

SONGWRITERS ON INSPIRATION

(As interviewed by **Bill DeMain**)

“I have a theory that the only original things we do are mistakes. Everything that I think I’ve ever done that was good was done purely by accident, purely by serendipity. I recognized it to be something good after I did it. That takes talent to do. But to screw up I don’t think takes that much talent. It takes humanity to do that. It’s good to be a human being.” - **Billy Joel**

“To be a true songwriter, you have to really allow yourself to feel and allow yourself the freedom to write it the way you want to.” - **Dolly Parton**

“Learn your technique, learn what Beethoven knew. Beethoven wasn’t a sellout. He knew his way around his keyboard and he understood music. If you only rely on the ‘letting it flow through you’ shit - your song will probably last five years that way. As soon as everyone else who let it flow through them at the same time and had the same little life is going to pass on and be working at IBM with you. You should treat your art as a craft and a discipline too. Learn the tricks of the masters. When I get stuck in a song and I don’t know where I am, I find myself using concepts of composition that come from studying classical composition.” - **Ben Folds**

“You have to continue to renew. You mustn’t ever stop. If you stop, you’re dead. There must be new ways to write and think. To say that a song form is clearly defined by one era’s version of it is so incredibly negative and lacking in joy. There are no rules about what can be in a pop song or a jazz song or any other kind of song. It is about freedom.” - **Elvis Costello**

“There’s a line in our song ‘How Do You Keep The Music Playing?’ that says, ‘How do you think of new things to say?’ That’s the thing. I’ve often thought, what the world certainly doesn’t need is one more song. Unless you can find an original way of saying something. Most songs are love songs of one kind or another. But to find the variation that maybe is a little different than all the literature has dealt with, that’s the challenge. To not repeat what came before you, which is why you have to know what came before you, I think.” - **Marilyn Bergman**

“I think you learn the rules so you can break the rules.” - **Burt Bacharach**

“There are days when ideas don’t come to me, and I can make a choice - I’m going to sit down and force it out, or I’m just going to do something else for a few days. To a big degree, there are songwriting wheels that get greased in your head. It can be a lot of work to get them moving. Once they get going, it just starts pouring out of you. You take notes and you write everything down, and it cannot be turned off. Morning, noon, and night. Driving in a car. Trying to go to sleep. These lines keep coming to your head. You’ve got to get the wheels moving. Once you do, grab onto something solid and hang on.” - **Jakob Dylan**

“People have often asked me, ‘How do you write songs?’ and to me, it’s ‘How do you not write songs?’ Open up your eyes, take a look at what’s going on around you and surely, you’ve got to scream inside to let your thoughts out.” - **Graham Nash**

“I think you have to listen to all music, then put your heart in it and decide what you want to do, then just cry it out louder than anyone has ever said it.” - **Valerie Simpson**

“It’s absolutely essential that I get surprised and excited by what I’m doing, even if it’s just for me. I think process is quite important, to allow the accidental to take place is often very good. So I trick myself into things like that. Maybe I’ll write out five or six chords, then discipline myself to write something only with those five or six chords involved. So that particular dogma will dictate how the song is going to come out. Not me and my sense of emotional self. Of course, I’ll cheat as well. If I’ve got the basis of something really quite good coming out of those five or six chords, then I’ll allow myself to restructure it a bit, if I think, ‘Well, that could be so much better if it went to F-sharp’ or something like that. But, define the rules, then take it as far as you can go with that little rule, then break it.” - **David Bowie**

“My favorite way to write, and it works every time, is to get really upset. Really frustrated and upset, usually with some guy, and write a song to sort of make it through that discomfort and then feel superior to them (laughs). I don’t think I court these situations purposely, but I’m sure I do subconsciously. My whole life is structured in a way that I seek out disaster in order to write songs for other people to enjoy.” - **Rufus Wainwright**

“Believe that you can do it. Half of writing a song is believing that you can do it.” - **Neil Finn**

“When I was starting out, Frank Loesser gave me some great advice. He drew me a picture of a freight train, using different colored crayons that he had on his desk. And he explained that a song to him has to have a great engine, a great locomotive that pushes it. And then it has to have a caboose, a colorful red caboose with a twist or something ends the song in an unusual way. Then the cars in the middles are the filler. It was a wonderful, child-like lesson, but it’s very good advice.” - **Jerry Herman**

