



# Song Doctor

helping you get better  
at writing songs

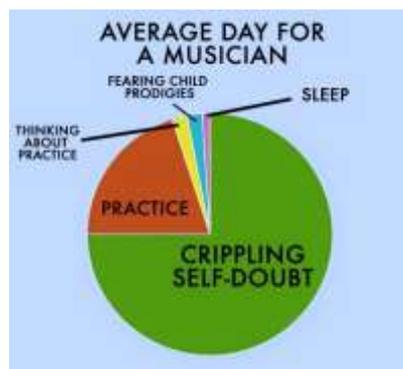
[www.songdoctor.co.nz](http://www.songdoctor.co.nz)

## Uppers for Songwriters

Sometimes, songwriters hit brick walls – sometimes at full speed. A rubbish review, an album that stiffs, a band that breaks up, the world's smallest audience, the world's rudest audience, a pen that won't automatically write anymore, a polite rejection email, or worse, the big loud void of **absolutely no response at all**, the “*I'm sorry he's busy right now...can I take a message*” for the umpteenth time.

You can blame your ‘lack of progress’ on everyone else in the world or you can recognise these dips and blips as part and parcel of making a relatively intangible art form a major part of your life, and preparing for them as best you can.

### 1. Self Doubt



There's a lot of it about! A very good NZ songwriter once told me off when I was being self-deprecating about my own songs. He said ‘*Don't piss on your own work – plenty of people will piss on it for you*’. That was a bitch slap that made me wake up. But he was so right.

If you want to write just for yourself, then go for it. If you want to work in the music industry at any level writing songs, then other people need to connect with them in some way. It can be difficult receiving criticism, whether justified or not. There is a curious balance between having enough confidence in your material and plain fear. Most songwriters I know don't think they're shit hot. They can become hugely wracked by self doubt, disillusioned and disheartened. There are also plenty of great artists who, on occasion, make really duff records. The difference is at some stage, they are willing to put their music out there and set their songs free. They see **songwriting as an ongoing process** and are prepared to weather the setbacks. It's no coincidence we talk about ‘releasing’ an album!

So, how do you get brave enough to dip your toe in the water and risk feedback?

Well, for starters, if you write the songs, they're yours and you don't have to show anything to anyone until you're ready. If you feel like you'd like an opinion, or you've done all you can with your song and ‘now what’, then maybe it's time to let someone else take a look. Now who would that be!



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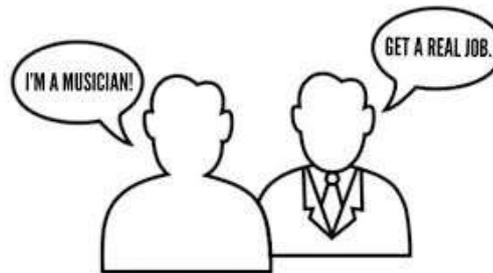
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It should be **someone you respect** – just outside your comfort zone, but with more knowledge or talent, experience or success - something that makes you want to listen to what they have to say. Remember, it's your song and you can take or leave any opinion offered. But you may just have started a **feedback loop** that can help you make your work so much stronger. And that's exciting. Suddenly, you get an energy surge at a really fundamental level that can push you to dig deeper into your own creativity. And you may be closer to **realising your potential** – which is worth its weight in gold. Sounds cheesy, but if you don't let go, you'll never know!

*The kid holed up in his dorm room writing shitty songs is still a songwriter. The kid worried about writing shitty songs so much he doesn't write anything...just isn't. John Mayer*

## 2. When are you going to get a real job?



This is a personal hate of mine. If you spend significant amounts of time songwriting, with not a lot of immediate tangible outcome, then at some stage, someone, be it your parents, peers, girlfriend, boyfriend, the internet or the whole damn world is going to tell you to get a real job, or ask you what you do for a 'day job', with that knowing smile and a 'yeah, right!' eye roll. Yawn!! But unless/until you are overtly successful, your chosen career may not get validation, or even general social support. The best thing to do is **prepare a script** for the outer circle, and develop a very supportive inner circle! Your script should be truthful but brief, while you sort the tyre kickers from the wannabes. Something like....

What are you doing at the moment? *Oh, I'm working hard on my songwriting currently.*  
Wow! But don't you have a day job? *Well, yes I do, for now. I'm self-funding. What do you do?*

If someone is actually interested, they'll persist, and if not, you haven't divulged that you have to flip burgers to survive. You've told them what's important to you and quietly closed the door.

If it's a repeated parental onslaught, try this: *Look, I know you don't get it, but it's something I'm going to pursue.* That's a statement that can give closure, or you can tack on some sort of an addendum, like... *It would be great if you could see your way to clear to wishing me well while I try this out. I really want to give it my best shot.* There are two kinds of parents – the ones that get it and the others that don't. The second type are the ones you should stop trying to defend yourself against, and just go do it. Results win out and they will make your choices self-evident.



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### 3. Gatekeepers



As you immerse yourself in songwriting and begin to develop your supportive inner circle, you begin to rub shoulders with folks who are in the same boat as you, and your network expands. You will also come into contact with people in a position to ramp your songwriting up a notch. While successfully negotiating these opportunities is important, it is fraught with the possibility of rejection. From something mundane like a venue owner who won't book your band or a radio show that won't book you for a live to air, to something more significant like a record label who won't renew your contract, major or minor, these are the people who appear to hold the keys to your imminent success. Gatekeepers! Sometimes, it seems like everyone (but you) wins all the competitions, hits the charts effortlessly, isn't as talented (as you), but is still the flavour of the month. And you can feel major FOMO!

