

## SONGWRITING CONTESTS

By John Braheny

Contests provide songwriters, singers and bands with an opportunity for validation/ acknowledgement of their talent as well as an opportunity to win prizes.

Contests are created for many different reasons and it's important to be able to assess whether or not you're wasting your money to submit material at all. Most contests are created to make money, though there are always contests that spring up for other reasons, for example to find a theme song for an organization or a city. There have been several competitions for a new national anthem, for instance. Many non-profit songwriting and music organizations use competitions to raise operating funds. These contests are usually open to writers from all over the world.

The loftier reason, aside from making money, is to find and expose new talent. Seldom do contests translate directly into commercially successful record deals, hit songs etc. There is, however, a wide range of potential benefits depending on the scope of the contest.

The long-defunct American Song Festival and Music City Song Festivals offered, by virtue of their judging procedures, the benefit of being heard by many judges and of each song being heard by several judges who could turn in the code numbers of songs they particularly liked. After the contest was over, the judge would be provided with a list of the writers he/she requested and their addresses and phone numbers so the judges could, on their own, request

additional material. This benefit was a valuable door opener for many writers to establish ongoing relationships with the music publisher and producer judges.

Beyond prizes and validation, one of the valuable prizes was that winners were provided with more door-opening tools via the publicity they received as contest winners. This could, in turn, be used for inclusion in query letters or e-mails to industry professionals requesting permission to send tapes.

### *Submission Procedures*

Each competition will give you its own submission requirements on the entry blank, but the following are common to all.

An entry form is submitted with each song submitted in each category (if there is more than one category). Be sure to fill out each form completely as though it was the only one submitted. In nearly all cases, it is acceptable to make photocopies of the original form. To save yourself some work, fill out the basic name/address/phone information on the original before making the copies so all you have to add is song titles, writer(s), if different, and categories.

A fee is sometimes required for each tape submitted in each category. Fees can range up to \$15 or more per song per category. Entry fees are certainly justifiable. It is not cheap to promote and organize a contest of any kind. Advertising is expensive and, as the now-defunct American  
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*Next BSW Meetings*

**May 9<sup>th</sup> and June 13<sup>th</sup>**

*For directions visit the BSW website*



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Song Festival discovered, it's not enough to just announce that the deadlines are rolling around and assume that those songwriters who entered last year will automatically enter again. Each year they have to go after a whole new group of writers because last year's entrants who didn't at least receive an honorable mention are likely to believe that, if someone didn't recognize their hit, the contest is a rip off and the judges don't know anything. The last thing they'll allow themselves to believe is that their song just wasn't good enough.

In addition to advertising, contests must hire people to process entries, book, coordinate, and supervise judges and judging sessions, keep financial records, answer phone inquiries and many other tasks. In some cases, judges are also paid.

Some critics have actually advised writers not to pay a fee for submission to contests, particularly if they get a critique because "you should never pay for a critique." Nonsense! That philosophy originated as a way to protect writers from song sharks who would ask a writer to pay a small fee for a critique, give their song a rave review as a way to set them up for a

publishing contract for which they would unscrupulously ask for an additional fee. Songwriting competitions usually require one song per cassette to facilitate easy coding and tracking of a song, eliminate confusion among judges regarding which song is to be heard and make it easier to re-cue for the next judge.

A lyric sheet is usually requested to speed the judging process. A judge can listen to and judge a song by listening to a verse and chorus of the song while scanning the remainder of the lyric. Lyric sheets should always look as professional as possible, be neatly typed with sections (Verse/chorus/bridge) separated.

### ***Rules and Regulations***

Many competitions request that your name not appear on the tape or lyric sheet to avoid the possibility of favoritism should the judge recognize the name of a writer. It is especially important, in those cases, for the writer or performer to completely fill out the submission form so that the person initially processing the tape can code the submission form, the lyric sheet and tape. Don't be too concerned about it though. If you don't eliminate your name, the contest will black it out. In fact it's always a good idea to have a proper copyright notice (year, copyright owner) on each lyric sheet no matter where you send it or for what purpose.

