

CHAPTER 10

Call Yourself a Songwriter

First, we find ourselves inspired to make up songs. This impulse might be sparked by records we hear on the radio, production numbers we see in a movie or theater production, or a particularly unforgettable, live concert performance. Maybe we have a relative or a family friend who performs music or even writes songs. Somewhere, somehow, something has touched us, and we've been moved to create music and/or lyrics. We find ourselves scribbling rhymes on a scrap of paper or noodling a phrase of melody, strumming a guitar, or formulating an original sequence of chords on the keys. By honoring this urge and taking action on it, we start the process of becoming songwriters. If we continue to scratch that itch to the extent that we begin building a repertoire of finished, original tunes, we can actually pin the "songwriter" badge to our chests. No one can stand in our way or deny us that right. It's our creative inspiration; and it's our choice.

Regardless of what you do to pay the rent, if it's your calling, your most compelling aspiration, call yourself a songwriter. You may teach school, sell used cars, mow lawns, or wait tables. But if, in your heart of hearts, your greatest desire is to write songs, and you are doing just that every time you get the chance, then the answer should be, "I'm a songwriter." Your day job may be a lab technician or a dog walker, but at the end of the day, if you see yourself writing songs for a living and you're actively laying the groundwork to make that your reality, a songwriter is who you are. Saying "I'm a songwriter" is the first personal affirmation and the first public declaration that will set you on the path to success.

This is not a business for dilettantes. It's not often that we hear of a cashier in Boise, a nurse in Tucson, or a forklift operator in Birmingham spontaneously jotting a lyric down on a napkin or singing a melody into a cell-phone memo, then, through an amazing string of serendipitous events, suddenly seeing their original song bullet to the top of the charts. There's good reason why that never happens. The people who succeed as songwriters are dedicated to following their inspiration and applying their craft on a daily basis. They assemble the tools of the trade and endeavor to learn how to use them. They study the works of the masters and become aware of how the interlocking gears of the music business turn to create commerce.

Becoming a pop songwriter does not require a degree. It only requires a strong desire to do it, a little bit of native talent, the stick-to-it-ive-ness to start and finish song after song, and thick enough skin to withstand what will surely amount to thousands of rejections. However, becoming a *successful* pop songwriter almost always requires an education. I'm not talking about the kind of schooling that culminates with you marching to

“Pomp and Circumstance,” although going to school is not only an option, higher education can be a huge benefit for some aspirants. A songwriter’s classroom can be one of his or her own making, a place of his or her own choice—a bedroom, a garage, or a basement—some private place, where those organic, creative juices are allowed and encouraged to flow and mix. A songwriter’s education doesn’t stop at the classroom door, either. Life itself is the campus, and every encounter, from the mundane to the extraordinary, should contribute to the unique ideas and personal perspective reflected in a writer’s work.

Songwriters who embark strategically toward achieving success usually do so in two major stages. First comes the part we’ve been discussing through the entire first half of this book: the education stage. After all, just because you own the CD box set of *L.A. Law* or have memorized hundreds of *Perry Mason* dramas, doesn’t mean you can go down to the courthouse and pull off a capable murder defense. Nothing prevents you from defending the accused (as long as you don’t actually purport to be a lawyer). Of course, there are no statutes either against you writing songs, demoing, and pitching them. However, lawyers do have briefs to file, arcane terms to master, and protocols they should be familiar with. It’s helpful for a lawyer to have a knowledge of all applicable precedents, comparable cases that could affect their current case’s outcome. Legal precedents are the golden oldies of the courtroom, the chart toppers of the past, the major copyrights of jurisprudence, the historical benchmarks (pun intended) that brought the law to where it is today. So, for those excellent reasons—and many more, I’m sure—most who seek successful careers as attorneys attend law schools and endeavor to pass those grueling bar exams. Only after running that gauntlet will a newly minted member of the bar apply for a job as a public defender, try to win a starting position at a law firm, or hang up that shingle and start chasing ambulances.

It would seem irresponsible—not to mention jumping the proverbial gun by a few years—for the guy on the forklift in Birmingham to pack his family in a converted van and drive up Interstate 65 to Nashville, armed with only one hastily warbled song on his cell phone. (I mean, he has to have *some* recollection of the training and certification he was required to go through before he was trusted to move that first stack of boxes with his forklift, right? Every job requires *some* training, for Pete’s sake!) Without having thoroughly learned his new trade or assembling any tools of it; without having studied the business he aspires to break into; without knowing a soul who might give him an in, impulsively scootin’ off to Music City, wife and kids in tow, would obviously be, well, crazy. Yet, it happens (maybe not to the extreme of this example, but close).

My friend, David Preston, is one of a half dozen folks in songwriter/publisher relations working out of the world headquarters of BMI in Nashville. Over lunch, David told me about one such feller, who’d showed

up that morning from out of town, pulling his car and a U-Haul trailer into a guest parking spot. This guy walked boldly into the building, up to the reception desk and asked to see somebody about becoming a hit songwriter. He didn't have a songwriting credit to his name or a single industry phone number, let alone know anybody in the business. All he had was a beat-up guitar and some original tunes. He explained to David that he'd quit his job back home and was serious about getting his songs cut by the biggest stars in the country-music pantheon.

Now that, in and of itself, is not so extraordinary. In fact, scenarios like this repeat at least once every day in Music City. Some guy or gal with a few tunes and visions of glory pulls into town, steps off a plane, or jumps down from a Greyhound bus, fully expecting to score a hit record in quick order, without a clue as to how to go about it. Here's the kicker: Waiting in his vehicle in the BMI guest lot were this man's wife, kids, dog, cat, and most of their worldly possessions. It broke David's heart. I'm hoping that everyone who reads this book has more sense than that. It's great to have a dream, to feel compelled to create songs, and to visualize yourself as being successful. It's also helpful to have a realistic plan to make it happen. That plan should start with getting your education.

During the education stage, the writer builds a solid foundation, preparing to face the opportunities he or she will create and encounter in the second stage: the practical stage or the "doing business" stage. The education stage involves learning, practicing, and developing a craft, while simultaneously studying the history, traditions, and machinations of the industry. And, quite honestly, that education should never cease. It should continue until you hang up your instruments, unplug your computer, put your tortured muse at ease, and cast your retirement lure into the lake. There is always something new to learn, something else to discover. "Professional songwriters never stop learning or think they know it all," says Danny Arena of SongU. Physicians, executives, attorneys, professional people of all stripes—even hairdressers—attend seminars, read trade publications, belong to online communities, and so on to keep up on the newest technology and the latest theories, to freshen their basic knowledge, and to stay on the cutting edge. Their interest is not just curiosity, it demonstrates passion for the work, an open mind, and a willingness to progress and improve. Even though the basic craft of pop songwriting goes back centuries, those who do it today should also be keeping themselves apprised of the new tools and the latest trends, if only to avoid creating disposable work that might be hip today but obsolete tomorrow.

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So now, assuming that you've committed yourself to your continuing education, we're moving on to stage two in our journey to songwriting success: the stage in which it all starts to happen. Excited? I knew you would be.

Hold your horsepower, pal, because we're not ready to hit the highway just yet. First we need to take a good, hard look under the hood, check for leaks, make sure your plugs are firing, your block is solid, and your cylinders have plenty of compression.