where business is concerned. It’s important not to assume “inexperience” means “without talent”. As an older writer, I’ve been brought up short more than once by a young co-writer who came out with the one blinding idea that made the song.

b) Older or very experienced writing partners

Our ears are formed by the music we grow up on; new ways of structuring a song can be very uncomfortable to someone whose formative years began three decades ago. It’s a rare older writer who can let go to the point of going with something completely alien to their history. They can “pull rank”, saying “That’s not a hit - I should know.” They can be bored, and boring, with their craft. These are not pleasant situations for the co-writer.

Older writers can also be so accustomed to partnering that they move too fast for a younger writer to keep up. By the time the new writer has worked through a line and its various permutations, the older writer is halfway through the second verse. We’ve learned to do most of our editing in our heads, not aloud or on paper. It’s tough to slow down. This happens even among peers; Don Schlitz and Paul Overstreet are both so quick that I can’t really write with either. I move more slowly than that, I need more time to process. I know that’s just the way I am, but for the younger writer, it can be very intimidating.

The benefits for a young writer able to work with someone more experienced are obvious. Their understanding of the business, their knowledge of the craft, are an invaluable resource. If the older writer is successful and respected, the patina will rub off as the young writer tells his publisher “I just wrote a song with Willie Nelson!”

There’s also the insight and perception an older writer brings to the table. Jamie O’Hara is one of the most successful songwriters in Nashville today, with hits by George Jones, The Judds, and Trisha Yearwood. He swept floors at Tree Publishing when he came to Nashville, and credits much of his success to the generosity of writers like Harlan Howard, who’d say “Hey kid – you write? Play me something!”, then critique his work.

c) Performers as writing partners

During my first week in Nashville, I sat down to co-write with Thom Schuyler. We were working on *A Love Like That* (which later became a hit for Judy Rodman), and I came up with what I thought was a splendidly interesting line. Thom said “Wow... That’s a *great* ‘Janis Ian’ line. Just great.... Too bad no one else will sing it.” At first I was offended, but I quickly realized he was correct. We were supposedly writing in the hope of hitting a universal, and getting a cut – but I was writing with only myself in mind. It was a good lesson.

Performing/recording artists are a completely different type of writer than the pure songwriter. Artists bring a very distinctive style to the mix, something many songwriters can’t do. They often have a clear vision of what they want, and how they want it to sound. Their egos are such that they have no problem telling you their deepest secrets, sure you’ll find great material in them – and you often do. They’re hungry for good material for their own projects, so they try hard. Your chance of getting a cut is also greater if the singer co-wrote the song, and that makes management happy, too.

But sometimes the singer isn’t a songwriter. Sometimes they don’t even want to be a writer; they’ve been pushed into it by their management. This can be incredibly painful for all concerned. In the words of Ree Guyer, owner of Wrensong publishing, “As publishers, we try of course to do the co-write

with an artist when we can, but I always try to make sure the artist is really a writer... and that they have an idea of who they are and what they want to say.”

Ree adds “I have writers who are really good at pulling out of an artist what’s going on with them, and their story – then they feel very attached to the song. Sometimes the artist doesn’t have to be a ‘writer’ if they know who they are and their direction.”

It’s true that when a professional writer is close to an artist emotionally, they may be able to write a song that tells that artist’s story, and is a co-write, even when most of what the artist contributes is their feelings and the things they want to say. The artist may not be able to rhyme, scan, or find a metaphor, but they can still be a viable co-writer.

Time constraints are a problem when your co-writer is a full-time performer and recording artist. Performers live on the road; it’s the only thing that makes economic sense. You may find yourself doing a lot of long-distance co-writing over the telephone, or using tapes and email. This works for some people.

d) Writers from the radio vs. writers from the heart

This is a difficult distinction, because I truly believe some people are gifted with commerciality, and others are not. And I’m convinced that while you can learn to write more *toward* the charts, you can’t learn that talent. You have it, or you don’t. Additionally, no good writer can write solely “for radio” or “for cuts”. The heart has to be a part of it, too.

Writers who try to write solely from a commercial viewpoint, geared toward getting covers and hits, are usually more oriented toward music. Music is, after all, the first thing our brains register. Given the subject matter, if my song *At Seventeen* hadn’t had such a catchy melody and track, I don’t think it would ever have been a hit.

When I worked with Giorgio Moroder, who provided me with a track and melody, I asked for some direction lyrically. Giorgio said “I don’t care; the track is the thing.” I asked how he worked creatively, and he replied that he studied the market, studied the singer, and went from there. I said “But Giorgio, what about art?” and he laughed, saying “Art... yes, once I did Art... Now I make money.”