“I’ve found that by looking at songbooks, you start to internalize what a good song is. And it can be old songs from an anthology of folk music or really complex art songs. You start to internalize what a song is and how it fits together. It becomes part of your grammar.” - **David Byrne**

“I’ve had people come up and say, ‘I would like to be a singer/songwriter,’ and my first advice is ‘Then stop saying I would like to be and start saying *I am*.’ Because that perception of something eventually happening is just as elusive as a cloud. If you are a singer/songwriter, then you start looking for ways to be that where you are. I always tell people that there is no guarantee that this will pay the bills, but if it’s who you are, then it’s who you are and go on and admit it.” - **Amy Grant**

“The more coal you shovel, the more chances you have of finding a diamond. If you only write four or five songs, you may not find it. If you write four hundred songs, you may find one or two real killers in there. But you really have to shovel. Don’t expect to sit down with a pencil in hand and find it in the first half dozen, because you won’t.” - **Andy Partridge**

“I don’t picture a song that I want to write, like some people do. You know, ‘Let’s write a song called Sad September,’ then sit down and structure it. I just sit down and start playing, and looking for an interesting melody and chord changes to build on. It might just be a very short ten second thing. Like the opening line of ‘Make it with You,’ that just came. Then you develop from that start, rather than from a finish. That’s the only way it works for me. I sit down at the piano or guitar and just start doodling around, looking for something that’s catchy and interesting to me that I want to play over and over. Something that’s infectious. Then it leads you on to the next section. You chase it down a little further, then maybe a line comes to you that you can build on or it suggests a title.” - **David Gates**

“My whole thought on love is that most of the time we’re screwing up, but it doesn’t matter and it’s part of being alive. I think my songs are trying to say that. Love isn’t some big, grand thing. It’s just a really small part of life that makes us incredibly happy. That’s why I like ‘Thank You.’ I feel like I got my point across on that song about what love is. There’s the line about ‘handing me a towel.’ That’s a useful thing to hand me, as opposed to giving me a big hug or something. It’s the very small things, very small moments that matter.” - **Dido**

“Don’t be afraid to write a song, then rewrite it, then rewrite it. Retry, retry. It’s so easy to get caught in the mode of what works until what *might* work never gets a chance.” - **Terry Lewis**

“I think if you try to hang on to that innocence and believe that there is love and there is God and there is beauty, then you will be able to be relevant. I think when you start to become really jaded, that’s when you can’t write relevant stuff anymore. People that are in their teens and twenties and their thirties don’t really want to hear you write about stuff that is so miserable that they can’t even deal with it. When you stop writing about love, and you stop writing about the possibility of love, you are no longer relevant.” - **Stevie Nicks**

“Ultimately, when someone becomes a songwriter, I think they have a gift of talent stuck in their chest and it was not put there for them to suffer. It was put there for them to use, and the real gift they give the world is authenticity. If Tom Waits had tried to be anybody other than Tom Waits, we wouldn’t know about Tom Waits’ songs. If Buddy Miller had tried to write like Paul Williams, you wouldn’t have Buddy Miller’s songs. Their own authenticity is the great gift. Trust that what you have to say needs to be said, and be authentic.” - **Paul Williams**

“So what is our job? Our job is to get in touch with ourselves. If we’re not in touch with ourselves, how can we possibly give something to the people out there. If we could remember who we are. We are the poets who are going from town to town, and trying to remind the populace, with all the stuff going on, information, whether it’s television, movies or what have you, all this media, everything is straying away from the heart. Everything is really straying away from what’s inside of yourself. And that’s what people are starving for. I don’t like the word documentation, but in a sense, songwriters are the mirrors, just like the poets were in another time. The poets of the late 19th century especially. The French poets, they were the voice of their time. So what are we? I think there’s a lot of us who are trying to remember why we’re doing what we’re doing. We have to put our hands, as writers, on the 220-voltage and say, ‘Well, what do I want to write for?’” - **Tori Amos**