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## **BSW Newsletter**

**Editor:** Luke MacNeil  
**Graphic Layout:** Don Gnecco  
**Feature Columnist:** Geoffrey Keith  
**Mailing:** Jeff Reilly and Joyce Josephson  
**Labels:** Stan Lyness

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

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### *Categories*

There are great variations between contests in the areas of categories. The major groupings are amateur and professional. Some contests will rightfully place great importance on the division between amateur and professional songwriters with a variety of methods of making the distinction. One method is to disqualify you in the amateur category if you are a member of BMI, ASCAP or SESAC with the erroneous assumption being that, to be a member of a performing rights organization, you must have a song released on record. In reality, though it is impractical to belong if you don't have a record released, the organizations may sign a writer if they feel he/she is talented enough that it is likely to happen in the future.

Another method is that used by the Billboard Song Contest in which you can only enter if you have not averaged more than \$5000 per year in songwriting royalties since 1992. This method gives great latitude because one can still be an excellent professional songwriter and not attain that goal.

Yet another method is that one may not enter the amateur category if they've had a song released on a recording before a certain date, usually the deadline date. This method has caused great problems, at times requiring notarized affidavits as proof and delaying the final disposition of prizes based on objections of amateur entrants. However, this is still, probably, the fairest way to divide categories.

Your best strategy, if you feel you are an exceptional writer (don't you all?) is not to allow your ego to take you into the professional category, but without breaking any rules, to stay in the amateur group.

Stylistic categories, though more fair for obvious reasons, are problematic mostly because amateur songwriters in particular often have difficulty distinguishing pop from R & B or rock, country from folk etc. They either enter the same songs in several categories just to be safe, or risk entering one song in an inappropriate category and having it eliminated, not because it's not a quality song but because of a poor category choice. The best approach is to play it safe by entering more

than one category, if you can afford it, after getting as much feedback as you can from fellow writers and friends on the most appropriate category.

Some of the criteria to consider in making the choice of songs to enter involve a process of elimination, which, in fact, is involved in the judging as well. So it may be instructive to come from the viewpoint of a judge who knows that certain factors will preclude a song being a winner even though it may receive an honorable mention. Here are a few:

1. A song without a chorus
2. The title doesn't appear in the chorus or first or last line of the verse.
3. Clichéd lyrics
4. Little or no melodic contrast between verses, chorus and bridge

Along with those factors that will immediately eliminate a song from competition, another factor that will enhance its chances of staying in the race is a well-produced demo. This doesn't mean spending \$500 to \$1000 in a state-of-the-art studio. But it does mean that your singer should be convincing (don't sing it yourself if you're not the best singer for the song). The sound should be clean and the tape copy clean.

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### **BSW Executive Team**

**Director Emeritus:** Elliott Jacobowitz  
(978) 749-8857 •  
[elliott\\_a.jacobowitz@bostonbbs.org](mailto:elliott_a.jacobowitz@bostonbbs.org)

**Director & Membership Chair:** Geoffrey Keith  
(508) 460-8171 • [bswmembership@earthlink.net](mailto:bswmembership@earthlink.net)

**Webmaster:** Larry Manning (617) 739-6876  
[ldmstudios@comcast.net](mailto:ldmstudios@comcast.net)

**Newsletter Editor:** Luke MacNeil • (774) 573-8963 •  
[luke@lukemacneil.com](mailto:luke@lukemacneil.com)

**Finance Committee Chair:** Brent Hall, Assisted by  
Mark Stepakoff (508) 655-2311 •  
[bch@eight.com](mailto:bch@eight.com)

**Special Events Co-chairs:**  
**Joe Carotenuto** (978) 264-4692 •  
[jcaroten@mindspring.com](mailto:jcaroten@mindspring.com)

**Karl Steudel** • (978) 386-5644 •  
[Ksteudel@yahoo.com](mailto:Ksteudel@yahoo.com)

**BSW Hotline:** (617) 499-6932

(For special events, membership, etc.)