He did – the song, and our record went platinum in 14 territories, including England and Australia.

Giorgio is the exception rather than the rule among songwriters, and in fact did not define himself as a songwriter when I worked with him. He was a producer who happened to create tracks and melodies. And he remains the only successful commercial writer I’ve met who did not keep the “integrity of the song” paramount in their thoughts.

When I try to sell out, no one’s ever buying, and it seems to be the same with writers who achieve huge commercial success. Their greatest triumphs are always the songs that came from the heart. If you don’t inject your essence into whatever you do – be it writing for your audience, writing for the radio, writing for record companies – you may have some success, but it won’t be long-term. Here’s this story from writer Jess Leary (who’s been covered by artists like Victoria Shaw, Pam Tillis, and Tim McGraw):

“I had a writing appointment with someone I truly admired. On my way into the writing room, I had to walk past a long hallway plastered with platinum records, which didn’t help my nerves. But I felt like I had a really good idea. . . I wanted to write a Christmas song and call it ‘The Holly Tree’. I played her bits of a Christmas-type happy little melody I thought might be fun. She asked me the story behind it, and I began telling her that my father was a builder who’d rescued this pretty little holly tree in the dead of winter, rather than have it bulldozed down for a house lot. We got to talking about my family, and I could feel the door starting to unlock all the old emotions and painful memories. I talked about my father’s problems with alcohol, how I treasure my good memories of him. She looked me square in the eye and said ‘That’s your song, that’s the story we need to write. Not something that’s just cute and pretty, but the *story* of why you loved him so much.’ I knew she was right. It just never occurred to me to be so truthful in a song. If there’s one thing I learned, it’s that the truth shines through, and nothing is more powerful than honest emotion.”

The publisher’s take on co-writing

For every publisher I spoke with who actively seeks out new partnerships for their writers, I spoke with another who said “Best to leave them alone with it”. I’m going to let a few publishers speak for themselves, and you can draw your own conclusions.

Dave Conrad (Almo Irving Publishing): “As a publisher, I want somebody who can go home and write a great song by themselves. I find that sometimes, with a writer who’s getting hot, I have to encourage the writer to take a week for themselves. Co-writing is a drug sometimes, the easy way out...the hot writer suddenly has so much work, and it’s so competitive, that they feel a need to generate a lot of material. Co-writing becomes the shortest distance between two points.... Songwriting is a lonely business, and sometimes you don’t want to be alone. It’s fun to be lifted up by another writer. But you never want to lose that individuality. That muscle, of being able to create on your own, may atrophy.

“The down side for us as publishers is the economics. It’s born of a need to generate as much material as possible, and often to get two publishers working on the same song. The publisher says ‘I’m willing to sacrifice half a copyright if you’ll write twice as many songs.’ We’re overworked, so two teams is better; that’s just mechanics...but the more important picture is developing the writer, and maintaining the essence of this individual that attracted you to them in the first place. Of course it’s better to give me 50 songs to pitch Reba than eight, but I don’t drive the writers that way. I’d rather pitch one great song than 50 all right songs.... Co-writing is a refresher sometimes. . When you feel stale on your own, it’s something to fall back on. But individuality has to be paramount. ”

Kim Hylick (Bug Music): “I’ve seen a lot of cases where a new writer suddenly gets barraged, and doesn’t know how to be selective. They start writing with everyone, over-booking themselves and running themselves into the ground. There’s a tendency to demo everything, and pitch songs that just shouldn’t be out there, all because they can now write twice as many. It hurts their reputation. Part of my job is to prevent that, to educate them. ”

Ree Guyer (Wrensong): “Co-writing is not a good thing if you’re just trying to churn out songs. I really believe in quality versus quantity, and I think sometimes the co-writing gets you in a rut of ‘Let’s get together and turn out a song because we have to’ instead of getting the inspiration. You follow through on something that might be mediocre, and it’s a waste of everyone’s time...I want to know that writers can write by themselves – unless they’re only a lyricist, in which event that’s their specialty – but that’s an exception...You can hang on to your own “voice” through co-writing. That’s what I say to my writers – nobody has a voice like *your* voice, just like the snowflakes. Every person is unique and has something different, and valid, to bring to a situation. Don’t forget that, because if you just homogenize to be like someone else, then you’re going to get mediocrity...”

