SONGWRITING

GARY BARLOW

BBC MAESTRO



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Songwriting
is the art of turning
the music in your head
into something that people
will connect with.

1. Introduction

Who can reveal the secrets of songwriting better than an artist who has sold more than 50 million records? What about someone who has had 14 number one singles, 24 Top Ten hits, and eight Top Ten albums, and who has won eight Brit Awards and six Ivor Novellos?

These are the achievements of the same man.

Gary Barlow's obsession with music started early. He was only six years old when he knew he wanted to be a songwriter and just 15 when he wrote his first hit, A Million Love Songs. Today this passion burns as brightly as it ever did, shining through everything he does, from pop music and musical theatre to film soundtracks.

As well as writing numerous hits for Take That and finding success as a solo artist, Gary has collaborated with musical legends like Sir Elton John, Rick Rubin, Brian May and Sir Paul McCartney. Awarded an OBE for services to music and charity in 2012, Barlow attributes his success to a love of melody and a fascination with the elusive qualities that make a song connect emotionally.

His ability to find this quality again and again was never more evident than in 2020, during the first wave of the pandemic, when stars queued up to duet with him on his Crooner Sessions. Initially intended as a way for Gary to stay busy during lockdown, they soon developed a huge following with millions of fans all over the world.

Gary Barlow has had very public ups and downs, which is surely what makes him so relatable. During his BBC Maestro course, he describes how he built up his resilience in the face of these setbacks and talks candidly about why confidence matters so much to an aspiring songwriter.

In this BBC Maestro course he shares his secrets and everything he has learned about songwriting since he first sat down at a keyboard 40 years ago. You'll learn the recurring fundamentals that go into making a hit record, watch him create a song from scratch and gain insights into the creative process as you see that song evolve. Everything, in other words, that you need to get started on your own.

> **No one can draw you a map of how to do this, even if that's what I'm going to try to do.**

As a 15-year-old, sitting in my bedroom listening to music with headphones on, I would have given the world for someone who'd made a success of themselves in music to appear on the telly and give me a nudge in the right direction, just a hint of how it's done.

But more than any tip or shortcut, I'd have wanted someone to inspire me. And that's what this course should be. It shouldn't be a list of things you got wrong or things you got right, it should be something to inspire you. I hope it does.


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Music is everything to me. I couldn’t imagine a world without it.

2. What Is Songwriting?

Songwriting is many things, including being an extremely frustrating process at times. Sometimes, it's extremely difficult to make a musical version of what's inside you, or of an idea that's in your head. It can take months. And sometimes it can take 10 minutes. It's an exciting, elusive process and it's endlessly varied. No two days are ever the same.

It can be very frustrating sometimes, but that shouldn't come as a surprise when you think of the journey you go on. It starts with nothing really, just some thought that you plucked out of thin air. But it can end up with you hearing your own creation being sung back to you by thousands of fans at Wembley Stadium. That's what happened to me, and it could happen to you.

It's a crazy, magical thing, and you can't choose the day when a song, which could change the course of your life for ever, will come to you. That spark could happen at any moment.

A WORLD WITHOUT MUSIC

Music is everything to me, and it's such an important part of all our lives. It's the soundtrack to your 18th birthday and it's the start of the weekend. It's the place you go when you're sad or when you want to celebrate. It's the Swiss Army knife of everything we need in our lives. A movie is only half a movie before the music is added.

I couldn't live in a world without it. That's how much I love what it does to me.

> **It's an exciting, elusive process and it's endlessly varied. No two days are ever the same.**

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Songwriting is the art of turning the music in your head into something that people will enjoy listening to
- No two days are ever the same, sometimes it can take months and sometimes it can take 10 minutes
- A spark of creativity can happen at any time, you can't choose an exact time
- Music pervades so many parts of our lives, and a world without music is unimaginable
- Different songs have the power to take you back in time, lift your spirit, or make you sad
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EXERCISES

1. Think about what you want to say in your next song. What is it that's inside you that the whole world – or even just one person – needs to hear? Is it the melody that's been bugging you for weeks? Do you have a unique twist on the state of the world?

2. Think about a favourite theme song written for a film. How does it tell the story? Does it work as a song in its own right away from the film?

3. Pick a favourite film from a couple of different genres: comedy, romance, thriller. Look at how they each use songs in their soundtrack. Why do they work? Do they specifically tell the story or just suit the mood? Is there anything in common musically and/or lyrically in the best film themes?

4. Think of a good film with a soundtrack you don't like. What's wrong with those songs? Pick the songs that you think would have worked instead.

5. Which song always take you back to a time in your life? Why does that song resonate with you? Do the words tell your story? How does the melody capture your mood at that time?

6. What's your go-to song to get ready for the weekend? What is it about that song that makes it perfect – the lyrics, the melody or both? What elements does a song like that need?

7. What's your go-to song when you're sad? Are you someone who likes to wallow in sadness with your music choice, or do you prefer a song that lifts the mood? How do your chosen songs influence your mood?

3. Process

If you're serious about writing songs that connect with people, don't expect an easy ride. Fasten your seatbelts, because it's going to be a long journey.

You have to be ready to put in the hours. I don't believe anyone ever sits down at the piano and creates something wonderful with no previous experience. There's a process you have to go through. You can't just decide to do it and expect it to happen.

You need to gain a lot of experience, honing your talent, until you get to the right place. Songs come from exploring the world around you. That's why I like to think of songwriting as a journey, not a destination. The truth is, you never get there. Because, once you've finished one song that connects with people, you're going to want to do it all over again. That's what you're getting into with songwriting: it's addictive!

Songwriting demands a great deal of commitment. And not a lot of people go all the way, because few have the right mental attitude. Saying that, the rewards can't be quantified. When you're making progress it feels like out of this world.

There's no one who can draw you a map of how to do this, even if that's what I'm going to try to do. The journey that you're on is yours and the map that you'll be using is unique to you.

> **I can pretty much guarantee that anyone you ever see on the screen or in the charts has got there through hard work.**

WORK ETHIC

I spend a lot of time around other musicians and songwriters and I see that it is not just me that works like this, it is the same for everyone. I can pretty much guarantee that anyone you ever see in the charts has got there through hard work. No matter how different they are in other ways, they'll always share that quality.

It doesn't matter whether it's Ed Sheeran or Elton John. Ed is always in the studio, going to a gig or meeting a songwriter. Elton is off to interview a musician or meet a producer. Music isn't a hobby to these guys, it's their life. They're constantly searching for ways to move forward and hard work is at the heart of it. They're constantly searching for that little extra percentage of craft and technique from other artists in the chart or who are touring that week. Hard work is at the heart of it for all artists.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Songwriting requires a great deal of commitment, you have to prepared to put in the hours
- The rewards cannot be quantified, when you are making progress it feels like out of this world
- No one will draw you a map, because this is your journey
- Anyone who is in the charts has got there through hard work
- Hard work is at the heart of it for all artists

EXERCISES

1. Read and watch interviews with five of your favourite musicians about their songwriting process. How do they each differ in how they write songs? What do they do to try to start writing a song? Which method do you think might work for you?

2. Read and watch interviews with Ed Sheeran and some of the musicians who have worked with him. What qualities does Sheeran bring to the studio, according to his collaborators?

3. Listen to some of Elton John's Apple Music shows in which he interviews other musicians. What is Elton John still seeking to learn about music and musicians after so many years in the industry?

4. Go back to the very first song you tried to write. Look at its faults, whether lyrical or melodic. How would you improve it now? Is there any part of the song that could be salvaged or that could work for another song you're developing?

4. Listening

I was about three years old when I asked for my first single for Christmas: Rhinestone Cowboy by Glen Campbell. I was tuned into that acoustic Americana sound for a few years, but I was lucky to grow up in a house filled with music: The Beatles, Lonnie Donegan, Abba, Elton John, Billy Joel, The Carpenters…

With that kind of music always on at home, it's no surprise I started to write pop music, because I grew up on popular, mainstream, feel-good music. I loved spending my pocket money on singles at my local record shop, and that community around music was very important to me. I was surrounded by people talking about music and recommending new music.

Whenever I speak to anyone in music, I always ask them about their childhood. What you grow up on helps formulate your taste in music. Early on, you learn what moves you and what doesn't. I think you have to be an expert in whatever genre you like, but you also need to appreciate music outside your own taste so you can incorporate different influences into your songs.

Whenever I'm stuck for inspiration, listening to other music is key to getting me into the studio. The more you listen to other music, the more you're training your ears. It can be a curse – whenever I listen to something now, I can pick apart the frequencies used, the instrumentation, even the studio equipment. It's very important, however, to train your ears to learn how other musicians write and record their music.

Appreciation leads to inspiration and it all starts with listening. You need to train your ears, and the only way to do that is to put everything else aside and go deep into it.

