Songwriters on songwriting

A panel of five pro songwriters tackles 17 questions about the craft of writing songs
Numerous factors have to fall into place for you to have a career with your music, but having great songs is where it all starts. All the image making, marketing, and social networking in the world won’t get you far if your songs aren’t resonating with an audience, and like any worthwhile endeavor, it takes practice, dedication, and time to develop into a great songwriter.

Study the stories of a hundred famous songwriters and you’ll find a hundred different paths to success. There is no single road, there is no one answer, and we all know music is subjective. There’s hardly a metric to define what makes any song “great,” only time will tell whether a song has the ability to move people, express a universal sentiment, or tell a story that endures over the ages.

To learn from the greats, you need to study the greats, and to that end we’ve interviewed five successful and active songwriters to get their insights on the craft of writing great songs. From Music Row in Nashville to the back roads of independent success as a singer/songwriter, the following pages can help you glean information and inspiration to use on your path to becoming a better songwriter – whatever your genre or destination.

Writing great songs is no guarantee for success in the music business...

By: Andre Calilhanna

designed by Marie Threscher
Byron Hill [BH]
Byron Hill’s list of writing credits and #1 songs is enormous, and includes more than 700 recordings, 77 Gold and Platinum awards, 10 ASCAP awards, and 31 US and Canadian top-ten chart hits.

Kent Blazy [KB]
Perhaps best known for his work writing with Garth Brooks, a partnership responsible for multiple hits and five #1 songs, Kent lives in Nashville and continues to write for himself and some of the biggest names in country music.

John Ondrasik [JO]
Better known as Five For Fighting, John has scored major hits, has released seven albums, and has been involved in numerous philanthropic endeavors through his music and industry connections.

Rachael Sage [RS]
A veritable indie-music pioneer, Rachael has released 10 albums, started her own record label (MPress Records), and tours constantly through the US, UK, Europe, and Asia, playing 150+ shows a year.

Doak Turner [DT]
Another Nashville resident, Doak’s contributions go beyond songwriting. As the founder of The Nashville Muse and co-founder of MusicStartsHere.org, Doak was awarded the NSAI Community Ambassador Award in 2012.
Writing for an intended audience

[KB] For me, the target audience is really the universal, trying to get to the heart of a song that will touch as many people as possible. Most of the people I write with have the same approach, and Garth [Brooks] is really like that. He’s always looking for a way to make people laugh, cry, be grateful... and it’s such a benefit to work with songwriters like that: striving to use music, like music has always been, for its ability to change the world, change things for the better. That’s what I’m aiming for.

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[BH] Whenever I sit down and write, I try to come up with something meaningful, I’m trying to write something that will apply to a lot of people and maybe even make a mark out there in some sort of historic way. You can’t own songwriting relying on those impulses... at least not consciously! I believe I’m composing songs in equal parts as a means of creative self-expression and a way of communicating things I am either afraid or unable to convey through more conventional language. When I’m initially composing, summoning ideas for melodies and lyrics, I’m rarely focusing on anything other than crystallizing an idea and letting it evolve. When I’m refining the song, that’s where “craft” comes into play, in terms of repetition, song-length, clarity of language, imagery, etc. Some of that relates to the audience, but mainly I write with the presumption that if I’m satisfied with the completed song, it will hopefully connect.

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[JO] I frankly don’t have an intended audience, and trying to appease a certain group can lock you down. Of course you need to know who you are and what you do. I doubt anyone would want to hear a Five For Fighting rap record. You do treat potential singles a bit differently from always write art, but sometimes it might end up looking a little like art. I guess I try not to get too focused on a particular artist – sometimes I will aim at a genre a little bit, but I never sit down and say, “I’m going to write something for Reba today” or “let’s write something for George Strait.”

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[RS] Early in my career, I worked in the jingle business as a composer and lyricist, so I do think I have the ability to target specific listeners in an intentional way, and I am grateful for that skill-set because it has helped me as a hired composer for TV and film. But I don’t approach my a production and structure standpoint, but beyond that, the best melodies and lyrics win.

Co-writing

[BH] I do a lot of co-writing. I’ve got a little studio, just a desk and some tools that we might need: keyboards, guitars, good coffee, an Internet connection, things like that. I love writing at my place, but I’ll write anywhere. We just basically meet at whatever time is set aside, and we quickly start getting into ideas. You can sit around and talk about everything and the weather for two or three
hours and next thing you know you've wasted time – or you can immediately jump in and start looking at ideas. I prefer jumping right in. The discipline of two or three people being across the table from each other means you can always pull each other out of the death spiral of not being creative, because there's someone else working with you. These days it's often artists. They've got to come up with songs, and I hope they view me as an experienced craftsman who can help them deliver. It's a new game now – it's still about songs, but it's also about the delivery requirements that the artist has, and so I'm here to help.