Moral issues – the ugly side of co-writing

I’ve read a lot of other peoples’ books on songwriting, and it seems to me that none of them ever talk about the moral or ethical issues in co-writing. Partly that’s because we’re artists – we have the ego to assume everyone shares our worldview. Partly it’s because we don’t want to throw a wrench in the works, to bring up legal or ethical issues that might jinx our creativity. But here are a few of the problems areas I’ve encountered:

1. *Splits*. This is probably the biggest day-to-day problem for writers and publishers; how does the money get split? Splits are normally done on the “honor system”; the assumption is that splits will be even. But artists are easily swayed, and with enough pressure from a label or publisher, even the nicest artist can become optimistically greedy. I once wrote with a dance artist who literally gave me a track – no melody, no lyric, no title. I wrote the song, he recorded it, and then I got a call saying the his management wanted 2/3 of the split! The publisher represented both of us, so it made no difference to their royalty stream; they were no help. I did some research and discovered our song was the first single; advertising was due to start in a week. This gave me enough leverage to say “No”, and the splits stayed even. However, this is not something you always have the luxury to do. If you’re going to insist on principle, you have to be willing to give up whatever that cut might offer in the long run. Personally, I come from the “even split” school. When I first came to Nashville, Don Schlitz and I wrote a song where he contributed the melody, chorus lyric, and first verse. I felt funny about splitting it 50/50, but Don said “What goes around comes around – you’ll do the same one day. It’s easier this way. ” Sure enough, five years later I worked with a co-writer who contributed exactly two lines to a song; he felt funny about a 50/50 split, and I quoted Don to him. We split it evenly, the song was covered and went double-platinum, and I’ve never regretted it.

I have heard that this is a growing problem among songwriters, particularly in the “Christian” field for some reason. I’ve heard of writers literally making a line by line count, then dividing the splits pro-rata. That’s impossible! Do chorus lines get more points than verse lines, because the chorus is a fulcrum? What if someone only contributes one word to a line? How very difficult. Even splits keep life simple. Look at it this way – if the record’s a hit, that portion you gave up would go to the IRS anyway. If it’s not a hit, who cares?!

2. *Being held hostage by the singer.* I had a co-write song that a multi-platinum artist wanted to record – great! He phoned me and said “This will be a hit if I add one more verse.” What nonsense – adding a fourth verse would make it a hit? We knew the game. The co-writer and I discussed it; we’d probably lose the cut if we said no, so we said yes, provided this version was given a slightly different name. The singer added a verse, and took 1/3 of the copyright (on his version only – we negotiated that up front). Maybe he really believed that would make it a hit, maybe he just wanted the money – I’ll never know. The cut and prestige were worth it to us, but that’s not always true.
3. *Faked credits.* Rare, but not unknown. Rumor has it if you wanted a Frank Sinatra cut, you left the lead sheet on his desk with his name listed as co-writer. This is particularly true in television. Sometimes a producer will insist on credit because he/she recommended the song and “created” the track. That isn’t songwriting.
4. *Being held hostage by your publisher,* who insists you co-write – a lot. Your contract says you have to provide the publisher with 10 songs a year in order to get next year’s salary. In December you discover that means ten self-written songs – or twenty co-writes. You lose your draw (your financial stipend) until you turn in another 10 “satisfactory” songs. Hey, idiot – read the contract before you sign it!
5. *Separation of credits between lyricist and musician.* I insist that credits say “Music and lyrics by Janis Ian and…” because once I wrote the lyrics to a pre-existing melody, recorded it, and had a number one record in Japan. The melodist turned around and licensed the melody separately, raking in thousands of dollars for everything from karaoke bars to Muzak in elevators, and I got nothing. I also think it’s more fair this way; after all, one wouldn’t exist without the other.
6. *The “boys club”.* When I came to Nashville, I wrote with male co-writers every day, five days a week, for three weeks. No one offered to take me for a drink at the end of the day. Not one offered to show me around town, or invited me to their home on the weekend. Since they were the only people I was meeting, it got very lonely. Songwriter Amy Sky finally explained it to me: “They’re not going to tell their wives they went out drinking with a woman. They’re not going to bring you home to their wives for dinner. They’re not going to be seen driving around a small town with a strange woman in the front seat next to them.” It’s silly, it’s stupid, but it’s a real problem for female writers. “The boys” go fishing, golfing, get tickets to sports events together. They form new business relationships in each group that gathers, relationships with publishers, artists, producers. They don’t invite us, and we lose out. This is less an issue with the younger male writers, but it’s still there. And unfortunately, the male writers remain blissfully unaware of it. I would say to them – pretend we (the female writers) are male, and behave accordingly. Don’t shut us out.
7. *Adding a writer.* You finish a song, your co-writer demos it, and you discover they weren’t happy with it but they forgot to tell you – now they’ve brought in another writer. Who gets a third. That’s not the way to do it! When I began writing with Dan Seals, we had two songs with great choruses, but were completely stuck on the verses. I finally suggested bringing in a third writer, in this case Jess Leary, to see if we could make the songs work. They did, but in part that was because all parties agreed up front. Not being up front costs you relationships and integrity.
8. *Losing an idea.* Ree Guyer’s take on this is absolute: “You might take an idea into a co-writer, you start getting going, and neither of you likes where you are. Do you take back your idea? Yes! You say ‘I don’t like where this is going’. It’s the writer’s responsibility to leave the room knowing what they want to do with the song. The young writer needs to be able to say ‘Can I take