> **Develop an appreciation for all sorts of music so you can incorporate different influences into your songs.**

EAR TRAINING

The way I like to think of it is this: when you start out, you're listening to music in mono and then, as you train your ears, it becomes full stereo. It's going from black and white to technicolour. You're discovering all those little elements that make up a great song and picking out little things that inspire you. The more you learn about how songs are created, the more you can borrow from other people's techniques. You start to think, "I can use that technique when I next sit at the keyboard."

There are all kinds of ways in which a song can come to life. For example, you could hear a seemingly random cowbell pattern in a song that might inspire your own melody. And, of course, a great song might make you think, "Damn, that's good! I want to write something in that vein!"

Songs can come from the craziest places, like hitting the wrong chord. Happy accidents can be important. Be on the lookout for those moments, when you make a mistake that sounds great and make you think, "What was that? That stupid mistake could be great in that section!" Throw it in there, give it a try.

Open your laptop. Any keyboard now will give you any sound, whether it's a guitar, a clarinet, a cello or a drum pattern. Start playing with the cello simulator on your laptop keyboard, as that's how you figure out how it makes its own distinctive sound. That goes for any instrument. Try to figure out how other instruments fit around it. If you do this, you'll begin to understand the many layers that make up a piece of music and how those layers fit together to make a song.

Speak to friends who've started writing songs. How do they do it?

You can't train your ears solely by listening. You have to get involved and make your own music, even if that starts just by making sounds. Challenge your ears, even if it's by hitting the side of an ashtray with a spoon.

Start to consider how Beethoven managed to make 60 different instruments into one piece of music. You'll start to figure out how, at the top frequency, you've got the piccolo and right at the bottom you have the double bass. All those players in the orchestra combine to create the sonic picture, and their instruments don't all have the same timbre or use the same frequency.

It's the same with a rock song: a drummer will use a low-frequency kick drum to get the beat thudding and a high-frequency hi-hat for a disco feel. Then you can see how the guitarist creates differing frequencies in one song, how it works with the bass and drum.

> **Appreciation leads to inspiration, and it all starts with listening.**

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Appreciation leads to inspiration and it all starts with listening
- The more you listen to music, the more you'll train your ear
- Listening to different genres of music will help you expand your songwriting skills
- The more you learn about how songs are created, the more you can borrow from other people's techniques
- You can train your ear by listening, but you also have to make your own music
- Experiment with sounds and see how instruments fit around each other
- There are many layers that make up a piece of music and those layers fit together to make a song
- The more you listen, the more you'll be able to understand how each instrument interact and blends with another

EXERCISES

1. Are you an expert in a specific genre of music? Is that the type of music you'd like to write?

2. Analyse five songs from a genre you're not into, whether it's metal, EDM, country, etc. Try to understand what the appeal is for other people; speak to friends who are into it. What could you learn from those songs? Do they have meaningful lyrics, insistent hooks, a well-crafted chorus? How can you start to appreciate all music?

3. Pick a favourite song from your favourite style. Don't rip it off, but try to write something in that vein, even if it's just a verse or chorus.

4. Start making a random beat with a found sound like hitting an ashtray with a spoon. Can you get a beat from it? Does it sound like something you could work with?

5. Try to think of a song that uses everyday objects like a phone ringing, a siren or a random unspecified sound. How does it fit the song?

6. Speak to friends who have written songs. How do they do it? Work out what elements make up their songs?

7. Open up the laptop and get involved. Start to experiment with the keyboard's simulator program. Which instruments are you drawn to? Is it the guitar, bass, drum, something more classical? Could a classical instrument be the missing element in the pop song you wanted to write?

5. Early Days

I was never driven lyrically when I started. I wasn't a teenager that needed to pour my heart out. It was more of a musical experience for me at that stage rather than an emotional, expressive, lyrical one.

I had melodic ideas, but lyrics happened after music for me. They came less naturally to me than the music. I always found it a real effort to get that side of things right and I ended up having to work much harder at it.

A lot of songwriters share this – we'll either be more naturally drawn to writing the music or the lyrics, and we'll spend most of our time trying to work on the weaker aspect of our process. When I started, I had far more melodic ideas stored up than lyrics but, eventually, I got there, and the words I was writing came up to the standard of the music I was creating.

Even to this day my process always starts as a search for some musical hook to bring you in. I often spend a lot of time searching for a break – the part of the song where the lyrics and the main melody stop and something else comes in. A good example is that famous saxophone solo in George Michael's Careless Whisper. I tried it a lot when I was starting out, getting stuck and thinking, "Maybe this is a good idea to introduce something new."

> **My process always starts with a search for a musical hook to bring you in.**

When I was writing A Million Love Songs at the age of 15, I was just playing around, exploring different possibilities and looking for that break to bring everything together. I started with only two sections in the key of C, which is a great key when you're starting out, because it's so forgiving that you can't really go wrong. I am not sure, but I believe Billy Joel only plays in C. Even if a song is in E Flat, he will tune his piano to C.

Because A Million Love Songs is a pop song, I didn't really want to stray too far from where I'd started, didn't want to complicate it. I just changed the bass note, so that we're suddenly in a new and more soulful section that introduced a new verse. I added a new chord, an F, and that led to the break that I'd been chasing. I hadn't been thinking, "Let's just get this verse done, let's get this second section done," the break arrived naturally.

If you experiment with feeling, things just evolve and eventually you'll get there.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- You can start from the lyrics or from the melody, the choice of how you write a song is yours
- Dedicate time to really work on your weaker point so that both lyrics and melodies come up to the same standard
- Experiment with hooks and breaks
- The key of C is a good place to start on a piano and can be very forgiving when you're new to songwriting
- Things develop naturally when you explore feelings and textures

EXERCISES

1. Do you like starting a song with the music or the words? Which do you find hardest? If you're a weaker lyricist, study the lyricists you admire. Is there anything about their wordplay and subject matter that could inspire you? If you're weaker with the music, study the songwriters who are great with hooks and melodies. Could they inspire a song in you?

2. If you are stuck on a song, try to take it somewhere new by adding a break. Alternatively, do you have a section from another unfinished song that could work as a break? Don't be afraid to play around with unfinished songs by mixing them together.

3. Play around with song ideas in the key of C. Could it be a comfort zone for you while you're starting out?



6. First Steps

No one in my family played music. The closest we had was my nan's next door neighbour who played the piano! However, as I mentioned earlier, the house was filled with music and the radio was always on in the car.

When I played music no one ever told me to turn it down. Then, when I started to play the keyboards at 10 years old, I was only ever encouraged by my parents. I think that was critical for me. I was never pushed into doing this and they let me forge my own path. When I left school, I told them I wanted to be a pop star. I'd figured out quite young that I wanted to do this and they let me go down that road.

Although my dad had no musical skill, he saw that I was working really hard. He knew that I rehearsed a lot before any gig. I still do. I've always believed that the real work starts at the rehearsal stage and even now before my concerts I put a lot of energy in the planning and tour meetings, rehearsing with the bands and dancers, talking to designers, etc.

Dad knew that I was serious, which helped. I used to play music when I came home from school at lunchtime, then again when I got home at 4pm. If I went to a gig at 7pm, I'd be out until midnight and then play for another two hours when I got home. I just loved it.

On top of loving the music, I loved feeling like I'd worked hard. I loved the feeling of nearly losing my voice because I'd sung for four hours that day. It was never work, because I loved it. It shouldn't feel like work. It never has for me. It won't for you either if it's something you really want to do.

> **It shouldn't feel like work. It never has for me. It won't for you either if it's something you really want to do.**

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Your love of music probably started when you were very young
- Fall in love with the process, hard work does pay off
- It should not feel like work if you really love what you do

EXERCISES

1. What was the first song you fell in love with? Looking back, what did you like about that song? Analyse its lyrics, its melody, the chorus – what hits home? How is that achieved?

2. What music that your parents played at home are you still listening to? How have your early music tastes stayed with you – are you still into the same type of music now?

7. First Keyboard

When I was 10 years old, I was given the choice between plastic wheels for my BMX and a Yamaha PS2 keyboard for Christmas. I'm so glad I chose the keyboard because it changed the course of my life. By 6pm on Christmas Day, I'd already learned some carols and had the whole family singing along. I'll never forget my dad saying, "If you can make a room full of people sing and feel good, you'll have a job forever." I knew straight away that I'd found my passion.

The PS2 included a primitive drum machine which I loved – the electronic cog was already ticking in me. Three months later, my dad took me to Rushworth's music shop in Chester to buy me a better keyboard. I got a lovely 2-manual Yamaha organ with bass pedals. My dad sold all his annual leave to buy it, so I really wanted to make him proud. It was dad saying, "There you go, son, run with it."