 KS | I would say 1/4 of what I do now is by myself, and it's more like if a song wants to be born and I'm the only one there, I'll let it be born. I always like writing with co-writers because they can bring an angle to things that you haven't thought of before. On the last CD I put out, and probably on every CD I've done, there are three or four songs I wrote by myself, and the rest is stuff I've written with other people. It's not like I go out of my way to do it or not do it, it's more of an organic thing of just sitting down with a songwriter at a certain time, which is what we do in Nashville, knowing that you're going to be writing with somebody on a particular day. I love the interaction of working with other writers, you aim to pick people you get along with, who are fun to write with, so when you're with them it's a lot of fun.

 RS | I have not done any co-writing at all with the exception of my work as a commercial composer, early in my professional career in New York City. Right after college, I fell in with a jingle-house, where I co-wrote many spots for TV and radio, both by myself and with a writing partner. I haven't ever co-written a song that I put on one of my albums, however. I am intrigued by the idea, though, so I may pursue that process for my next record. I think it requires a lot of letting go, and a certain reverence for the song as something disconnected from an artist's persona/ego. It scares me a little, so I imagine that means I ought to do it.

 Getting through writers block

 KS | The joke with us here in Nashville is, when we get stuck songwriting, we do lunch. There's a couple of writers here who seem to write better after they've been fed, so I usually have some kind of lunch I can fix so we don't have to bust the vibe by getting up and going out. If I get stuck on a song I'm writing by myself – like on the Play Guitar CD there's a song I wrote about Stephen Foster called “My Old Kentucky Home Revisited,” and that song took me like three years to write. I would just keep going back to it, and I just couldn't get it to where I wanted it, and then some life circumstances happened and some other eye-opening things that kind of made the whole thing fall into place. It was interesting that after that period of time it really came easy once things had changed.

 RS | If I ever feel like I have what could be deemed writer's block, I recognize that maybe that's OK and I try not to beat myself up about it. I've recorded 10 albums of material that I feel pretty positive about, and thrown away hundreds of other completed or half-finished ideas. So in a sense, I try to recognize that my job isn't necessarily to write countless songs at whim but rather to continue to develop and grow as a human being. Usually if I'm out of ideas it means I'm focusing too much on the business aspects of my career or the record label I run. Seeing movies, reading books, socializing with friends – living life and getting out of my own bubble – is usually enough to get my creative juices flowing. And if not, well, maybe
something larger is wrong in my life, because I think my natural state is one of creative expression. For instance, I have been in relationships where I felt creatively blocked for extensive periods of time, but once I realized I was not happy and needed to move on or shift the nature of the relationship, a flood of song ideas would come – and not even always based upon my own experience – just a general sense of being open and letting either personal or imaginative ideas flow.

**BH** | I’ve learned some tricks through the years from mentor-type co-writers to just keep going, to never be afraid to throw out ideas. Don’t shut down, don’t go into your own world, especially in the co-writing process. Try to keep things going even if the ideas are a little silly or are something to break the monotony. In co-writing it’s a little easier because you’ve got someone else there and you can’t just go off into a corner. When you’re writing solo it’s a little bit different, it’s a little easier to get up and turn on the TV or get frustrated and find some kind of distraction. A lot of writers I know will get stuck on the first line or the second line, and they feel like they can’t write the third or the fourth line until they’ve got the first and second written they way they want it. I’ve just never been one of those writers. I might jump down and write a chorus, or I might write a verse and I’m not hung up on whether that will be the first or second verse. I might go back later and say, “you know those need to be flipped.” If I don’t feel creative, I don’t want to force it. If I just get away from it for a week or two, ideas start to come. But the writers block thing has never been a problem for me. I’ve always thought it was part of the process and I don’t get frustrated with it. If I don’t feel like writing one day, I will wait ‘till I feel inspired a few days later.

**DT** | I keep a couple of “hook books,” one has a couple thousand ideas from over the years, and I started a new one a year ago with more ideas. I also record ideas on the notepad of my iPhone. Sometimes I will have a song idea in a notebook, and I’ll keep the notebook open beside my desk or on a counter. As I walk by, I’ll stop and look at it and perhaps a line will come to me that would work for that song.
There are tools you can use, like changing your environment, writing trips, looking for inspiration in books or films, and co-writing. Still, for me the most important aspect is continuing to power through. Songwriting is an exercise in failure. For every good song you write there will be dozens of ideas, pieces, attempts that never make the cut. You have to understand the process and try not to get frustrated. And when you have a good song on the line, understand that it may take hours, or months, to get the lyric and form right. Just keep your head down and keep swinging.

Knowing when your song is done - it's time to stop revising and put it down

Songs will tell you when they're not done for sure, because they will kind of bug you – there's something there that you know is not right. What really helps me is getting away from it. If I work for a couple of hours on a song, especially if I'm working by myself, I will get away from it and look at it maybe a day later and then it's just obvious to me. I don't really call it soup yet, I'll let it sit for a while. I've even let songs sit for a week or two and I go back and listen to it and I go, "Oh my gosh, what was I thinking?"

