



Song Doctor

helping you get better
at writing songs

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A Songwriter's Setup for Success

Imagine your workday goes like this. You sit quietly for a moment, gazing into space, and suddenly, there it is – ping! Your next brilliant idea has landed from Songwriter Heaven and your pen hardly touches the paper as profound, yet exquisitely simple words fall from your heart on to the page, your fingers fly over the strings of your guitar in an unusual, yet highly accessible chord sequence. You start singing this song so easily it writes itself, and you now know it's going to be good – so good! You swing round in your swivel chair, dial up some beats, slam down the audio note perfect and hey presto a scratch track of your #1 hit is uploaded to your publisher. Secure in the knowledge you've just written your retirement fund, lean back in your chair and smile. And it's not even lunchtime!



Or is it more like this? Are you sitting on your single bed, strumming the same three chords you always play on your six-string, doodling in your notebook, trying to find the next line after the less than impressive (and yes, you know it), 'woke up this morning'. Council workers have started digging up the road outside again and the next door neighbour's baby's bawling her eyes out. Your phone's still on and you half heartedly check out those notifications to events you can't afford to go to. You give up and go to the kitchen for another pot of two minute noodles. Your minimum wage waitressing shift at the bar starts in 30 minutes. Maybe, you'll get around to finishing that song tomorrow. But right now, you just can't do it.



If you live in the first scenario, you probably don't need to read any further. However, if you feel more than a little familiar with the second, its time to take a good look at your songwriting set up.



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Problem One: Gunna do this, gunna do that. Consequently, never happens.

There is a great deal of fantastic advice out there in the world about encouraging the creative process. None of it means s*** if you don't use it. The trick is to set yourself up so you don't have to use enormous amounts of willpower to get writing. In fact, so you don't have to use any.

Take the decision to write away from yourself.

Then, you can actually as Mr Jordan would tell you to, 'Just Do It!', or at least you're way more likely to, more often.

Problem Two: But I don't have enough time/energy/money/talent/girlfriends.....!!!

Maybe so, but you sure do have a lot of excuses! This **extreme reach barrier** line of thinking is often closely followed by **unsolvable problem thinking** or the **if only** trap:

Problem Three: If only....I had this laptop/recording programme/studio/upgrade/guitar lead/car/phone.....then I could really get down to it.

Go get what you need.

If it was easy, everyone would be doing it and popping basketballs through hoops from the opposite end of the court as well. Some of the reasons you're not writing as much or as well as you want are nothing to do with your talent or what's trending in the charts. Some of them are purely physical, some psychological and some social. So, let's get physical to start with.

1. Make a Space.



Give yourself some room where you do what you do. Provide a haven for your inspiration. Note I said some room, not a room, although if you can get a whole room, good for you. Of course, an acoustically isolated totally set up studio is even better, but you can **set somewhere up**, and



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go from there. If you have a designated place, you can pick up your thoughts where you left them. It contributes to what hit songwriter Jimmy Webb calls **continuity**. What's in the space?

A table, a chair, a pen and paper or a laptop (and charger with a plug), with a guitar on a stand beside it or a synth shoved up against the wall. Nothing in a case, nothing out of sight – all within arms' reach. A poster of your band on the wall above the table or a wall planner with due dates on it - musical due dates like your next gig where you're going to play your new song for the first time. Maybe some quotes from your favourite writer. Songwriter-ly stuff, close at hand that practically supports you, that visually prompts and validates your awesome choice to get better at writing songs. Now, this could develop into a.....

2. Project Studio

Yes, you can write songs without them, but you need some way of capturing your ideas before they fall out of your poor little head. It makes the process quicker, you remember more and you try out more ideas. In ancient times, we relied just on our well tuned aural/oral memories. Then came quills and manuscript paper. Later still, Walkmans with endearingly hissy cassette tapes, but since 1984, computers have made it possible to record **digitally** – no tape purchase and no studio rental required. And the technology has got more ubiquitous and easier to use.