> **I still practise every day. I'll never be as good as Elton John... and that's OK. You need to set realistic goals for yourself if you're going to stay motivated.**

LEARNING AN INSTRUMENT

Learning an instrument is rewarding, but it can also be very frustrating. That 2-manual Yamaha was amazing, but trying to play two keyboards and the bass pedals was like patting your head and rubbing your stomach. You have to be prepared to put in the hours, but once you've got the hang of it, it will enrich your life forever.

There was no YouTube in the 1980s. The next best thing was the guy next door and he taught me three chords, but he didn't teach me that those three chords were all I ever needed. Having learned those three chords, I went in search of Major 7ths and 6ths, 11ths and diminished 5ths. But those three chords meant I could practise and practise, so I did.

Although learning an instrument takes time and can be frustrating at times, it is very important for a songwriter because it means you can accompany yourself – not just as a singer, but when setting the foundation for your songs. Alongside listening and participating, learning an instrument is the most important thing you can do.

When I joined Take That I thought it was going to be about music all the way, but from the day I joined, I swear, only about 3% of my year was spent making music. I'm so glad that I'd had those early years to learn my craft, when I didn't have the commitments of TV shows and all the other promo work. I feel sorry for people who become successful and then try to learn an instrument. Having had that uninterrupted time as a kid meant I could learn the keyboard inside out.

Learning to read music is hugely beneficial too. When I started working in musicals a few years ago I was so glad I wasn't flummoxed by seeing the score, that I knew what a key and an F Minor were. The hard work you put in never stops paying off.

THE JOY OF AN INSTRUMENT

I do a lot of writing sessions, and I feel for singers who can't play an instrument and have to say, "I hear this melody…" or "I hear that chord, as it makes me feel sad." I'm so glad I can step in and say, "Do you mean like this? How about if we add that?"

I love when I can have two hours on a Sunday to play the piano for my own pleasure, it's beautiful and it's great for my head. Though you can't beat the feeling of playing live – seeing the crowd react, so you react to their reaction…

Playing with other musicians – being able to sit in and join in when that 1-2-3-4 countdown kicks – and making music with other people, that's a whole different level. Don't forget, music is an international language. You might play or write music with people who don't speak English, but that doesn't matter because all musicians speak music. It's a great language to have.

BE REALISTIC

I still practise a lot. Growing up on Elton John, even if I'd practised every day from getting that first keyboard, I'd never be as good a pianist as Elton. And if you're a guitarist, it's extremely unlikely that you'll ever get as good as Eric Clapton.

You've got to be realistic, and not let your limitations put you off. You might not be a "chosen one", but you can get to a level that lets you do what you want and what you need to get by. And that's great! It's where I sit, and I'm happy with that. The piano was a stepping stone for me because I wanted to be a singer and a writer, and it has been great for getting me to other places.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Alongside listening and participating, learning an instrument is the most important thing you can do
- Try out a few instruments before you choose the one for you. You don't need a huge budget, the flashiest guitar or keyboard or drums. You're starting out, so you can start with something basic
- Make sure you can practise regularly, even if it's just for a few hours a week.
- When it comes to learning an instrument, keep your expectations low, because it will take time
- Learning to read music is another great skill to have. Put the hours in and practise, but set realistic goals and don't let your limitations put you off
- You don't need to become Elton John or Eric Clapton. You just want your instrument to be a tool to help you write.
- Remember, you're not going to be brilliant at your instrument straight away. Think about how good you need to be, not how good you want to be. Learn three basic chords – that means you can start writing and playing songs properly.

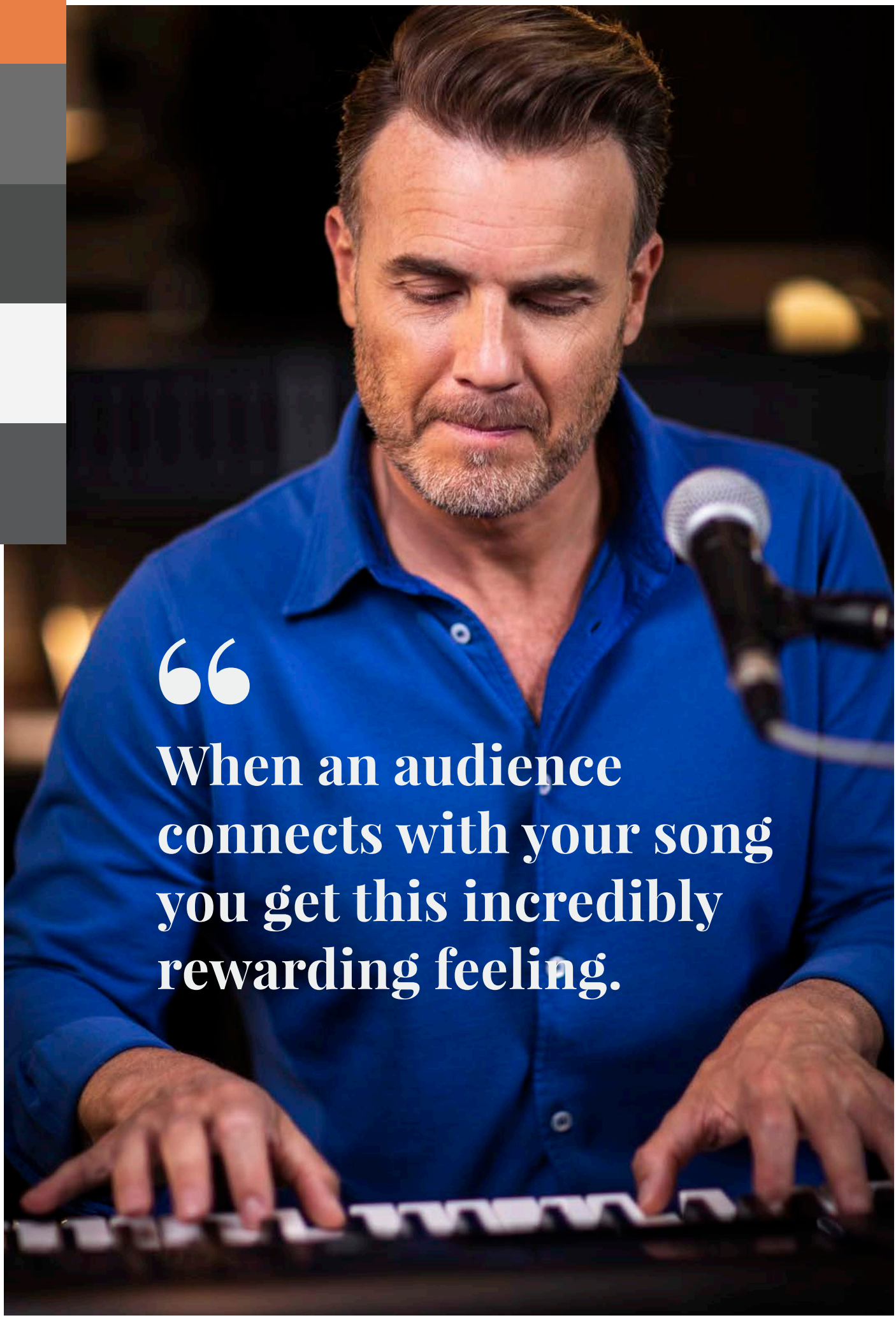
EXERCISES

1. Which instrument would you like to play? A piano or a guitar are very popular with singer-songwriters. You can use an app to get a feel for an instrument if you don't have access to a music shop.

2. How will you find the time to learn an instrument? Think about incorporating it into your regular daily practice. That time will be so beneficial as a songwriter. If you can already play an instrument, what would you like to learn next?

3. Can you find the time to learn to read music? Not all successful musicians can, but it means you'll be the ideal all-rounder.

4. Do you know other musicians who can practise with you? Can you learn from them? Or can you learn with them, so that you start on the journey together and encourage each other along the way?


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When an audience connects with your song you get this incredibly rewarding feeling.

8. Singing

It didn't take long for me to realise that having a singing voice is like having an instrument. It needs to be trained and practised like an instrument too. We all sing, in the shower and around the house, as it is a positive way of expelling energy and expressing ourselves.

I didn't fully appreciate my own voice for years. I undervalued it and took playing more seriously than singing. Anyone who knows my history knows I barely sang for 10 years, which was a dark, low and empty period with very little music in my life. Then, during Take That's comeback shows in 2006, when everyone was going crazy, I had a very cathartic moment on stage during one of those concerts and I said to myself, "Wow! I love singing!" That was the moment when I realised how beautiful it is to be able to sing.

I really like the sound of my voice now, but it took me a lot of hard work and time to get there. If you have a chance to be a singer, do it. If you have chance to have singing lessons, do it.