I usually use the live performance setting as my test for whether a song is done. If I'm on tour and I have the urge to play the song live, or introduce it at a local show in NYC, it's either ready or close. Playing it for an audience and getting a sense of what sections or lines aren't flowing or are just confusing is a great way to gauge whether any further revisions are needed. Once in a while I take a brand new song into the studio if I'm making a record and haven't had the chance to "tour" it, and sometimes I'll adjust a word as late as when I'm doing a final vocal. Once it's on a record, that's usually that! I do improvise a great deal live, though, so piano arrangements and even song structures may vary show to show. That's what I love about performing live – music is always shifting and that keeps it fresh for me as well as the audience.

There are some songs of mine ("The Riddle") that I spent months on and still don't think are quite finished. It is extremely hard to edit yourself and sometimes an album deadline will force your hand. If you have a producer, or a group of people you trust, the outside perspective can help. One key is to put the song down for a few weeks and listen fresh. You'll get a more macro perspective of the song than when you aren't immersed in the minutia.

That's probably one of the toughest things. I have friends who are still re-writing their songs as they're going up the charts – "Boy I wish I'd said this or done that." It's kind of like kids you've nurtured, or something like that, where you're like "Well, I think this is complete," and you give it to other people to see what they think and you get some feedback and if someone says, "I think you should do this or change this," you might go back to it, but most of the time we're going for the energy of what's happening in the moment, and if we feel like we've captured it, a lot of times, we don't go back to it. Some of the biggest hits I've had have happened very fast. There was a book I had, about the most popular 100 songs or whatever, and most of them were written in 30 minutes, and I know some of the greatest writers here in town who I've written with work really fast and they don't look back. There's something to the magic of the energy that's happening right at that one time, it's like it's your subconscious coming out rather than the thinking part of your brain, and when you start going back and looking at it and reworking a song, then you're thinking about it. A lot of times when you start thinking about it, that's when it gets derailed.

Being aware, in the midst of writing/rehearsing/recording a song, that something special is happening

I think being aware of when the "magic" is happening, at whatever creative stage, is a big part of what keeps us all engaged as artists. Whether those moments are abundant or sporadic, they're always undeniable and crucial, if not difficult to articulate.
The truest test of whether a song stands on its own, for me, is performing it acoustically in an intimate setting such as a house concert or even a room full of strangers at a party, something low-key like that, where there’s little to no pressure and no bells/whistles. You can gauge very easily whether you’re connecting with people. Sometimes a song that elicits that sort of response might get lost in the studio, though, whereas another that didn’t land as well with a live audience comes to life more in the studio because of inspired arrangement and production. It’s a process, and you don’t always have those ephemeral moments of awareness.

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KB | You know, that’s the kind of thing that is so nebulous — you write these songs and you think you’ve got something really special and then nothing happens to them. Like “If Tomorrow Never Comes,” which was the first song Garth Brooks and I wrote together. We thought we’d really written something special. We pitched it around Nashville for about a year and we didn’t get any bites on it at all. We were actually talking about going back and re-writing the song and taking another look at it. Then he played it one night at the Bluebird Café and somebody from Capitol Records, who had passed on him three different times, heard that song and said, “Maybe we missed something, why don’t you come back in?” He got a record deal, it was his second single and the first #1 for each of us, so it’s that kind of thing that makes you wonder. There’s a song I’ve written with this young writer, Corey Batten, that’s probably eight years old called “Still On My Way Home.” It’s never been on hold, but every time we go out and play that song anywhere around the country, people just go nuts over it. I mean, you see the public response, but nobody in the music industry has the same response, and you go, “I don’t know, who’s missing this? Am I missing it, or are they missing it?” It’s a pretty perplexing thing.

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BH | Oh yeah, sometimes you’re aware when you’re writing it. One song I wrote with Tony Martin that really sticks out called “Politics, Religion, and Her,” that when we were done we just knew it would get cut. And the publisher did go out and get it cut immediately and we had a Sammy Kershaw single. But nowadays, as writers we often talk about it privately, that you can write a “Wind Beneath My Wings” and maybe not be able to
get it cut because there just aren’t as many artists looking for songs. It’s just very difficult these days to feel that way about a song when you’ve finished it.

JO | When we were recording “Superman” we had the sense that anybody who heard the song could connect with it. There are always a couple of songs that rise out of the recording process, and a few that let you down. The best part of being a songwriter is playing a special song from beginning to end for the first time. It’s what keeps me coming back.

Avoiding the same words, themes, rhymes, and patterns when writing

JO | Part of the tight rope walk, if you’ve had success, is to reinvent yourself enough to grow as a songwriter without going off the deep end. There is a tendency for melodies and stuff like that, so I’m always looking for an idea or a melody that’s a little different. I mean, you’re working with only so many notes and so many chords. The other thing I do is buy instruments I cannot play, and start playing them to see if I hit on something different than what I would do on the guitar. Sometimes that will motivate me to write something I never would have written before, because the instrument itself is giving me different tonalities than what I’m used to. Anything that breaks me out of the norm of what I’m doing assists me in coming up with something different.