“It’s really more important than ever to write about what you know. Not to have answers, not to teach, not to have a mission, but to say how you’re finding it is to be alive. That’s how we learn and that’s the most valuable thing that I read or hear or see in film. How that person is finding being alive, and how to learn from each other. For me songwriting is about that. That’s one of the most valuable things someone has to offer as a songwriter. Just to say what you’re experiencing.” - **Jane Siberry**

“Read *Letters From A Young Poet* by Rainer Maria Rilke. His advice is better than any advice I could ever give.” - **Sarah McLachlan**

“When you do something you love, it lasts. It is not my intention to write ephemeral pop songs that are on the hit parade for three months. I always had the intention to be faithful and serious. I want to be eternal.” - **Antonio Carlos Jobim**

“My advice is to concentrate on content, on the message you’re trying to get across and save the finer points of rhyme and scanning and perfect meter and inner rhymes for at least until halfway or close to the end of the process.” - **Jimmy Webb**

“The thing is to always write another song. It’s kind of like a photographer in a photo session. They take lots of pictures. They don’t just take one picture and try to doctor it up and make it look good. If you take a couple hundred pictures, you’re going to get one or two that are really good.” - **Roger McGuinn**

“I think there’s an awful lot to be said for putting yourself behind the guitar, to put yourself in the position where you’re actually making some music. The guitar is only going to write a song when it’s out of the case.” - **Mark Knopfler**

“Music is another kind of language. It’s emotional language. It’s a spiritual language. It’s intellectual and intuitive. We’re using words in the form of lyrics, but it’s not the same as a conversation because the lyrics are poetic and they have more abstract, metaphorical, symbolic meanings, and they also must rhyme at a certain point. You’re never quite sure where the song is going, because you might not find the word to rhyme with the end of the line. Therefore you have to become associative. Whatever you get in the batch of rhyming words, you need to find associative meaning to get you there. So it’s rather like doing a crossword puzzle backwards. A kind of strange, three-dimensional, abstract crossword puzzle.” - **Annie Lennox**

“I think it’s important to learn not to hold on to things for dear life, as if you’ll never get another idea. Throw it away. That’s my main motto about songwriting: If it doesn’t stick naturally, throw it away.” - **Dave Stewart**

“There’s something in a song, like a little spiritual zap, that will reach a listener, and that’s what you’ve got to go for.” - **Phil Collins**

I'll write it and I'll be singing it, trying to make some sense out of it, and it won't feel right to me. And then that's when I start to write it again on another piece of paper, but change the wording so it doesn't feel so formal. The formality's what bothers me the most. Sometimes you say what you mean but it's so literal that it isn't the way you'd say it to somebody, so I feel really fucking corny singing it. I don't like it when they sound like lyrics. I think what I'm doing is writing it again and I'm hoping as I come to the part that gave me the little twitch, that I just rewrite that in my own words a little more, like I'm saying it to somebody. I might sing that, then write it again and rewrite the twitch a couple more times. I have such a hard time finishing lyrics that even I'm writing it over and over, three sheets of lyrics might be the same exact thing and never change. I just write it again, then I write it again. If I don't keep moving like that, then I won't do it. - **Ben Folds**

“Sometimes a little restraint is required in order to really intensify what you're trying to say. You could just sing your journals - I think there are actually a lot of artists who tend to do that - but that doesn't necessarily make a really good song. You might have a lot of feeling, but you need to have structure. It's extremely important in art, any kind of art. Even Picasso, who could've drawn anything. Because he was so advanced in his talents at an early age, he was able to break outside the lines. You have to have that center of knowing how to work within the parameters.” - **Emmylou Harris**

“It's okay to feel that your voice can have a resonance beyond your immediate life, or your immediate friends, or your immediate peers, or your immediate community. It's okay to feel like you have something to say to the world. Don't let anybody dissuade you from that. Don't let anybody push you off that, because that's yours. You own it, and you can take it to the world in your own way. Large or small, you're always a success when you're doing what you love.” - **Ben Harper**

“It helps to establish a star of the movie, as it were. That's one of the first things we ask each other when we start. We've got our melody and we like our idea, or the core of the song, what it's about, and then we start asking questions like, Who is this person? What's the person's environment? Why is the relationship breaking up? Why indeed are they falling in love? So we'll look into that and we will try to create a person. It gives the song a life of its own, a personality.” - **Barry Gibb**