> **Singing is such a positive way to express yourself. It doesn't matter if you're singing in the shower or in front of a thousand people.**

SING YOUR OWN SONGS

I don't like to sing cover versions. I find them very hard because I think singing them would probably not move you as much as I hope it does when I sing my own songs. My own songs are from the heart. I've created them, been around them from the start. You'll only ever sing and feel the emotions if you have given a lot personally to a song and know where it comes from.

A song takes on another life – if you've written it – when you perform it in front of an audience. It's amazing when the audience connects with your performance of your song. The reason why I write songs is so that I can perform them.

If you're ever unsure about whether you should be putting all this time into being a songwriter, know that the sense of achievement you'll feel when you're performing your own songs, opening your heart to that room, will take you to a whole different place.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Your singing voice is like an instrument: it needs to be trained and practised like one
- Singing is fun!
- Singing is a positive way of expelling energy and expressing ourselves
- The songs you write come from the heart and will connect with particular emotions

EXERCISES

1. Think about what you like and don't like about your singing voice. What areas would you like to improve? Are you technically good but need to be more emotional when you perform? Do you struggle to reach the high or low notes? Do you struggle for breath control? Really work on the areas you don't like.

2. How much would you benefit from singing lessons? Even if you're fairly happy with your voice, would you consider taking it to levels you didn't know you could reach?

3. Keep singing in the shower and around the house, but maybe try out that challenging song with the bigger vocal range while you're doing it.

4. How different does it feel to sing your own song instead of a cover? Do you find yourself putting more emotion into performing your own songs?

5. Think of some of your favourite cover versions. How do singers who interpret other people's songs, from Elvis Presley to Miley Cyrus, manage to be so convincing? Could you bring the same qualities to a cover?

9. Major To Minor

I think of verses as minor key and the chorus as major key. You're down deep for the verse. But a strong chorus is usually bright, in a major key: it's a song's "Here we go!" moment.

I always wanted to write a song that combined major and minor like that, and I found it with Pray. The song keeps a simple bass note and has a verse pattern that is quite dark, but then the chorus suddenly feels good.

When you're composing, be open to evolving a song away from where you started. Pray had been in a very straight 4/4 time before it came alive in the studio.

At the time, the New Jack Swing style was buzzing around – Jimmy Jam & Terry Lewis and Terry Riley were producing artists like Janet Jackson, Bobby Brown and Paula Abdul. My songs are hardly ever led by production, but on that occasion, Pray, this quite sedate 4/4 ballad, took on some of the New Jack Swing groove to sound cooler.

That swing and lilt informed a new melody for the chorus, which goes back to minor right at the end and back into the verse. The contrast gave it some tension and transformed it into a great live song. The audience waits for the chorus, just like in a club when everyone is waiting for the DJ's big drop, and suddenly it arrives when we sing, "All I do each night is pray." When I was writing it, I started to think, "This is going to be a great live moment if I get the chorus right."

As well as the basic chords, words and melody, external influences can also work their way into a song – in Pray's case, the groove and beats of New Jack Swing. It doesn't just have to be a lyric or melody to get you into the studio. It can just be an idea. Don't forget to think bigger than the song.

> **You have to think bigger than the song, always, even when you're in the studio.**

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- When composing don't be afraid to let your original idea evolve
- A song structure often follows the verse-minor chorus-major pattern, but songs can evolve in many unexpected directions
- Be open to new influences coming into your songs
- Think bigger than the song itself
- Don't force a current hip style into your song – but don't be afraid to experiment with it either
- Always be open to improving a song, no matter what stage you think it might be. That unfinished masterpiece you wrote a year ago might suddenly come alive.

EXERCISES

1. Analyse the structure of some of your own songs. Do they follow the verse-minor/chorus-major pattern too? Can you think of any of your songs that would work better by switching the around?

2. Does a minor key always feel sad and a major key feel bright?

3. Look at some of your songs that keep the same tempo throughout. Could any of them benefit from a new melody or a break?

4. Try to push a song by taking it somewhere new – it might not work, but sometimes it does.

10. Find Your Voice

No one is born with their musical voice fully formed. We're all influenced by the music we listen to as children, then the artists we're passionate about. From that process of virtually impersonating those key artists, we get to the place we need to be, when we are creating. That's when you find your voice, and there's no shortcut to get there. You have to stretch and make it harder for yourself on a daily basis. It won't happen from taking it easy, writing around the same chord and key.

You have to write about the moments that change your life and go on a soul searching journey. More so even than being around studios and musicians, you have to live a life. Without experiences, personal connections and looking at the world, what is there to write about?

> **If it hadn't been for my system of logging ideas, many of my songs would have never been written.**

THE NEED TO WRITE

Whenever I take a break from songwriting, something eventually pulls me back and tells me it's time to write, and I just have to do it. Usually when I first get back into the studio after a long tour – and not having composed anything for a while – new songs are easier and quicker to write. I think it's healthy to have a balance between life and creativity, because they feed each other.

It's important to strike that balance. When I met my wife and found true love, that was a great time for writing about the ultimate positive experience.

Of course, the other extreme is when something very bad is happening. I hate to say it, but sometimes that can also inspire great songwriting.

Forever Love came almost instantly in 2009 after a long break from writing because of touring. The lyrics were done after just two attempts. Everything I'd been going through at the time came pouring out.

WRITER'S BLOCK

Songwriting can be hard, but that's OK. Writer's block definitely exists. I've had it, and so have many songwriter friends. But there are so many simple ways to get through it: take a walk, listen to someone else's music… Reading a newspaper can give you song titles.

Inspiration doesn't have to come while you are sitting at the piano. I've written so many songs while doing the school run or driving down the motorway. Songs are everywhere, and they just need you to find them.

LOG YOUR IDEAS

George Michael said that he never logged any musical ideas on his phone's Notes. He said that if he couldn't remember something the next day, it couldn't have been any good. But I tend to forget things instantly, so there are many of my songs which would have never been written if I hadn't logged them in my phone.

Whether it's a song title or the section of a verse, if I am excited enough about an idea to want to log it, I must be on to something. For logging ideas, choose something you always have near to you – that's why I use my phone. A lot of the time, you'll go back to those notes the next day and they'll seem rubbish. Don't be put off, they might make sense later. So often I scroll through my Notes app and hit on something from five months before that I'd dismissed at the time. Suddenly, the time for that idea is right. A good idea is always a good idea.

> **The birthplace of a song isn't always in the studio. I've written songs while doing the school run or driving down the motorway.**

Once I've got that spark of an idea, I'll build it up by giving it a verse or a chorus. Music shouldn't really be structured, but my songs often have two patterns, of verse and chorus. However, I'm all for new ways of doing things, so it's great if I can play with ideas by starting with the chorus and going into a bridge. In any case, you need to build the song by giving it a chord structure. Think about the song. If the lyrics are bright and happy, try to give it a minor key, to play with the form and push the boundaries. If your last seven songs were written in B Flat, try something in E – your ears will work differently and make you write different chords.

I sometimes keep a stopwatch by the piano and work on an idea for an hour. For that hour, I refuse to be distracted, because you'll never be in that first burst of creativity again. So, turn your phone off, don't answer the door. Stay in that first moment as often as you can.

During that time I can often hear what a guitarist or an orchestra could bring. Get down those ideas too: what drumbeat your song needs, how the bassline should sound, etc. Even if they change later, at least you have a structure in place. If, at the end of the hour, you think you've finished, great. Have a break – but come back and spend 10 minutes checking the song again a little later. You might then come up with three different ideas for the final section and be able to pick the best one.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Balance creating with living
- Ideas for songs are all around you
- Look back at the moments that changed you or that stir feelings, happy or sad
- There are ways to deal with writer's block – something as simple as taking a walk, listening to some music or reading the paper can free your mind
- Take yourself away from the piano. The birth of a song can happen anywhere
- Read the news. It's full of song ideas
- Log all your ideas
- Don't reflect on whether ideas are good or bad, just document them so they are never forgotten. One day their time will come
- Remove everyday distractions to find your flow

EXERCISES

1. Start logging song ideas in the Notes app in your phone. Every time a song title idea, the snatch of a melody or a great couple of lines come to you, get them down. It doesn't matter if it's at 4am or if you've had a drink – get it down. It might look rubbish in the morning, but it might look amazing in another six months. Don't discard it.

2. Read the print edition of a newspaper from cover to cover. Do any headlines leap out at you as potential song titles? Could any of the stories, which you might have already seen on social media, grab you as potential subjects to explore in a song? It doesn't have to be about a big topic like Brexit or coronavirus.
What about the human-interest stories in the features section?

3. What big moments in your own life can you write about? They don't even have to be recent. If you can remember how you felt, what emotions do they bring back? Can you translate that into a song?

4. What about your friends' lives? Your friends and family know you're writing songs, so they know their lives are fair game. Disguise the names, change some of the details, but make the essence true.