RS | I’m very grateful to my parents for some of my ability to filter and edit myself as a writer. Originality and variety of language within my songwriting was always heavily encouraged, and I recall receiving a very large thesaurus early in my youth! I do believe that to a large extent we “are what we read,” so I’m also very lucky that as a drama major I was exposed to so many incredible plays and written work by such a rich array of playwrights. They all had their own music, in a sense, and probably taught me subconsciously to strive to be as specific as possible with language, toward the goal of telling a story – even if that story is something as simple as love-at-first-sight.

DT | I keep my hook book with all my ideas and try to look for different angles to write the songs. I use Wikirhymer.com for a rhyming dictionary – that site has so many rhymes I would never have thought to use in my songs!

All it really takes for me to summon the muse is some degree of human vulnerability... We are all transmitters and receivers, but artists have somehow learned how to amplify self-expression to a different level.

-Rachael Sage
Writing songs you loved that others didn’t respond to – or songs you thought weren’t your best that sparked big reactions

[JO] The subjectivity of music is what makes it fun. Once I throw them out there, I understand that they are not mine anymore. What’s more interesting is how people take my songs and apply them in ways that I never imagined or intended. During the first Iraq war, I was getting letters from soldiers who used my music to pump up for a mission, to calm down after a mission, to escape for a few minutes, to connect with home – and it was the same song! That’s the beauty of music.

[BH] Oh yeah there have been a few songs along the way that I thought were nothing special or anything earth shaking and they get cut. But there have been songs that have surprised me for sure. “Picking Up Strangers” by Johnny Lee, I thought it was an OK song that fit a movie, and the next thing I knew it was at #2. The song it itself was only 2:08 long, had way too much rhyme in it, and all these things I try not to do now. But it sort of defied gravity and found its own way, and there have been a few of those that turn out to be the square peg that fits perfectly into the square hole.

[RS] You hear a lot from big mainstream acts that their “throwaway” song is the one that became their biggest hit. I think the reason that happens is because sometimes the simplest songs we write are the most universal. It is very easy to navel-gaze and get overly consumed in our own personal experience to the point where others might not find a key into your work. But sometimes those simple, three-chord, poppy numbers can get a crowd engaged and feel included, and yes, I have definitely had a handful of those sort of lighter-fare tunes garner a big reaction. I think different songs are meant to reach people in different ways, and I try not to be overly critical of something I write with less effort, just because I did not feel a big catharsis from creating it. I actually try to include a few of those tunes in every set, because it’s all about dynamics for me; if I can get everyone singing along to a poppy tune, then maybe they’ll be more able to listen intently to a very personal love song. It’s a balance.
What it is that makes you get out your instrument and write a song

What it is that makes you get out your instrument and write a song

I usually write after some kind of overwhelming experience, whether personal or vicarious. It could range from seeing a powerful film, to going to a museum exhibit by an inspiring painter, to feeling inspired in the afterglow of someone else’s musical performance. I might also be sparked by hearing a couple have a heated discussion in a coffeehouse about a political issue, or having a stranger confide something very unusual and personal to me on an airplane or a train. All it really takes for me to summon the muse is some degree of human vulnerability being exposed in a surprising way. We are all transmitters and receivers, but artists have somehow learned how to amplify self-expression to a different level. I don’t ever recall there being a time when I wouldn’t find some comfort in sitting down to play piano, or painting. These days, the biggest obstacle is simply lack of time; I have to really protect my down days while off tour, or not working with my record label, to allow creativity to flow.

The miracle that every once in a while you can create something powerful out of thin air.

Well, there are always a bunch of scribbled titles on pieces of paper, which can sit there on the side table or a desk for months before I look at them. I mean, I don’t go a month without writing, but I’ve got a whole bunch of titles laying around, so I’m just grabbing something whenever I do write with somebody or write by myself. When I do co-writing, those are by appointment, so I am committed to sitting down and writing for anywhere from two to five hours – and that’s great and it’s really disciplined. But when I’m left to my own devices and I’m just walking around my house or dealing with business stuff, a lot of time what draws me to a song idea or my guitar – and this kind of sounds wacky – but the stress of the business and stress of things that just come up in life make me turn to my guitar or the piano as an escape. It’s a wonderful thing, and a lot of times I think we musicians forget what brought us to the party, you know? It’s that place that a piano or a guitar will take you. I sort of look at song ideas like that. If I can chisel out time and sit in the kitchen when nobody else is here, the next thing I know three hours have gone by and I’ve got the basics of a song, and it might have all started with having a bad day and needing a place to go.

I keep the hook book visible and have a couple rooms in my house with guitars and other instruments that make me want to pick them up and play at various times of the day. If I like what I am playing, I record the groove on my iPhone and play it back in co-writes or when I want to sit and write a song.

