

Songwriting Exercises

by Joel Mabus

Stuck? Here's an old trick to get you going. What a good song offers is structure, repetition, form and balance. Not always easy to create, but easy to borrow. You can build on the form of another song, without sounding at all like that song. Much as a scaffold is used to frame a skyscraper — the scaffold may look familiar, but once removed yields a unique building.

Try this exercise:

- A) Take some song you like — any song at all from any era, any style — just so long as it is familiar to you.
- B) Write a new lyric to that song. Verse for verse, chorus for chorus, refrain for refrain.
- C) Take that new lyric and write completely new music to it. Try switching keys, time signatures, tempo, etc., to remove yourself from the original.
- D) Edit. Adjust your new words and melody to fit your newly established mood. Rewrite as necessary.

Out of ideas? Start a list. Pen & paper ready, start a list of practically anything — things people eat for breakfast; words that remind you of your mother; things your high school counselor told you were important; all the shades of blue — anything. Just write it down!

A list could become a song (remember “My Favorite Things” or Tom T Hall’s “I Love...”) or could be a starting pad for an essay song, enumerating facts or feelings. But more importantly, writing down a list begins to mine your unconscious — unlocking creativity. You may wind up with an idea entirely tangential to your list, but that’s O.K. The point is to get those words flowing.

Similar to list making, but more purposeful, is putting your imagination to work in creating a scene, place or mood.

Imagine a perfect day in your childhood — or the day your childhood sweetheart left you. What is the weather like? The temperature, the breeze, the clouds — how does your skin feel? What are the smells? What are you wearing? Who else is there? How is her/his hair fixed — what is his/her scent? What are the sounds around you? How about taste? Engage all your senses in creating the image. When you look at what you have written, is there a center to your images? What overarching image sets the theme? What phrase could capture that central image? Now you have the nugget from which a song might flow.

Brain dead? Take a book off your shelf. Crack it open to page 113. Point your finger at the middle of the page and see what the word or phrase is. Any book will do; any page will do. Perhaps it is the manual that comes with your garage door opener — you see the phrase “worm gear.” Think about the image. A gear that looks like a worm. Or acts like a worm. What kind of gear does a worm need? Rain gear? Maybe the gear to catch a worm? Flashlights and tweezers on a rainy night?

Do this a few times and you start to see language in a new light. Hmm — what kind of light is a “new” light? What kinds of things would you see in an “old” light? See... it just doesn’t stop!

The better you know music, the better you will compose. But you don’t need to be a musical genius to make a new melody. If you find yourself in a rut, try confusing yourself — play an instrument you don’t know and make a tune on it. Or retune your guitar to an open tuning and try normal chord forms over the new tuning and **hear** the sounds you make.

See **EXERCISES**, page two

Next BSW Meetings

March 14th and April 11th

Directions on page 4 and on the BSW website

CONGRATULATIONS...

Bermuda Billy Byron was awarded one of the first prize winners in the B.B. King OneTouch (diabetes) blues lyric contest 2004/2005.

Pappas Krisanthi took third place in the jazz category of the prestigious Billboard International Song Contest for her song "One Slow Dance A Day"!! The song will be placed on the Billboard Winners CD and distributed throughout the music industry! The winners list is at <http://www.billboardsongcontest.com>

Don Gnecco is heading off to Ireland with vocalist Sherry Allen to perform his song, "One Light" in the 2006 Tipperary International Song of Peace Contest.

This is the second time that Don has had a finalist song in this prestigious annual contest. His song, "Touch the World," was one of the ten songs selected for the 2002 event.

To hear both compositions and to learn more about the contest, check out Don's website:
www.DonGnecco.com



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Break your old rhythm molds. Listen to some music from another culture other than your own — whether that means listening to Afro-pop or Wisconsin polka. There is more than one beat in the borscht!

Sometimes taking a lesson or two, or studying a page or two of a book of jazz chords, or attending a concert of music or poetry you love (or you thought you would hate), can give you one new thought; just one pearl of insight that might just become your next best song.

One of the best things you can do is keep a songwriting journal. A workbook you can scribble in, daydream with, experiment with. It's O.K. to be messy and write in the margins. But keep it — start a shelf full of journals. You will often write half a song before you decide it's too lame to finish. Keep it. A year later look back and you might see the one line or two in it that is the real gem — the nugget from which to build a new song.

Using a computer with a good word processor may be your preference. But try to keep early versions of works. When you go back to work on an old piece, you may decide that an earlier version has more promise. And don't forget to backup your work!

However you choose to do it, do keep track of your thoughts and remember to revisit them from time to time.

(Read the unedited tutorial at: www.joelmabus.com/songwriting_exercises.htm)

BSW Newsletter

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Contributions from members are welcome. Deadline for the next issue: On or before 15th of the preceding month. Send submissions via E-Mail to: Luke MacNeil: luke@lukemacneil.com or phone Luke at (774) 573-8963

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