5. Do songs always have to be about the big moments? Would something your partner or a friend said during an argument make a great line in a song, or even work as a song title?

6. If someone says something that sounds like a line for a song, get your phone out and log it as quickly as you can!

7. Don't overdo it. If you're starting to get writer's block because you're working too hard, take a break, even if it's just a walk around the block or going for a coffee.

8. If you're stuck, try listening to a song you love. Does that make you want to write something as good? If not, try listening to a song you hate – it might make you think, "I can do better than that!"

9. Find an hour in the day when you can be without distractions. Work on your latest little idea, with no phone or internet to distract you. How does the idea sound at the end of that hour? Go back to that idea again the next day for 10 minutes. Have you spotted anything in the song you could polish up or give an alternative to?

10. How happy are you that you've found your own musical voice? Be honest – are you still sounding too much like your own musical heroes? Have you got stuck in a comfort zone of always writing in the same key? Mix it up – try writing in a key you've struggled with. The C key is forgiving, but try writing in E for a few songs. It'll make you think differently.

11. If you have a happy subject idea, try writing it in a minor key. How does the song sound compared to how you thought it would? Is it suddenly different, maybe more sinister? And if you've got a sombre idea, write it in a major key. How does that contrast feel? Do you have an unlikely huge chorus you can develop?

11. No Idea Is Ever Wasted

I started Open Road when I was 17 years old. I had a great verse and a small idea for the chorus, but I just couldn't find the finishing touch. It needed another four lines but I had practically given up on it. It had very simple chords and felt hymnal. It was written during a time in my life when I needed help – I was back and forth to London, trying to get a manager or anyone who could help me progress. I needed more lyrics, but I loved the line, "I just keep on walking down this open road."

Then, my career with Take That took off. We had all the success of our first period, and I had kept going back to Open Road, but couldn't finish it. Then, when the band split up, I started my solo album. All of a sudden Open Road came into focus because it was the sound that I was looking for at that point. It sounded like a song for the solo artist with a guitar or a piano. It sounded like Bruce Hornsby, whom I really liked at the time, and the idea of the guy constantly walking down the open road really got to me.

> **No idea is ever wasted. Keep them all safe because one day you'll need them.**

It hit me that I'd always had the melody for the song, that all I'd needed to do was take that melody a little higher. That line I'd always liked became, "I just keep on walking down this open road, talking to the man who knows me/Yes, he knows me: the man is me."

Did I really know me? Unfortunately, I did not, as it turned out at the time. But I'd at least found the hook for the song, and this song, which made no sense in 1988, made all the sense in the world eight years later. Open Road wasn't just the second single from the album, it was my album title.

It shows that no idea is ever wasted. Store those ideas away and keep them safe. You never know when you'll need that idea. I knew I would need that idea from Open Road one day, and, when I did, it felt great.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Store all your ideas away
- You'll never know when you'll need to go back to them
- Find the right hook to a song and everything will fall into place
- Realising the real meaning and significance of a song will jolt it back to life

EXERCISES

1. How will you keep your song ideas safe? Find a cloud or a hard drive, and store all your unfinished songs and scraps of ideas. Then back up!

2. Go back to an unfinished song you've struggled with. What is that song's essential idea? Who does it sound like? Try singing it in the style of the artist it most resembles – it might make you realise what the song is missing. Perhaps understanding what a song is really about will spark it back to life.

3. Play that unfinished song to a friend and ask them if they think it sounds like something a specific artist could sing. Perhaps that will give you a fresh spin on how the song could work.

12. The Chorus

The chorus is the most important part of the song. It's the bit that leaves people wanting more. It's the part that people can't stop singing, even if it drives you crazy. That little earworm is how you drive the stake through the heart.

Writing the chorus is a great place to start, as it'll give you the confidence that you're on to something special. It's the throne you can build the rest of the song around. If you've got a great eight-bar chorus, you'll want to finish the rest of the song.

I've written songs by starting with the verse and then writing in the same linear way a listener would hear them but, more often than not, I start with the chorus. I try to get the song title in there and do something melodically clever. First and foremost, I'm a melodicist: if I'm writing a musical, I just do the melodies. I pride myself on pop hooks and giving people songs they can't stop singing.

> **The chorus is the most important part of a song. It's the bit that really grabs people, the bit they can't stop singing.**

You should use the chorus as a lure, both to grab the listener and for you as a songwriter to ask, "How can I make the rest of the song this amazing?"

Once I start writing the rest of the song, I'll realise that the chorus wasn't as amazing as I thought, and I'll write a new one instead. Finding a chorus goes back to the importance of logging down your ideas. I think of the Notes on my phone as a bag of gems. Every now and again, I'll look in, reach about and go, "Ooh! What's that? This is great!"

There'll be a word in there that fits another song perfectly, so that the jigsaw starts fitting together.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The chorus is the most important part of a song
- It should leave people wanting more
- It's the part that people can't stop singing
- The chorus is a great place to start when you are writing a song
- If you have a great chorus, you'll want to finish the rest of the song
- You should use your stored ideas to find a gem that will fit perfectly in the song

EXERCISES

1. Examine some of your favourite choruses, and choruses of annoying earworms that drive you crazy. What do those choruses have in common? What does a good chorus have to have to be catchy? How does a song in your opinion go from being joyfully infectious to driving you crazy?

2. Look at some of the choruses in your own songs: would they lure the listener? Can you imagine them being played on the radio and in a playlist? Can you imagine people singing them? How can you make them catchier?

3. Try writing a few songs by starting with the chorus? Are these songs more attention grabbing and hookier than the songs you started writing from the verse?

4. Go back to some recently written songs. Could the chorus be better? Is there a better melodic idea lurking in the rest of the song?


RONOS
SIC WORKSTATION

13. Chords

Playing chords can be a great way to start a song, as they're crucial building blocks in songwriting. Some chord structures will sound happy, others sad. They make you feel emotional, and those emotions can inspire you to ask: What can I add to this?

In 2010, when Robbie Williams rejoined Take That, so all five of us go back together, we wrote our Progress album. At the time I thought, "Five songwriters? That's a lot of people with ideas. How do we do this so that everyone feels included?" So, I wrote 10 songs consisting only of chords. There were some drums and guitars on there, but there were no melodies or lyrics.

They were just the backing tracks for what I thought sounded like hit songs. As soon as we were in the studio and hit Play on those tracks, everyone started coming up with different ideas for melodies and lyrics, everyone was writing and feeling involved. That's so important in a group.

The same process can work, even if you're a solo artist – get those chord ideas down, store them away. If you don't feel like writing that day, getting chords down is a great doorway for getting started.

> **Try different chords and see what feelings they evoke, then work from those emotions.**

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- When you're feeling stuck, play around with some chords.
- Just get the chords down, nothing else
- Come back to those chords a few days later and see what ideas they produce
- It's important to know and recognise the happy chords and the sad chords

EXERCISES

1. Play Take That's album, Progress. Can you spot Gary's original basic building blocks at the core of the songs? Can you identify what the other members of the band bring to some of the songs in the album?

2. What chords sound happy, which ones sound sad?
Which ones are you usually drawn to? Why is that?

3. Once you've analysed that, play around with those chords again and see if they spark some deeper ideas for melodies and lyrics.

14. Experiment With Chords

For a songwriter there's nothing worse than being in the studio for months and then hearing the words, "We don't have the single yet," from your record company. It gives me a mild heart attack just thinking about it.

I hate those words so much because I usually like to have my single done before we even walk into the studio as it gives me peace of mind and enables me to enjoy making the rest of the album. This didn't happen when we were making The Circus.

When Take That were working on that album in 2008, we were writing as a group and loads of ideas were floating around. One day I went into the studio with two ideas. The first was to do a song in which the right hand doesn't change what it plays, but the left hand does all sorts of clever things, which is unusual because normally it's the other way around. The second idea was about the chorus.

> **I like to have the single done before we even walk into the studio, so I can enjoy making the rest of the album.**

People who've analysed songs scientifically say that, as a general rule, you want to get to the chorus after 40-50 seconds into a song. As a songwriter, however, I don't want to think scientifically about music – but those rules can stay on your mind.

As part of a group that gets played a lot on the radio, I'm on board with wanting to get to the chorus quickly. So, let's take that idea a stage further: if I've got a dumb right-hand and a clever left-hand, can I also get to the chorus quicker than usual? In two lines? At first, I thought it couldn't be done. I couldn't think of any songs that had tried that.

Once I started writing what became Greatest Day, I had the idea for the first two lines, and then I started thinking whether I should go into the chorus there. So, I asked myself: Have I told enough of the story or am I selling the listeners short? The answer was no, and once I'd got the chorus, I had everything I wanted. I didn't have any lyrics yet, but the sections sounded amazing.

