

ON
WRITING
&
PERFORMING
SONGS



Learn as many things as you can.

Start from the premise that all music is lifted by some-
one, and that if you don't like it, that's not your
fault. You're to blame about the music.

Stop listening to music only because you like it. The
less you like it, the more you should listen to it. If
you can't, ask yourself why.

Nothing for the first before you start writing is like
nothing for almost anyone before you start writing.
Just write.

The songwriting process is very confusing, so people all
only have the knowledge of the craft and what containing
them in the name of logic. But the song is a complex
blend of their various experiences in their lives,
and it's difficult.

It's all about the song. The song is the heart of the
process. The song is the heart of the process. The song is
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The idea for this zine came from several years of teach-
ing guitar and songwriting to pupils of various ages
and abilities. Although it is, quite frankly, the kind
of unsolicited advice that I myself would reward with
an eye roll, I put it down here in hope that at least
some of my pupils can see their own hard work animat-
ing its pages. In these days when the radical potent-
ial of education is being subsumed by the drive to
conjure a workforce that can compete with Asian dicta-
torships, I'm a firm believer in abolishing the teacher/
student binary--or emancipating the two, as Jacques Ran-
ciere would have it. With that in mind, I'm committing
these ideas to paper as a gesture of affection, to re-
mind my pupils that I learn from them as much as they
learn from me.

Ben Kritikos

Learn as many songs as you can.

Start from the premise that all music is liked by someone, and that if you don't like it, that says as much about you as it does about the music.

Stop listening to music only because you like it. Listen to as much music as you can and try to like it. If you can't, ask yourself why.

Waiting for the muse before you start writing is like waiting for dinner guests before you start cooking. Just write.

The songwriting format is very forgiving, so people with only passable knowledge of the craft can make contributions to the canon of song. But the canon is a crowded place, so doing anything extraordinary is extraordinarily difficult.

Nobody cares about your music. Even if you're Kanye. (Especially if you're Kanye.) This is simultaneously depressing and liberating, and presents you with a question: who am I writing for?

Write for nobody, if you can. If you must write for somebody, write for your peers. Your peers are the people who can be bothered to give you constructive criticism, and the people you're nervous about seeking it from.

Never trust anyone who talks about 'just writing for myself.' They're lying to themselves, and people who lie to themselves are the most insidious liars.

Good songwriting is often an exercise in truth-telling. Ironically, you do it despite the fact that it's impossible.

Be completely derivative until you can afford not to be. That is the constructive way to use 'influence.'

Take your time--there really is no rush. Good things take as long as they take.

Try never to name the thing you're writing about. That way, by the time the listener grasps the subject matter, they're already in the heart of it with you. If a listener comes to a song knowing that it is about so-and-so, they're likely to observe it from a distance. People are slow to hear what they haven't heard before. That makes it much harder for them to see the thing through your eyes--which, after all, is the point.

Songs don't have to be good for people to like them, but someone has to like the song for it to be good.

Before I really learned to write in my own voice, I wrote like my heroes--but badly. When I reached the limit of my abilities, I tried writing like my peers--and it was worse. Later, I wrote a song for each of my peers, trying to make it sound like them, like they would be singing it--and it didn't work, but it was better. Then I found my voice.

Keep writing until you've worked it out. As George Orwell said, vagueness is usually a sign of insincerity. You don't have to know exactly what you're trying to say, but you have to know exactly what you mean.

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'Playing music' is a deceptive phrase. It is as much about listening as it is about playing.

As a performer, you have two jobs to perform at the same time: playing and listening. But as a player/listener, you must always remain as a singularity. Even in an ensemble, the number of player/listeners should remain: one.

The objective of performing a song you've written is bringing an audience into that singularity.

Before you sound a note, you should inhabit the song. When you are conscious of the imagined space that a song inhabits, you can create that space in real terms by entering it yourself. Sound is nothing but the perception of disruptions in physical space, vibrations in the air around the listener. In that sense, the meaning of performance derives from the difference between inviting an audience to inhabit a space with you, or forcing them to hear without necessarily listening. The latter anyone can do, but the former requires skill.

Some of the greatest writers and performers have imperfect command of their instruments. What makes them great is their ability to inhabit this space. So: you don't master a craft or an audience, you master yourself.

When you acquire this skill of inhabiting the song, the performance happens as if it is automatic. But it is never automatic, because it is deliberate.

John Cage composed a piece of music titled 4'33", in which a pianist sits at a piano and deliberately plays nothing for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. The audience and the performer are sat together in a space with no 'music'. The ordinary sounds that both would otherwise not hear--because of the 'music'--are suddenly audible. The attention that would otherwise be directed to the 'music' is suddenly-directionless. The space that this music inhabits is abundantly perceptible regardless.

Cage rigorously studied silence before composing 4'33", subjecting himself to sensory deprivation in an anacoustic chamber, finding remote wildernesses where one would expect there to be no sound--yet he still failed to perceive silence. Whether it was sounds in the distance or the pumping of his own blood, silence remained elusive.

The great contribution to music of Cage's 4'33" was to

demonstrate how we think in binary terms of music/silence: that an enveloping silence is there before the music starts and there after the music finishes. But what we didn't know was how it is present the whole time throughout the music, too. What John Cage demonstrated is that there is no such thing as silence per se.

So what does the word 'silence' actually describe? Evidently not an objective absence of sound. Silence is ungratified attention. We carry it with us. It is present in all music--it is the source of all music, because it is the source of all listening.

Great performers respond to silence like audiences respond to sound.

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The rest is luck. Sheer, dumb luck.

SONGS
ARE THE
POETRY
OF THE
PEOPLE