Scheduling time specifically for songwriting or forcing yourself to write no matter how you are feeling

The key word you’re using is “force,” and I’ve attempted to force myself to do that before, and it seems that it’s better when it’s just organic. There’s a place where I walk my dog most every morning, and a lot of times when I’m out there, it’s kind of like driving the car or mowing the lawn or something, you’re out in a different place and ideas just start coming to you. Then I’ll come back home and work on them, maybe before a
writing session with somebody else or a day where I don’t have something scheduled. The greatest thing that’s happened lately is the voice memo on the iPhone – you can be anywhere and put your idea down so you don’t lose it and come back to it and work on it later.

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[RS] I go through phases with trying to structure my free time and build in certain hours for practicing and writing vs. trusting that if I live and work with passion in general, the songs will come. I am a bit ADD, so distractions come easily and I do benefit from set deadlines; if I’m gearing up to record a new album for instance, a couple of the best songs will usually come to me within a day or two of the tracking session. That is not something I can count on, though!

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[DT] I schedule co-writes. I will get in the mood to write, my brain is always going, so I might as well focus on the song. Sometimes a fun challenge is to imagine seeing a video of the song – what is the next scene in the video? Other times, when I am tired, I will come up with ideas I would have never thought of and get working on the song!

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[JO] Yes, that’s the key, writing when you don’t want to – or even harder, when you don’t have to.

Hearing a song and thinking, “I need to write something like that”

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[JO] Of course, I write “Let It Be” at three in the morning every few months. Unfortunately I wake up the next day.

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[KB] There are a ton of songs on the radio down through the years that I go, “Man, I wish I’d written that!” and there are others where you go, “I had that idea in my book and I never wrote it!” Sometimes, maybe that is the most frustrating thing.

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[RS] When I was first writing songs as a child, my mom played a lot of Broadway soundtracks and classical music while my dad shared his doo-wop and Beatles collections. My sister was listening to hip alternative rock, so all of it
kind of blended for me into a sense of how melody can impact the listener and how repetition and variations of melody and lyrics can expand one image into a three or four-minute story. So yes, I have heard innumerable pieces of music, both classical and contemporary, that have prompted me to take a crack at composing my version of whatever had inspired me. However, usually that was undetectable to other people. For example, if I heard “American Pie,” my version of that might be to write a long story-song with imagery about the experience of being bullied at school. I was connecting dots in my own way.

Setting out to write a particular type of song vs. letting your music dictate the song

I usually let the natural rhythm and singability of a lyric dictate the tempo of a song. I’ve written ballads that ultimately became faster rock tracks once I explored the arrangements with a band, and vice versa. One of my more popular songs through the years, “Sistersong,” began as a piano ballad and ended up on an album as an upbeat pop tune. I think it’s a good thing to be open to alternate arrangement and production ideas once you are in the studio with a band, especially if you’ve already tracked a “definitive” version and there’s extra time to do another one just for fun. Sometimes that’s the one that will be more adventurous, because you’re playing off of the energy in the room and not an abstract expectation of what the song ought to sound like. I have a handful of excellent drummers to thank for helping me reimagine some of my ballads and reconceive them as groove tunes.

Reacting to a song after it’s been produced and recorded by another artist

It’s happened both ways, where I demo something and I get locked into that and I feel like the demo has the magic. Then I hear it recorded by someone and I’m like, “Whoa, they missed that whole thing I was trying to get across.” Other times it goes the other way. “Born Country” is a great example of a song I wrote with John Schweers and we went into the studio and it came out as an average sort of demo, it had all the right chord changes and did everything it was supposed to, it had all the dynamics it needed. But then when it was recorded by Alabama it was like, “Holy cow, man. Wow!” They took it into the stratosphere and came up with a lot of sub hooks and things that really took the song to a new level. On the other hand, “Picking Up Strangers” is an example of something that went the other way. I wrote this song for the movie back in 1980 and it was nothing but me and a guitar. And when they produced it came back, the background singers were kinda out of tune, it was not really what I was envisioning. And sure enough, it was a big hit.
Formally studying the art of songwriting

| KB | I can’t say I studied it formally, but when you grew up on AM and FM radio that had so much diversity and so many great songs, you’re inundated with the kind of things that get to your heart, the things that make you happy, that make you sad, that make you cry. You’re always studying the music or the lyrics from people like James Taylor, Jackson Browne, The Beatles, Marvin Gaye, Frank Sinatra, and anyone you can think of. I went back and studied the writers that were big in the ’30s and ’40s, Hoagy Carmichael, stuff like that, just getting a handle on what made things so popular. So I did my own studying, just working on what was done in the past and figuring out how to do it differently and still get the feeling they got across in their songs.

| DT | I have studied songwriting it seems for most of my life! I remember loving lyrics, and even as a ten-year old kid, putting a quarter in a jukebox and listening to “These Eyes,” trying to figure out the words in the chorus as the song played over and over. It probably drove the people in the soda shop crazy. In the early ’90s, someone gave me a copy of a book called The Craft and Business of Songwriting by John Braheny, and that helped me get on board to really study songwriting. In 1996, I visited Nashville, stumbled across NSAI, and found I had a great resource to study songwriting. I’ve also read dozens of books on songwriting and about people in the music business, and attended many workshops over the years. I read something every day related to music and ask friends about their songs, how and where they got their ideas.