At that time, we were playing stadiums and performing in front of huge audiences. This asks for simplicity in the songwriting, so that way everyone can sing back at you.
The lyrical message needs to be huge and all-encompassing, using words like universe, stars, moon, sun, greatest, fantastic, wonderful… They're the words we're dealing with.

And those two ideas colliding on that day means Take That can't open a live shows with any other song except Greatest Day! It's a song you can't end a show with, you have to start with it. Greatest Day isn't just a radio song, it's a show opener.

It didn't begin with just a lyric. It was a large ball of thoughts that led to this simplest of songs.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- For a songwriter there's nothing worse than being in the studio for months and then hearing the words, "We still don't have a single"
- Writing your single before getting into a studio can free up your creativity for the rest of the album
- If you get a better idea, you can always switch songs
- If you're stuck, try something different
- Breaking the rules can work to your advantage
- Playing to large audience requires a simple and plain song, easy to sing back

EXERCISES

1. Analyse songs by stadium artists from a few genres: U2, The Killers, Madonna, Foo Fighters, BTS, Kings of Leon, Green Day… How different do these songs sound to the songs they wrote at the beginning of their career? How have the lyrics changed?

2. Try to write a song suitable for a stadium. Strip the words and the melodies back to the bare essentials.

3. Write a song in which the left hand does all the clever work and the right hand stays static.

4. Try to write a song in which the chorus kicks in quicker than usual. Can your song's story be told quickly enough to justify the chorus coming in immediately?

5. Can you think of songs that start with the chorus rather than the verse? Are they among your favourite songs?

6. Have two ideas for a song which just might work together. Try throwing your most offbeat ideas together into one song too. Is it a nightmare or does it make for an inspired, cheeky song?

15. Collaboration

The more I got into music, the more I realised it was all about collaboration. There's always someone who can help you – look at what lyricist Bernie Taupin did for Elton John? Other musicians can inspire you and be inspired by you. I'm probably more inspired by other artists now than I have ever been before.

Remember, it is meant to be fun, you should be having fun while you are doing it. And you can do that by working with other people.

> **The more I got into music, the more I realised it was all about collaboration.**

GO SOMEWHERE NEW

I've done lots of co-writes, and most of my success has come from writing songs on my own at the piano.

However, a great Take That song, Patience, on our comeback album Beautiful World (2006) was written in collaboration with American songwriter and guitarist John Shanks. He has worked a lot with Westlife, and has written with Sheryl Crow, Bon Jovi and Melissa Etheridge. Because John is a guitarist, a lot of the directions the song takes would not have been possible if it had been written on the piano.

The song is an example of what you can achieve when you change the way you usually work. Whenever you sit down to write, you never want it to feel like it's a routine. Switch it up if you can.

I'd come to the studio with a very specific idea: one word that represented the 10 years off Take That had just had as a band. George Michael's most recent album had been called Patience, and I was thinking about how patient Take That's audience had been while waiting for us to come back. There was also the significance of how patient the four of us had been in waiting for the right moment to return.

A comeback gig is one thing, but new material when you're returning is very tricky. Then Shanks came up with these beautiful chords that sounded so different. Unusually, rather than putting the title word 'patience' in the chorus, it's there at the top of the first verse. Writing with Shanks made me step outside of my routine, he made my mind wander in a completely new way.

If you start thinking, "But I don't usually do this", that's great, as you're somewhere new. I want to be somewhere new every time I write, because I don't want to feel too comfortable. Whenever I feel like that, I think, "I've been here before, and I don't want to be back here again."

Another idea I'd always wanted to try, with the song, was letting just one word be the melody. The elongated 'i' in the chorus line "…cause I need time". There's the hook, that one word, one letter. That simplicity meant I could get all the emotion into the verse. The verse is where the meaty subject matter is, so that the chorus really opens out.

I'm always aiming for simplicity. When I write, I try to ask: Could people sing this in the pub at 11pm on a Friday night? With Patience, they certainly can, because the melody is drilled in three times in the chorus: "Iiiiii", "tiiiiime" and another "iiiii". The title and the melody – it is all people really need to know from that song.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Collaborations are the greatest and most exciting aspects of songwriting
- Find interesting people to collaborate with will inspire you
- Working with other musicians will open your mind to different ways of working and get you out of your creative rut
- Whenever you sit down to write, it should never feel like a routine

EXERCISES

1. Who would be your dream collaboration?
What kind of song do you think you'd create together?

2. Who are your favourite behind-the-scenes songwriters?
What is it about their writing that stands out?
Which one of those qualities could you bring to your own songs?
(If you don't know many non-artist songwriters, start to study songwriting credits to see which unfamiliar names crop up time and again.)

3. What are your favourite collaborations?
How do the two talents bring the best out of each other?

4. If you're a guitarist, find a keyboardist friend and try to write a few songs together, for example. How do the different chords you each play inspire the pair of you?

5. What title would you base a song around? Try to write a song with that title.

6. Try to write a song in which the chorus is one word whose melody changes as you sing it.



16. Simplicity

Simple is always better. When you are a youngster who's just learned a million chords, you want to force them all into a three-minute song, but the result is always going to be a mess.

When Take That got signed at the end of the 1980s, my songs were too complicated. Pop had become simple again after Stock Aitken Waterman's run of hits, so what I was writing sounded dated. It meant I was at war with our record label because they weren't buying into my songs and were suggesting covers for us to do instead.

I went to see my long-time mentor Bob Howes, a professor at Royal College of Music. He listened to my woes and played me Edward Elgar's classical piece Nimrod. He didn't even have to say anything, because the message was so obvious: simplicity. Of course, Nimrod is complex in places, but its core is sheer simplicity – beautiful and heart wrenching.

Howes inspired me to keep a check on my songs' structure and my ego. It was my ego that had led me to throw all the chords I knew into my songs, to show that I was better than other writers. It's a lesson I still think about all the time. Why say it in 27 words when you can say it in two?

> **Simplicity. Why say it in 27 words when you can say it in two?**

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Simplicity in songwriting is key
- Why say it in 27 words when you can say in two?
- Simple melodies are catchy and memorable

EXERCISES

1. Are your songs getting simpler or more complicated? If it's the latter, is it time for a rethink and to stop trying to over complicate your songwriting? If it is getting simpler, try going over your old songs and seeing how they could become simpler and, therefore, catchier.

2. Analyse some of your favourite deeper, more complex songs; at their heart, are their melodies still simple? Would you enjoy them as much if they'd had any excesses trimmed off?

3. Analyse your lyrics – can you get the message of the song across in plainer language?

17. Constructing A Song: Part 1

Music has never been more accessible. The amount of resource in a laptop is mind-blowing and the programs are so simple. But I only ever use them as a tool. I've got about 24,000 sounds in those programs, but they won't make my song better. Those sounds are only there to help build the throne a song can sit on, helping make a song sound like it belongs in today's chart.

I always say to my team, "We don't make demos." From the moment we arrive at the studio, we're making records. So often what remains as the lead vocal is something I've sung into a bad-quality microphone. That first guitar take is so often the one, because you'll never recreate that performance again. Once you've opened the laptop, you're off, so take it seriously. But remember: the song happens at the piano, not in front of a laptop.

> **As soon as you start a song, you have decisions to make. "How am I feeling?" is a good place to start.**

DECISIONS

As soon as you start a song, you have decisions to make. "How am I feeling?" is a good place to start. If I'm feeling chipper, that's good for making music. Put the word 'happy' into an online thesaurus and see what it brings up: cheerful, contented, decided, delighted…

'Decided' is a good word. How about, "Now I've decided"? Where does that lead us? It could be deciding to jump into a relationship. It could also be, "Now I've decided to change" – about accepting yourself. Already, you've got options.

Without committing, you can carry on: "Now I've decided it's time/Now I've decided it's right/It's clearer than it's ever been."

I think "Now I've decided it's right" is a good line to end a verse – I'll put that line last and leave "Now I've decided it's…" to fill in later.

While we're just putting ideas down, I'm already thinking: What's the musical equivalent of what we're writing here? Before doing that, let's go over what's been written. There's probably too many "Now I've decided…" lines. As we haven't finished the second line, I'll change it to "Time now to start this fight". That verse isn't great yet, but it's a starting point: "Now I've decided it's time/Time now to start this fight/It's clearer than it's ever been/Now I've decided it's right."

The next decision is musical: What's the style for that verse? To me, it sounds introspective. I think it's about realising you've had a lot of choices for years which you've never acted upon. You've been disappointed in yourself, but this is it. The time is finally right.