“Beyond the logical mind there is the tummy. And I really believe this, because we can over think everything. Hey, I'm not writing things for some genius that's sitting trying to criticize. I'm writing from the tummy, because that goes beyond what somebody else's concept of cool is. I'm so sick of cool. If this world has one more megameter of cool, we're just gonna explode. So it's about allowing yourself the freedom to express. When you allow yourself the freedom, that's your first step. Then the other step is the craft of it, the skill. Okay, so I don't have a very big music vocabulary. It's not about big. It's about how you use what you know. I think you can stay on one chord for five minutes and make it incredibly interesting, if you know what you're doing. The more that I open my mind to different possibilities musically and lyrically, then the more places I can go. Whereas if I'm going I-IV-V-I all the time, it's gonna get a little sweetie pie (laughs). So that's the other end of discipline. It's like running a marathon. You can't run it unless your muscles and heart can take the distance.” - **Tori Amos**

“Don't ever get involved with technique to the point where it becomes too important. It's the least important thing to have. Some people think it's the most important, at least conventional technique. Make up your own technique.” - **Donald Fagen of Steely Dan**

“Some people are meticulous and probably spend four or five days writing one song. I think it would be a shame to spend five days writing a song, and then find out that it’s not any good. So I would say that you should write a bunch, then decide what you want to finish. It doesn’t have to be complete right away. It can be a fundamental idea of the song. Then if you’re still crazy about that song later, you can hone in on it and get it to where it’s supposed to be. Otherwise you end up with three songs in three weeks, rather than fifteen.” - **Ric Ocasek**

“I think there just has to be an emotional connection. And making it vulnerable is part of that connection on the part of the artist. I think if there’s not an emotional connection, if it’s just business, fine, you can sell lots of records by making something that’s commercial. If there’s no emotional connection in it, I don’t think it’s art. Long ago, I wrote songs, and still do, with commerce in mind. I’m not always on an ivory tower saying that I have to drag agony out of my gut. But once I start to make a song, to create a song, even if commerce is the motivation, I’m still going to put my whole heart and soul in it and try to write the best song and move people in a way that touches them and that fits the need of the commercial project, whatever it is. People know when you do that. They know that there’s an emotional connection, even if it’s commercial.” - **Carole King**

“Listen to your inner voice. That sounds clichéd and trite, but it’s the hardest thing in the world to actually accomplish. Try to be still enough to hear what’s there to listen to. Find the peace, in time and place - literally and figuratively - to be still enough to hear all the beautiful music that’s there to hear.” - **Dwight Yoakam**

“I get bands that come up to me, and they’ve got all kinds of image. They all look like Good Charlotte. I go, “Great image, you look terrific.” And then I hear the song, and I go, “Okay, I get it, you’re angry.” I tell them, “You’ve got a nice beat and this hook is great, but you’re yelling at me. You’re not singing to me.” Where is the verse? Where is the B-section? There’s a big sing-along chorus where you’re angry. So I say, “If you’ll do this, it will do you wonders. I want you to only listen to four or five artists for the next two weeks. I want you listen to Burt Bacharach. I want you to listen to Paul Simon. Paul McCartney. Laura Nyro. I want you to listen to the real songwriters. Listen to how their songs are written. Listen how they set up the B-section. Listen how the bridge is used. Listen how they modulate. And then write me this same song with those songs in mind.” And almost every time, they come back and I listen and I say, “Wow, great.” There is such a big difference between good records and good songs. “Good Vibrations” is a magnificent record. “Yesterday” is a great song. “My Sharona” is a great record. But “What The World Needs Now” is a great song. So, listen to the real songwriters and then rewrite your song.” - **Alice Cooper**

“The game is the same no matter what you do and who you are. When you’re alone in a room, it doesn’t matter how many records you sold, how many people you’ve got around you. It’s you and the possibility and what are you going to do to find it.” - **John Mayer**

“You can say everything in three minutes and I will always subscribe to that. It’s a discipline, like exercising. It’s very difficult to get to the nub of what you want to say in three minutes when you want to say hundreds of things. You have to use an editorial system and say in two lines three pages’ worth of ideas. But I hope the three-minute song will never die. It’s a lovely art form. It’s the ultimate structure.” - **Ray Davies**