| RS | I never formally studied songwriting, but I did attend a handful of very interesting and inspiring talks through the years, such as events with songwriters discussing their craft at 92nd Street Y or The New School. These were often very informative for me, as I was a young writer hearing stories about other artists’ processes — artists who I greatly admired. I suppose in a way, that is a type of education, like a master class. I also entered a slew of contests early on – The Billboard Song Contest, Disc Makers’ Independent Music World Series, The John Lennon Songwriting Contest. In a way, I think having to self-edit and select my own “best” submissions was a good exercise for me, and helped me set goals and become organized as a young amateur musician that eased me into becoming a professional.

| JO | I took one songwriting extension class at UCLA, though I believe the best way to become a good songwriter is to write song after song after song. There are no rules or secrets. Listening to great songwriters and knowing a few basic structure rules help, but it’s a craft, and unless you are a prodigy, it’s sweat and repetition that leads to improvement.

Wherever you are on your songwriting journey, remember the successful songwriters were right there too! They wrote songs in their home towns, had songs rejected, wondered why they wrote songs, got confused, were told their songs were not that good...

- Doak Turner
Favorite songwriters and what you admire most about each of them

BH | I guess I’d start the list out with Dolly Parton, she’s so down home and simple, she’s an amazing songwriter and really kinda underrated because her image and star thing overshadows what she does as a songwriter. But she’s just terrific and extremely crafty. I’d put Carole King high on my list, everything she writes sounds like a hit, she’s great at the hooks. One writer I have to give a lot of credit to for inspiring me to get into the business is Kris Kristofferson. My dad sat me down when I was about 16 and told me to listen carefully to “Sunday Morning Coming Down” and it was from that moment on that I wanted to be a songwriter. I was already a musician, I had been playing guitar since I was 10 and I was excited about music and what was going on, but when I heard that song, I knew I really wanted to work on being a songwriter. And there have been a lot of people along the way. Jimmy Webb has got these soaring melodies and big ideas, and he seems like quite an intelligent guy, and his songs are just huge. He does something that not everyone can do – it’s kinda like when I go see a movie, I don’t know what’s going on really, I’m just usually enthralled with the movie, and that’s kinda the way I am with Jimmy Webb: it’s so far over my head that I’m just amazed by it. Of course, you can’t beat Merle Haggard for the simplicity of the common man stuff. I’ve always liked Gordon Lightfoot, incredible depth and thought and real life story stuff. And you know, I’ve always liked Johnny Cash, but I didn’t really understand the full depth of his writing until I bought that book about his lyrics that Don Cusic wrote. I started looking through that book and I was like, “Wow, this is some deep stuff!”

JO | For me it starts with The Beatles. To be so prolific and skilled melodically is truly unbelievable. How many of us would give a left arm to write just one of those classics? As a piano guy I have to mention Elton John and Billy Joel, of course. I doubt there would be a Five For Fighting if I didn’t see Joel’s Glass Houses tour when I was 16. The Who’s Tommy is still in high rotation, and great lyricists, like Leonard Cohen, remind us songwriters how mortal we are.

The best bit of songwriting advice you have received

KB | It was simple. If you’re going to be a songwriter, you’ve got to be in Nashville, LA, or New York – but really, Nashville. So when I was bringing my songs down to Nashville, that was the advice I got, you know if you want to go hunt tigers, you’ve got to go where the tigers are. There’s an energy here in Nashville with everybody creating everyday that’s in the air that you just kinda pick up, and it makes it a little more fun and easy to be creative in this kind of environment.

RS | Some of my favorite songwriters include The Beatles (of course!), Elvis Costello, Prince, Suzanne Vega, Sinead O’Connor, Billy Joel, Marc Cohn, Carole King, John Prine, Sarah McLachlan, Bruce Springsteen, and Rufus Wainwright. In their own way, each of these songwriters has impacted millions of people by combining their own natural talents and unique aesthetics with an enormous sense of discipline and a seemingly endless desire to connect and communicate.
A publisher who was one of my earliest mentors, a guy named Jonathan Stone, once told me, “Nobody ever said it would be easy.” And it just stuck in my head to not feel like anyone owes me anything, I just need to keep plowing forward with that as a creed.

Be involved in your music community.

The example my father gave me to work hard and be humble fits most any endeavor.

The worst bit of advice

The worst advice I got was from somebody over at SESAC, when I first moved to town and she told me to move back home. She basically told me I was terrible, and it pretty much crushed me. Then, maybe six months later, I had six songs cut in three weeks. You can’t believe what everybody tells you. You have to go with what your heart’s telling you, and my heart was telling me I had to be in Nashville. That had to be the worst advice I ever got, and I’m glad I didn’t take it.