my idea back?”

Sometimes it's more complicated than that, but in general, professional writers understand this.

9. *Writing with non-writers.* Working with artists is the surest way to get a cut; that's obvious. The next best bet is writing with the artist's producer, whose role is often to sit in the room as you write and say things like "She won't sing that line" or "She won't like that word". Most artists and producers are moral; if they can't contribute, they don't want to be a part of it. But some are not, and if you enter that arena, you may end up resenting them for their lack of talent as they grab half your royalties. On the other hand, you might also get a hit record out of it. I enjoy writing with artists who may not be writers in their own right, but bring enthusiasm and plenty of ideas to the process, but I find it very difficult to "write" with someone who contributes nothing. It's a personal choice.
10. *Making friends – or losing them.* Gretchen Peters (whose songs have been recorded by Trisha Yearwood, Martina McBride, and Bonnie Raitt) says of Nashville, "In a town where co-writing is the norm, and for songwriters it's also the main opportunity for finding friends and comrades, it's tough to say no." She's right. When you become successful, publishers urge their writers to work with you. Those writers may already be your friends, and turning them down for any reason – even if it's that you want to write more alone – is almost always taken personally.
11. *Jealousy.* Brenda Andrews of Almo-Irving once said to me, "Be careful in a great co-write relationship, because it becomes like a marriage. Beware of being too deep in each other's pockets. Watch out for jealousy." When the partnership really works, it's easy for one party to begrudge the time the other spends writing with "the competition". I used to write a lot with someone who became very resentful if I wrote with someone else; they pressured me not to co-write "outside the team". That's fine if you both make the decision, but it's hard when only one of you feels that way. I also wrote steadily with someone who became angry when I recorded our songs; she thought it unfair that the album reviews never mentioned her. Jealousy is unworkable in any relationship; try not to mess up a perfectly good writing partnership with it.
12. *Sheer duplicity.* Since writers almost never work with a written contract, it's easy for someone unscrupulous to go back on their word. Years ago, I got a call two days before Christmas from a fellow producing a new artist named John O'Kane; the artwork was finished, background vocals done, but the record company wanted new lyrics to six songs. Could I finish them in a week? The release date was January 15th! I listened to what he'd sent me; the record was really great, and extremely commercial, but the lyrics weren't up to the standard of the music or vocalist. Thinking "*When am I going to get the opportunity to write six songs for a project this good again?*", I cancelled my Christmas plans. It was grinding, back-breaking work. The artwork was finished, so I couldn't change titles. The background vocals were done, so my lyrics had to fit them. Horrible, but also a terrific challenge – and again, the music was fabulous. I turned it in on time, the record company were thrilled... and five days before release, someone from O'Kane's management called to say "Of course this is a 20/80 split, 80% to us." I was so furious that I withdrew the lyrics. Their greed cost them the record; it didn't make its release date, the record company lost their enthusiasm, and worse yet, a terrific record was sacrificed to greed.
13. *Repair work.* When does helping a friend out by saying "Why don't you put the chorus here instead?" or "What about changing these two lines to this?" become co-writing instead of helping a friend? Some songwriters are bears about this, thinking that if they add a single word, it's a co-write. I think helping a friend who's stuck, and keeping the friendship, are more important. It's very situational, and I find that the "original" songwriter will usually suggest a split if they think it's warranted. It's then up to me to take it or decline. When in doubt, talk it out.