It's a strong idea for a singer-songwriter song. It sounds right for a piano, acoustic drums, maybe some small strings. The message is big, and it's nice to counteract that with a more introspective sound to keep people guessing.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Use a thesaurus for inspiration, especially for the key themes in lyrics: love, hate, happy, sad, everybody, world…
- Invest in some music software, but don't let it dominate
- You'll have an entire recording studio on your laptop
- Your laptop is there to assist your writing
- Don't get too focused on all the bells and whistles, your instrument should be your main focus
- Sitting at a piano is the most effective way to write music
- Words can inspire the melody

EXERCISES

1. Use a thesaurus for inspiration. Which synonym leaps out at you?
Try to build a line, then a verse from that word.

2. Which music-making programs (GarageBand, Logic, Model D, Tracktion, AmpliTube) could help your music? How proficient are you with them?

3. Remember, technology shouldn't dominate the essential simplicity of a song.
Are you becoming too reliant on software trickery?

4. Think about the choices a keyword offers you in a song.
What else could your song be about?

5. Remember the simplicity of "How am I feeling today?"
Does that spark any song ideas?

6. Get that first idea down: remember to always log the ideas.
You can change the lyrics later.

7. What kind of musical mood does that first idea spark? Can you play around with that – make a big-sounding song from a small idea and vice-versa?

18. Constructing A Song: Part 2

As soon as you think about the music, you've another decision to make. Is it uptempo or slow? Is it emotional or tough? An emotional version of the song we started in Part 1 would need a softer sentiment in the lyric. Think about which key your song is in and experiment before you get set on your song's range. For the lyrics in Part 1, it might be more exciting as something you can tap your foot to.

TEMPO

If you're feeling good, you're probably drawn towards making your song uptempo, even if it's about a singer-songwriter subject like the big decisions in life. Try fixing it around 115-120 bpm. I use Logic Pro to fix a few bars of our song's tempo – but remember, don't just settle on your first idea.

Once those bars are in, you can go rhythmical by flowing a lot of words in, or less-is-more with fewer lyrics. You could also extend the notes within the words for the melody. You can change the vocals' key into being deep, falsetto or somewhere in between.

> **You can get too caught up in making sense of a line. If it sounds good, put it in. If needs be, you can make it work later.**

ENERGY

Adding drums gives the song energy. It keeps you excited as a songwriter too. Kickdrum and snare give a song attitude. If you're using a laptop drum machine, try to think like a drummer: What would a drummer do? Early on in a song, the drums are probably bare, but adding toms can bring excitement.

Once I've got that energy, I realise that the verse I wrote at the start could actually be a chorus to open out into, and the verse could be more descriptive – maybe about the drive to the studio that morning and how it made me feel upbeat.

VERSES

The verse is the first message you give to the listener. It sets out what the song is about and why they're listening. It has to draw you in and start the conversation. So, the idea of "Now I've decided" is probably too early for a first verse. Let's build towards it.

Thinking about that drive in and what I see in the rear-view mirror, it can be quite simple because of the song's less-is-more feel: "Colours, changing/Lights in the road I'm chasing…" What are those lights? Does it matter? You can get too caught up in making sense of a line. If it sounds good, put it in and if needs be, we can make it work later. "Lights up ahead I'm chasing" sounds better.

If you keep going, singing random words until you find a lyric that sticks, you'll soon realise where the song needs to change. Once you do, there's another decision: Do you go big into the chorus, or keep it down low? This song works best low, which gives you the option of going into the chorus or another verse. Do we go back into that verse, if there's more to say?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Tempo gives feeling to a song
- Energy is provided by the drums – think like a drummer even when using a laptop
- You might not play bass or drums, but study how those musicians play
- The verse is the first message you give your listener
- Don't get stuck into being too literal with your lyrics – if it's atmospheric and sounds right, keep it in

EXERCISES

1. Think about the tempo your song should be in. If it's a heart-breaker, you'll want a slow speed. But can you turn any other subject matter into a foot-tapper?

2. How many words does your verse need? Do you want to make it a word-heavy rhythmical song? Or will it work with a sparser set of words which can make a song more about the feeling than the story?

3. When you're adding bass and drum parts to a song, try to think how those musicians would approach the part.

4. How do you tend to go from the verse into a chorus – do you open the song up? Explode into a chorus? Build it gradually? Try varying those approaches.

5. Think about a song you love whose lyrical meaning is unclear.
Does it matter that you don't know what the song means?

19. Constructing A Song: Part 3

As you work on the song's sections, it's important to go back to the start and sing it through. In this song, I've introduced an alternative version of the middle of the verse, so it has four sections and doesn't feel monotonous.

Pop music needs a hook that people can sing along to. Equally, you don't want to drive people crazy so that your song ends in those 100 Worst Song lists.

Improvising words by scat singing can give you great lyrics. Once you've got a couple of lines, you can go "ba-ba-ba" and "da-duh-da" while focusing on the melody. That will start to suggest real lines. "It's all in the making" is a nice line to end the verse starting "Colours, changing", and I got there from scatting the vocals.

Because of the alternative with a new chord, it builds the song's suspense – you expect it to go from the verse into the chorus, but there's that new section.

FEEL THE CHORUS

Choruses are for everyone to join in, you included. It should feel like the whole band has kicked in by the chorus. For our song, it's where I add the bass.

Perhaps because it started out as a verse, the "Now I've decided" chorus is quite wordy and it doesn't have a melody. I had to play around with scatting until the melody emerged. That key word "decided" works well, and it's good for a melody if a word is repeated. The line "I've decided, I've decided that it's going to be today" works as at least part of a chorus with a strong melody.

STRINGS

Our song would work with strings, and the BBC Concert Orchestra has a wonderful sample library. You can hear the players' fingers on the bow and even the room where they were recorded.

> **A rub creates tension and gives your music its own personality.**

THE RUB

Our chorus has three chords: G, D and C. The musicians I love are those who can make G, D and C sound like I've never heard them before. Our song is a singer-songwriter tune, and quite often singer-songwriters are self-taught, strumming on street corners or in their bedroom. They sound unique because their sound wasn't taught.

In our song, I've inverted the D, which is a real stadium chord. I've altered it to become what's technically called a suspended 3rd, which contains D, F Sharp and A.

F Sharp is the 3rd and A is the 5th. I play it suspended, so the 3rd is a semitone up. Playing that together with the 5th makes it feel more emotional, making it suitable to add strings and other instruments.

That combination is a rub: a chord which makes musicians and, instinctively, listeners think, "Is that right?" It creates tension and gives your music its own personality. A rub is a great trick to learn.

If you're practising chords all the time, try adding a few moments that'll make the listener think, "Hang on, what's that?" I've also added a 9th at the top of the C. Now, we're starting our chorus with a straight G, which allows familiarity and feels great. But then, that suspended 3rd on the D is, "What's this?" As if that's not enough, we're going somewhere unusual again with the C chord. It's an exciting tension.

That final chord sounds hopeful, something that incites emotion, which is key to this song.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Don't get hung up on getting the lyrics right straight away
- Try scat-singing words when you start writing a song – so many singers just make sounds and random words, which begin to suggest what will become the real lyrics later
- Strings enhance a song, but they won't make the song any better
- Don't be afraid to repeat a word in the chorus for emphasis
- Some of the great songs rely on a repeated word to bring the melody home
- A rub is a chord that creates tension and gives your music its own personality

EXERCISES

1. Think about how catchy is too catchy? What annoyingly catchy song is just too simple and drives you crazy – where does it tip over from wanting to sing along to wanting never to hear it again?

2. When does a song need strings? If your song deserves that emotional air, try to access the BBC Concert Orchestra catalogue library – or another orchestral library.

3. How can you create a rub? Play around with your favourite chords so that they don't just sound like a straight C or a regular A. Can you bring tension to a song by suspending your chord together with an additional chord? Analyse some of your favourite unusual songs to see if those tricks are in there.

20. Constructing A Song: Part 4

In our chorus, I'm playing a straight C at the end, but in its melody I'm playing something else that's almost classical. That needs protecting, and you don't want to overwhelm it with too much melody elsewhere in the chorus.

We are pushing the listener's annoyance boundary by repeating "I've decided". But "I've decided, I've decided, I've decided… that it's going to be today" is a great way to wrap up that chorus. By repeating that melody, it ensures the earworm goes firmly into the listener's ear.

IN THE FLOW

Nobody can keep the flow going all day. I think you get about an hour of good ideas in a day. I'll fool myself and think I've got a good idea two hours later, but it is rarely the case and I know I'll be editing it later. While you're in the moment, make the most of it. While I'm writing, I can hear what the orchestra, the drummer and the other musicians will do. Don't worry if you're not there – that comes with practice, as your ear develops and tunes into potential.

We could have written our song just on the piano. It would have been fine. But adding the other instruments can spark new ideas. I'm not great on a computer, but I can make it do what I need.

While I'm in the flow, I've thought of another chorus that ends with "I've decided that it's safe." What does that mean for the song? That, if I make the leap, it's going to be alright. My intention is so good, I've got nothing to lose. Where does that take us lyrically?