A UK producer offered this gem, repeatedly: “You should write more like Taylor Swift – like it’s from your diary. Go study her, she’s really onto something!”

Advice you would give regarding songwriting

It’s a different world than it was five years ago or ten years ago in the music business, with Pandora and Spotify, YouTube, and even BMI and ASCAP cutting back the money. At the same time, it’s more possible for artists to do their own thing with companies like Disc Makers. CD Baby and iTunes have opened up some things, you’re reaching people you couldn’t get to before, say in Japan or China or Germany. So my advice is if you love it and you want to do it, do it in whatever way you can. If you’re looking for fame and fortune, I can’t say that that’s going to be the case, but if you’re looking to let out your inner soul, there are so many options to do it these days compared to how it was. Just go ahead, do it, and have fun with it.

Once you are ready to really pursue songwriting professionally and commit to it as a lifelong pursuit, have a regular way to present your work, whether in a performance setting or a local writers’ salon/group. I think some people fall into the trap of keeping everything very private/close to their chest until it’s absolutely perfect. I think that can become an excuse or cultivate an unhealthy fear of feedback, which we all need to grow and evolve. In short: don’t create in a vacuum. Become part of a “scene,” and find a supportive network of peers, friends, or a genuine recurring gig where you can experiment and present ideas without feeling like it will make or break your career. Be generous with your gift and share it however and whenever you can! If I had not played so many school assemblies and brought in demos to play for my friends, I might never have received the positive reinforcement – and sometimes, critical input – to recognize that this was what I truly wanted to do for the rest of my life.

Write tons of songs, record them, and play them live for an audience. To truly get perspective and grow you need to listen back to your music, even if it’s just a piano/vocal or guitar/vocal. You can work on a song in the studio for months, but nothing will give you better insight than playing it live for people you don’t know.

Don’t ignore the great craftsmen in Nashville. New artist/writers should have a few of those people on their team.

If you really want to write songs and have big dreams, you must be present to win! Build relationships in the music industry, learn every day, study the great songwriters, join a songwriting organization, and love the journey of songwriting. Surround yourself with positive people in life and in the music business.
Final thoughts...

[RS] Songwriting isn’t about you in the privacy of your bedroom or home studio. Present your songs every way you can, and it will grant you a rich, adventurous life! Many people wish they could play an instrument or write music, but they simply don’t know how. Somehow, you’ve figured it out, and are being given an opportunity to perceive the world in an unusual way that can bring all different kinds of people together. Relish it, respect it, and always remember there is more you can learn from others whose music has inspired you. Never stop being a fan, and if people are moved by your songs, take the time to be gracious and thank them, if possible. It’s no small thing, when you can impact someone else’s life with your songs. It can keep you going when times get tough, to recognize and appreciate those who encourage and support you – and then you can be that source of positivity to someone else down the line.

[DT] Wherever you are on your songwriting journey, remember the successful songwriters were right there too! They wrote songs in their home towns, had songs rejected, wondered why they wrote songs, got confused, were told their songs were not that good — and those songs sometimes are timeless songs! Study the story of your favorite songs and how they were written, what inspired them, the process of writing them, and who wrote the songs. Study the songwriters’ journey and make friends wherever you are. And always remember why you love music and writing songs.

[JO] Try as best you can to enjoy writing songs. Understand the dance: there is no right or wrong, no rules of the game. At the end of the day, songwriting should be a cathartic process, and a beautiful road.
Originally from North Carolina, Byron Hill has been a professional songwriter in Nashville since 1978, with his songs generating more than 700 recordings, 77 RIAA certified Gold and Platinum awards, 10 ASCAP awards, and 31 US and Canadian top-ten chart hits.


Through the years, Byron’s songs have been recorded by artists that include Juice Newton, Ed Bruce, Conway Twitty, Mel McDaniel, Ricky Skaggs, Margo Smith, Reba McEntire, Kenny Rogers, Tom Wopat, Randy Travis, Keith Whitley, Rhonda Vincent, Don Williams, Dionne Warwick, Doc & Merle Watson, Trace Adkins, Asleep At The Wheel, John Michael Montgomery, Toby Keith, Gene Watson, Porter Wagoner, Brooks & Dunn, Hank Thompson, Bill Medley, Blackhawk, Highway 101, Jeff Bates, Rhett Akins, The Oak Ridge Boys, Ricky Van Shelton, The Whites, The Seekers, and many others.

Byron performs regularly throughout the southeast, usually on-stage with other award-winning songwriters performing the hits they’ve written for major artists. Learn more at ByronHillMusic.com, check out Byron’s music on SoundCloud, and buy his music on CD Baby.
Growing up in Lexington, Kentucky, Kent Blazy became musically inspired when he heard Roger McGuinn playing his Rickenbacker on “Mr. Tambourine Man.” Kent traded in his baseball glove for a guitar and began his musical journey playing with a series of bands all over the eastern half of the country.