The trick is to **develop an outward looking, resilient approach**. This can take a bit of work to sustain! If you concentrate on reaching out to people who can help you get to the next level, whatever that may be for you, rather than aiming for superstardom next week, you will build a series of real long term relationships. Gatekeepers come and go. They lose their jobs when new technology disrupts the industry or have car accidents or heart attacks or retire or sell their businesses and move to Spain. Things in music are constantly changing, so concentrate on improving your songwriting, responding to constructive criticism and expanding your network in manageable chunks.

Two myths:

1. *The internet changed everything and there are no gatekeepers anymore.*

The first part of this is true, but the second isn't. It's just reshuffled who they are! You will still meet people you need to convince from time to time like persuading the rest of your band to play your song at the next gig to getting someone to give you a lease on a rehearsal studio. You will still need resilience and the ability to build relationships.

2. *I will be discovered and my life will change forever!*

Harrumph! Most overnight sensations have been years in the making from Lorde to Ed Sheeran.



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Time for another reality check! There are **taste cycles** in song styles that seem inexplicable in hindsight. Great waves of musical fashion that can leave you and your work stranded on the beach of yesterday!! And then, just as the tide feels like it's never going to come back in again, whoosh, away you go. Every now and then, something weird and wonderful happens that can propel you forward, and similarly, bad luck can set you back. This is the nature of the music business. If it was easy, everyone would be doing it! But forewarned is forearmed. Learn from setbacks, reach out for support, and continue on your way, whatever the weather! Be authentic in your dealings with others and what motivates you to write songs. The payoff may not always be what you expect but there will be one!

### 4. Fear of Success



Fear of success is a wacky thing. It goes a bit like this. You finally start to make some progress. You're writing regularly and it's not too shabby. You take a songwriting class or a workshop, and meet some new people who say good things about your work. You get some of these new and improved songs happening in your set, and a reviewer posts a really nice review – all seems tickety-boo. Then one of your mates texts and says “Come down for a few beersies – we're starting early!” And you reply, “Nah, I need my game face for tomorrow's photo shoot.” And your mate replies, “Don't be such a f-ing tosser!” And you think ‘That's weird. Am I being a tosser?’ That night, you feel out of sorts and you get snappy at your girlfriend - as she points out, for no good reason. So, you slam the door and head off to the industry function you'd just been invited to where you drink more than you should and behave like a complete idiot.

The things that you're doing are classic symptoms of fear of success, which is strange because you want to be successful. You've worked so hard to get here, so why would you sabotage yourself? Fear of success is why. We may not recognise it so it stays subconscious and manifests itself in stupid behaviours like the scenario described. Fear of success can hold us back from achieving our dreams. There's an awful lot been written about it, but for songwriters, here's some specifics to consider – most of which has to do with change!

**You Change How You Spend Your Time:** you may have less ‘free’ time now because you're choosing to spend time on songwriting and ancillary activities like practice, webinars, classes, functions, gigs and rehearsals.



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**You Change Who You Spend Time With:** You start to connect with other folks and you may leave former peers behind when you raise the bar, rather than just drink in it! Some people may be happy for your success – hey, you’re really doing what you want! But others feel left out and a bit pissed off. You may be accused of becoming ‘someone else’, a person your friends and family don’t recognise or even like. So rather than thinking of change as losing a bit of yourself, think of it as a plus. You’re adding to who you are and what you offer. It’s exciting as well as stressful! Yet, you can still be the person you’ve always been to family and friends. After all, you were still you at six, sixteen and twenty-six - just different! And if you’re still getting grief, maybe it’s time to part company, for a wee while, at any rate.

**Your Self Image Changes:** perhaps you've always wondered if you could do it but people may have told you, covertly or overtly, that you don't deserve success, that you're not worthy. This feeling has its own little descriptor - **imposter syndrome** (more on that later). Right now, you may be more familiar with wondering, rather than actually doing! When you succeed, you will change how you see yourself. On some level, its way easier doing things you've always done, even if you feel a bit disappointed in yourself that you're not giving it your all. But achieving success (whatever that is for you) puts you in uncharted territory. You and your songs will now be available for public scrutiny and criticism. A tiny part of you would rather not take the risk.



But although the idea of success can be scary, the reality is generally easier to cope with than you think. If you’ve survived the tough times, you’ll be able to cope with the good times, with a bit of forethought. You may have to change and grow, but if you can write songs, then you’re creative enough to do that. When you feel wobbly, **think of what success will bring you** like improved confidence/self belief/satisfaction/happiness/a wider, more relevant support system/a bigger bank balance or one that’s built from your new songs/an enhanced reputation that opens new doors/the increased ability to make choices in your life/ the ability to make something beautiful or meaningful that a large audience to appreciate..... doesn’t sound too bad, really, does it?



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**Fear of Selling Out:** Songwriters, like other artists, have a complicated relationship with success. On the one hand, you really want to make it but not at all costs – especially the loss of your artistic integrity. But celebrating a sold out concert is very different from being a sell-out. Whatever choices you make, if you achieve any kind of public success, the reality is someone, somewhere, will be bitching about you – including accusations of “selling out.” As Taylor Swift wisely said, *‘The haters gonna hate- hate-hate-hate-hate!’*

First, accept that you’ll never please everyone, underdogs are always heroes and that the **tall poppy syndrome** is alive and well. Secondly, have a bottom line you can sleep with. Figure out what you’re really not prepared to do, and stick to it. Then you can rest easy!



If you’re experiencing some of the things that I’ve outlined and you think they’re stopping you from doing your best work, get in touch.

I can help you with that.  
I can help you get better at writing songs.

**Email me on [songdoctorclinic@gmail.com](mailto:songdoctorclinic@gmail.com)  
I’m all ears.**