Some do, some don't

As pro co-writing as I am, I realize it's not appropriate for everyone. Sometimes it's not appropriate for me – I spend so much time on the road that it's imperative I take time to write alone, to sort myself out. I believe Gretchen Peters makes the case *against* co-writing much better than I can:

“When I moved to Nashville (1987) there was a real push from publishers and record labels to ‘put writers together’, like science experiments. ‘You need to write with X’ was also the prefab response you got from any publisher who wasn’t interested in signing you, or didn’t think you were ready for prime time. I made several attempts to co-write, but always felt miserable about it. Thanks to my first publisher, I didn’t spend too much time trying to force myself into that box. He recognized that I was uncomfortable with it...and that I was writing more interesting songs without it. He told me (and I will be forever grateful) to forget about co-writing, that it wasn’t necessary.... Almost all of my attempts at co-writing have left me feeling that something was diminished, rather than enhanced, by the process. I take complete responsibility for this, and feel sure that it’s my own fault. My co-writers have certainly proved it by having plenty of success with other co-writers. I’ve tried to understand what it is in me that isn’t suited to co-writing, if only as a way of explaining to potential co-writers that I’m not being snooty when I say no. I guess for me, the real reason is that if I have an idea for a song that I feel very strongly about, I feel very strongly about it! In other words, I have some sort of instinct about what it will be, fully realized; and at the same time I feel incapable, in the early stages, of conveying that to another person. It may be only a word, or a title, but for me it has power. My first instinct is to protect that power; to build the rest of the song around it and let nothing diminish it. It’s harder to sit with yourself and wait for the song to ‘tell you what it wants to be’, but to me it’s infinitely preferable to asking someone else, who may have an entirely different impression of the idea. In a sense, the difference between the two is that one demands the use of one’s subconscious, and the other encourages more learned, conscious craft. Writing alone feels to me like sculpting - chipping away until only the essential intent of the song is left. Co-writing feels more like painting - applying layers until the desired effect is reached. There’s no right or wrong about either one; it’s only a matter of what suits the song and the writer.”

In summation

The etiquette of a co-writing session is easy - arrive on time, be ready to work, know what works for you. Deana Carter says “My rule of thumb is: be prepared. I find I’m most excited about the songs that come from my experiences. . . my feelings. . . my ‘homework’! I feel much more confident about co-writing when I come to the union with some music and lyrics that I’ve hammered on a little.”

Other writers prefer to walk in and see what the moment brings. Know which makes you comfortable.

If you use them, bring a tape recorder that works, spare batteries, cassettes; don’t depend on your co-writer to supply your work product.

Don’t sit on your cell phone for half the session; it diminishes your co-writer.

Avoid overbooking yourself, or working with overbooked writers. I’ve worked with writers who allotted as little as two hours to the writing session, because they had three others booked that same day.

Be clear on your motives, both to yourself and your co-writer. If you’re writing for your publisher, explain that. As Fred Koller says “I’m tired of co-writers who won’t fight for a good sad song because they’ve been told by their publishers that they only want up tempo positive contemporary hit singles with strong family values.” Warn someone up front that you only want to write that sort of song. It’s unfair to the other writer if they’re walking in eager to write a great song, period, and you’ve laid all those conditions on the work.

Philip Clark says “If you’re going to try it, make sure you try it with several people, several times. Give yourself, and the process, a chance. If it’s your first time, shelve all the ways you normally write, so you can learn how someone else does it. Always have a couple of things up your sleeve – maybe a developed chord sequence or melody, or a topic.”

Don’t let fear hold you back. Every time I go into a co-write, I’m convinced my talent will desert me – they’ll be faster, smarter, more consistent than I am. They’ll play better, sing better, write better. I have to remind myself that co-writing isn’t about showing off; it’s about writing great songs. It’s not who gets there first; it’s who gets there best that counts.

Don’t let greed push you forward. Don’t lose your morals, don’t settle for inferior work – either your own, or your co-writer’s. Keep the same standards you keep for your own writing, or make them higher. One plus one should equal two, not one!

And ultimately, remember that you started doing this because it brought you great joy. No matter what your publisher wants, or what the market suggests, ultimately you must write for yourself, and the good of the song. You're the one who'll be living with it three decades from now. If you're co-writing, you should be enjoying the process, and the end result.

Fred Koller's email to me regarding this article has a wonderful ending, which I will now steal. He wrote:

"I have written with hundreds of co-writers, but if I had to chose a favorite I would quickly say Shel Silverstein. He believed in the songs we created and his belief never faltered. Twenty years after we wrote 'Jennifer Johnson and Me' he was still as excited about it as if it was our newest song. He was always encouraging and I never felt that he was holding anything back when we collaborated. I always looked forward to co-writing with him knowing that I would always walk away inspired. Hopefully *my* co-writers feel the same way. "

Remember that as you make your choices. Remember that twenty years from now, some writer will be recalling their session with you – and hope they are still as grateful to you for the experience.

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