From dictating snippets of tunes on your ever present smart phone to mucking around with Garageband loops on an iPad to tracking with full blown Protools or Logic or other hard drive recording programmes, you can now set up a simple record/playback home studio, with a decent vocal mic and headphones for jackshit. You don't need a licence or a physics degree or an engineer to work it either. **If you can operate an ATM, you can run a home studio.** There's ever so much online support too. The point is immediacy - **get something to record your music** as soon as you make it up. It will help you get better at writing songs.





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3. Instrumental to your Success

Play something. You don't need to be a virtuoso, but if you know a few chords on the guitar or the piano/keyboard (and they are the two main chordal instruments), you rapidly enhance your ability to provide a harmonic platform for writing melodies i.e. the TUNE. If you can't play an instrument and maybe your strength is creating lyrics or singing, then you need to collaborate with someone who can. Says writer/ producer Moses Arnold

Many songwriters are not traditional musicians. Some don't even play an instrument; instead, they will collaborate with arrangers by humming the melody to their lyrics. An arranger/co-writer figures out the chords and composes the accompaniment that makes up the musical bed. This is an exception, though. Many writers play one, if not several, instruments.



4. Practice Makes Perfect.

If you practice, you will get better. **Make your songwriting habitual.** But Lord knows, after school or a full time job, household duties, homework, childcare, tax returns and collapsing on the couch in a drooling heap on a Friday night with Netflix, what time is left to contribute to the development of your song craft? This is where willpower comes in but quite frankly, you need to show it the door. If you have to rely on willpower, we're screwed, because like New Year's resolutions we start with good intentions, only to scrumple up the stop-smoking-go-to-the-gym-eat-no-doughnuts-list by the end of January.

So, try these three ways in combination to **get writing regularly** – even a short space of dedicated time can get the juices going. First, choose a time when no one's around (one of my clients writes between 11.30pm and 1am) and put it in your diary or Google calendar every week to start off with. Secondly, give yourself a deadline to complete your first song. Take a fortnight – take a month! But, seriously, make an endpoint to aim for. Thirdly, make yourself accountable by booking in a 'front up appointment' with a teacher/ mentor/ band mate/ collaborator so you stick with your schedule. This kind of approach gives you a structure that reduces overwhelm and kick starts you into action by taking away the decision to write and replacing it with the 'it's what



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I do so I'd best get on and do it'. You work in regular bite sized chunks on a schedule you don't have to think about, while you make the 'time and place' approach a habit.



5. To get output you need input

My songwriting professor Andrea Stolpe said 'It's not *what* you write about. It's *how* you write that matters.' Songwriting is an amalgam of two languages - words and music. Feed your muse with both. **Read lots.** As music blogger Chris Bolton put it (<http://blog.hostbaby.com/2010/04/8-cures-for-lyric-writers-block/>)

Sometimes the best cure for writing is reading. Read poetry. Read mythology. Read fiction and non-fiction and prose. Many a great song has been written based on a poem or a fictional character in a book. When what you're reading moves you – take note. This is what you want your songs to do. Was it a character, a description, or an event that struck a chord. See if you can harness this element and use it in your song.'

I am taking it for granted you have access to the internet because you're reading this. Two really big things to read on and off are an **online rhyming dictionary** and there's plenty of them so bookmark one, and an **online thesaurus**. Word triggers for y'all.



Listen hard. Listen to how people talk, the phrases and sayings they use, the jargon and slang. Tune into conversations and ransack them for ideas. Remember song lyrics are words to be sung so if you can speak them, you can sing them. Listen to what they need music for, how they use it and when. Listen to music – live shows and recorded, change your radio station and take note.