By the mid-70s, Kent was band leader, playing guitar and touring with Canadian legend Ian Tyson. A first place win in a national songwriting contest persuaded him to move to Nashville in 1980, where Kent went to focus his efforts on the craft of songwriting. In 1982, Gary Morris took “Headed for a Heartache” to #5 on the charts. In the years that followed, artists such as The Forrester Sisters, T. Graham Brown, Donna Fargo, and Moe Bandy recorded Kent’s tunes.

In 1987, Kent was introduced to a new demo singer by Bob Doyle, soon to be the manager for an emerging talent named Garth Brooks. The first song Garth and Kent penned together was “If Tomorrow Never Comes,” which became the first #1 song for both. The friendship and writing partnership continued as Garth included eight more of their songs on his albums, including “Somewhere Other Than the Night,” “Ain’t Goin’ Down (’Til the Sun Comes Up),” “It’s Midnight Cinderella,” and “She’s Gonna Make It” — all of which reached #1.

Other artists to record Kent’s songs include Diamond Rio, Kenny Chesney, Terri Clark, Clay Walker, Patty Loveless, Julie Roberts, Andy Griggs, Blaine Larsen, Reba McEntire, and Chris Young. Learn more at KentBlazy.com and buy his music on CD Baby.
Born and raised in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles, CA, Five For Fighting’s John Ondrasik began his musical journey at the age of three. His mom was a piano teacher, and after teaching him the basics, she allowed him to walk away from formal lessons at the age of thirteen.

Some 20 years later, Ondrasik exploded onto the music scene with the release of “Superman (It’s Not Easy)” in 2000 on America Town. Having written those thousands of songs just for fun in his youth and his time at UCLA, the public adoration of “Superman” stunned his mother – a way to actually make money writing and playing music! Ondrasik’s father, a rocket scientist, was less surprised. As a businessman himself, he appreciated the long hours of dedication he had put into honing his craft – 45,000 hours, according to math major Ondrasik’s calculations!

“Superman” continued to embed itself in the nation’s consciousness with the events of 9/11, as Ondrasik joined superstar musicians for “The Concert for New York” fundraiser in 2001 dedicated to first responders affected by the events of September 11th. Since then, Ondrasik scored another #1 hit with “100 Years” and has compiled five albums to give away to US troops, with over a million distributed containing hit songs and bits from superstar musicians and comedians, including Five for Fighting music.

Ondrasik is an avid hockey fan – his “band” title references five penalty minutes given to a player guilty of fighting. Learn more at FiveForFighting.com and buy John’s music at his online store.
A soulful vocalist and innovative keyboardist, songwriter, singer, and producer, Rachael Sage has become one of the busiest touring artists in independent music, performing 150+ dates a year with her band The Sequins throughout the US, UK, Europe, and Asia. She has earned a loyal following for her music, lyrics, and often colorful and outrageous stage banter.

Sage has shared stages with Sarah McLachlan, Colin Hay, Marshall Crenshaw, Marc Cohn, The Animals, and Ani DiFranco. She has performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and received numerous songwriting awards, including The John Lennon Songwriting Contest (Grand Prize) and several Independent Music Awards and OUTMusic Awards.

MPress Records released her 10th album, Haunted By You, in May 2012. Featuring The Sequins as well as guest appearances by Dar Williams, Mike Visceglia (Suzanne Vega), David Immergluck (Counting Crows), Doug Yowell (Duncan Sheik) and more, it was self-produced by Sage and mixed by Kevin Killen (U2, Elvis Costello). Follow Rachael on Facebook and Twitter, learn more at RachaelSage.com, and buy her music at her online store.
Arriving in Nashville in 2002, Doak Turner has had a unique impact on one of the world’s most famous music cities. Doak was awarded the NSAI (Nashville Songwriters Association International) Community Ambassador Award in 2012, founded a weekly newsletter called The Nashville Muse, and launched MusicStartsHere.org, a website that hosts over 300 video interviews with music industry pros, producers, and songwriters. He also founded and hosted networking events such as the “3rd Sunday at 3” songwriters roundtable and the annual “Guitar-B-Q.”

Doak began in radio sales in his native West Virginia in 1982, moved to Charlotte, NC in 1987, and was working in radio for NASCAR by the mid-90s. He syndicated NASCAR Country, building a network of more than 300 stations for the company. He had also been trying his hand at lyric writing and was the coordinator of Charlotte chapter of the NSAI.

The years of support Turner has given songwriters are now translating into success for his own tunes. Frankie Ballard (Warner Brothers) cut “That Look,” and he has 10 indie cuts since moving to Nashville, including Brad Puckett singing “At Least I’m Feelin’ Again” and Jimmy Fortune (Statler Brothers) cutting the same tune. Kate Logan recorded “Rocks In The River” and Mallory Miller recorded “Rocks In The River” and “I Talk To God” for her album to be released in 2014. Learn more at DoakTurner.com, hear Doak’s music at DoakMusic.com, and read Doak’s blog of resources and tips for the music industry.