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Singer/writer/producer Chris Huff says to **listen actively** (<http://blog.discmakers.com/tag/active-listening/>) by *focussing on specific elements within the music itself. Start with the most obvious – the singer or the most prominent lead instrument. Try to keep your focus on this for the entire song. If it's the singer, what are they saying with the lyrics? What qualities does their voice have? Which other singers do they remind you of? Are there harmonies? If it's an instrument, is it playing lead or rhythm?....You get the idea*

He also talks about **opening yourself stylistically** and points out

*All of the great musical artists have been exceptional active listeners. One thing that many of them have in common is their willingness to branch out and draw inspiration from other genres and styles of music different than their own. Pete Townshend's open-mindedness led him to modern classical music in the form of Terry Riley, which in turn he paid homage to on The Who's "Baba O'Brien." Many of the great jazz musicians were listening to classical (Bird loved Stravinsky) and even pop music ... The point is that there is a world of music out there, and when you are actively listening to it ...**it will transform you.***

And speaking of personal transformation, it's time to wise up!

6. Learn stuff and get educated.

I mean this in the broadest sense. If you haven't already, start learning about songwriting. It doesn't have to be formal although it sure can be nowadays from online courses to bricks-and-mortar-get-a-degree styles. But you can learn in a hundred other ways without spending a cent. There are many very well written practical books you can get out from your public library or buy second hand for a nominal price. Here is a great list of them.

<http://www.taxi.com/abouts/music-business-books.html>

There are webinars and online mini courses all over YouTube. There are opportunities for one off workshops and one on one coaching. **It all feeds your muse.** Learn about how successful songwriters actually became successful. It may surprise and encourage you because there is no one right way to do this. What I do know is that there are many resources out there that can help you get better at writing songs. The trick is to start soaking it up.





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7. You are not alone!

When you actually say out loud that you are writing songs and that you want to get better at it, people will talk to you differently. And different people will start talking to you. It can be quite unexpected. This is a very good thing. Because although songwriting can be intensely individual, you are trying to make something that communicates. Tell people what you're trying to do and you will wind up interacting with like minds. These are the folks that get what you're going through. They will support your process. **It's like joining a secret society.** The enthusiasm is definitely infectious.



You can do this through your local music scene – there will be lots of friendlies out there, online forums, workshops, open mics, music clubs as well as gigs, festivals and songwriter camps. You may meet a prospective collaborator or join a songwriters circle. Doesn't mean you're locked in for life, but it does help to know other fish are swimming in the same stream. Start networking. Sometimes your access into the music scene may have been as a guitarist or a singer, but if you now generate your own material, tell people about it. This sets off a feedback loop, where you become propelled toward actually showing people your songs.

Suddenly it becomes real when you tell someone else.

Especially, tell someone who isn't your parent/girlfriend/other immediate family or loved one. These are the people you want to cheer you on no matter what. You need them in a different way. I'm talking about networking about people who write songs. They don't have to be famous - they may well become so, but right now they're getting on with it, and that energy can work wonders on you.





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8. Feedback from the Real World

This can be a double edged sword. On the one hand, getting rated/marked/reviewed or generally judge on something you've poured your heart and soul into can be nerve wracking. But until you offer your song to another set of ears, you'll never know if it has the potential to connect. You will need to venture beyond your social songwriting network support system at some stage. When you're ready, try these.



Open mics are a way of sharing your songs in a really supportive environment and getting your toe in the water. If you already have a band, start offering your material at rehearsal, ultimately for exposure to a live audience.

Sending songs off to **songwriting competitions** is another strand for your feedback loop, especially if you can get a comment sheet. There are generally positive and may give you something you can work on. Competitions may have entry fees but they're generally not too prohibitive. Performance competitions like NZ Smokefree Rockquest and Battle of the Bands have entire sections just for original song submissions. <http://smokefreerockquest.co.nz/>

Consultants. Another strand of feedback. Don't just take my word for it. Shop around. Look for someone who gets results **with** their clients (some of these may be unrealised yet), not necessarily **for** their clients. You're looking for someone and something that can improve your songwriting, not just drive it into the ground. Testimonials are a good gauge. Remember, a consultant should offer you an in depth, often very well backed up opinion, but it is just one. If you're getting a bunch of them that are in agreement, it really starts to add up.

These are the basic foundations for a songwriter's setup. Using any of these will help you get better at writing songs. Go at your own pace and do it your own way. If you want to know more, I can help.

I can help you get better at writing songs.
Email me on songdoctorclinic@gmail.com
I'm all ears.