You can go straight down the middle with "It's alright, it's OK". Sometimes, you can spend three weeks on alternative clever lyrics, only to come back to the same line. I like it, so "It's alright, it's OK/I've decided, I've decided it's going to be safe."

> **Nobody can keep the flow going all day. I think you get about an hour of good ideas in a day.**

EXPAND THE SONG

We haven't told enough of the song's story yet to get to "It's alright, it's OK/I've decided, I've decided it's going to be safe." That sentiment will penetrate harder if it's left longer. How do you get there? Build on the mood. Try "I've found the courage/Got the backbone" and then something before "I'll find the way."

Those lines add a syllable to the melody, which keeps the interest going. Those lyrics aren't the best, but dot them in, because they'll do for now. As songwriters say: "It'll do for jazz."

So now that section is "It's alright, it's OK/I've decided, I've decided that it's safe/I've found the courage/Got the backbone/I've decided this is going to be the way." That last line doesn't need a repetition of "I've decided", unlike the rest of the song. But I like elongating "way" so that it's "wa-aa-ay". That leads me to thinking there could be a different section to give the song a break that needs to move away from the "way" rhyme. Perhaps it could go back to the idea of those lights in the first verse?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- If a song has a subtler, more delicate moment, don't overwhelm it
- If it's still strong and beautiful enough to deserve staying in a song, don't pile other instruments and melodies on top of it
- Your song needs to tell a story, no matter how basic

EXERCISES

1. How long can you stay in the flow for? Remember that idea of timing yourself for an hour to focus on nothing but those ideas for the day. And if it can last longer, fantastic – but don't kid yourself when the inspiration starts ebbing away.

2. How long does a verse need to be before getting to the chorus? Don't force a chorus in if the song hasn't earned it, but tell the story as simply as possible to get to the chorus' big reveal.

3. Think about how adding or subtracting just one syllable from a line changes the tension within a song.

21. Constructing A Song: Part 5

By now, it's probably time to go through the whole song again. Doing that will almost certainly help you fill in a couple more lyrics that you've been missing. Going into the chorus, the lines "It's like a vision/And it all hangs on my decision" fit well into our song. That "decision" hints at the "decided" that's so key in the chorus.

Coming out of the chorus, I've got to go big. "A million stars looking down on me" is nice. It has that idea of being quite small in the universe, of "Who am I to decide something so big?" It's nice for the story to have that moment of "Is this decision definitely right?"

In which case, could I go even bigger: "The universe will stare in disbelief." Or is that just too big? Why not put it in as a placeholder if you think something is in there. What can rhyme with that line? Or how else can that section end? "Hear me say/I've decided, I've decided, I've decided that it's going to be today." That's good, because it ties things together well lyrically.

Now that the chorus feels more complete, it's time to add more instruments. I liked what we had earlier, but now we need to go back and look at it – not just settle for what was good enough then. Just because it was a great stepping stone, it doesn't mean we have to keep it. Where we've got to in the song feels more driving melodically than what came before, and maybe it's how the verse should start.

It's where the need to be your own editor becomes crucial, asking yourself: How good do I want this to be? Our song's 16-bar chorus feels great, but what about the rest of the song? A drop will sink the hook home, and who knows where we can go from there?

> **Each section takes you by the hand and leads you somewhere else as a writer, which might not be what you've just done.**

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- When you're writing, it's good, once you're happy with the chorus, to go back over the rest of the song
- If the chorus is strong, it'll probably show you how the rest of the song can be brought up to the same standard
- Even if you're not a dance music fan, learn to appreciate how well DJs and dance musicians deploy a chorus to make it explode

EXERCISES

1. Can your song use a drop to give extra anticipation before a chorus?

2. What are your favourite drops in songs?

3. Be brutal on your songs as you're writing them. What sounded fantastic yesterday can be made better today – if the song keeps improving, it'll make that first great part look less stable, even if it was a great building block to get the song to where it needed to be.

22. Constructing A Song: Part 6

After the first five parts, our song feels like it's worth working on. We're a little far away lyrically, but the chorus and melody are there. It took a while. Sometimes, I'll come in and all the work that's happened will come straight away. But sometimes, you need the process. The one real bit of magic we have is the quiet, gentle, moment in the chorus melody. The whole song is in that one line.

Having recognised that one bit of magic, the question becomes how to get to that motif as quickly as possible. You definitely don't go back to the verse, which we've discussed as a possibility, because that motif doesn't arrive until the chorus. How do you sow the seed for the motif? That's another decision, because you could try putting it in other lines in the verse. Try those.

Putting the motif in different places has given me the idea for some new lyrics. Now, I could have sat there for a month looking at options. But, without that little motif, I wouldn't have had much. The key is to find your way to one little piece of magic. That motif is special, so you also need to know how to protect it, by planting it elsewhere in the song.

I'm a glass half-full character anyway, and right now people are looking to songwriters to lift them up. I want people to feel better after hearing this song, I want it to be a song that people put on before a Friday night out. The message "I've decided to change today, not next year" is positive. It means we can go deep on the verses. The lyrics might well change as we try to hammer home the chorus' message. Also, the chords we had for the verse take away from the chorus.

STRIP IT BACK

If you can't strip a song back to guitar and voice or piano and voice, there's a chance there wasn't much there to begin with. If it's all about what you've added on the laptop, there's something wrong somewhere. I want the guy on the cruise ship or the girl in the club to be able to sing this song. If you've been on the laptop for an hour, go back to the piano. That lovely little motif only needs two fingers on the piano.

I love it when a song asks for more. This song asks for more: every time I talk through the lyrics, it brings up new ones. Every time I sing it through, another line arrives. That's the song, not me, asking for me to pick more and do more. It's saying that I should write three verses, so I can choose the best lines from each for the final verse.

I can't give you the lyrics or the melodies, but they're out there for all of us to take. Everyone can play piano with two fingers. So why don't you decide it's going to be today?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Once you've done all you can on a song for the day, look back at it
- If you can't strip a song back to guitar and voice or piano and voice, there's a chance there wasn't much there to begin with
- Lyrics are out there, just waiting to be taken

EXERCISES

1. Can you spot the one bit of magic that really stands out in your song?

2. How do you make that magic the key to the song?
Can you put it elsewhere without bombarding the listener until they're sick of it?

3. Look at your fullest-sounding songs. Can they still be stripped back to the basic guitar/piano and voice elements? Or do they rely on laptop trickery?

4. When you're writing is a song always asking for more? Could you constantly be giving it more lyrics, different chords? If so, try writing three verses or three chord patterns and picking the best.


MS2000

23. Confidence

In this industry confidence is the start and end of it all. I say that, because I've been there, I have lost my confidence, so I know what it's like. You're coming up with entertainment for people's approval, so you need that armour. A musician's manager isn't there to do the admin, it's there to make sure your confidence is intact.

While you're confident, you're free to express yourself. It's what you need to be able to put pen to paper and to get on stage. The audience have come to see the confident leader, not someone who can barely look at them.

You can protect yourself from people who want to put you down. You need a barrier from those people, but they're different from someone you love and trust telling you what they think.

You need to be able to think: "I'm not the best right now, but I know where I'm going." I've spent most of my career doing this job mostly because I love it, but also to prove people wrong. It's a good motivator. Don't let people put you down, instead use the insults as a stepping stone to say, "Right. Today, I'm going to do this."

You can also learn from criticism, when it's constructive, and think that there could be something in what they're saying. Don't be hurt by it, but use it to your advantage.

> **Confidence is the start and end of it all. It's what you need to be able to put pen to paper and to get on stage.**

BE READY

More even than a record deal, I wanted a songwriting publishing deal. When I was a student, I'd take the train to London every six weeks to go to EMI's head office and sit in their reception the whole day, hoping to catch someone in the A&R department to give them a demo tape. Sometimes I wouldn't see anyone, so I'd just have to get on the train and go home again.

I did that because that's how much I believed in what I was doing. I thought I'd bump into the A&R scout who'd be the key to the story I'm telling you now.

Those early days matter, because they show the passion I had at 16. Passion is nothing to be ashamed of, because you could be the one in a million to make it. But you have to be ready for it.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- In this industry, confidence is the start and end of it all
- When your confidence is intact, you are free, and when you are free you can express yourself
- As an artist, you need to protect yourself against the people who want to put you down
- Don't let criticism affect you, be humble enough to see if you can learn from it
- Prove them wrong!
- Find your tribe!

EXERCISES

1. Who are the people you trust to give you constructive criticism? Not just friends and family. Who can you trust to be honest about your songs in your network of musicians and songwriters at your level?

2. Don't be put off by the first bad reviews. If you know your music is strong, and if the people around you know it's strong, then it's just one person's opinion. And take no notice of any social media trolls!

24. See An Opportunity

Whether you're writing songs to perform in front of 10 people down the pub or in front of a stadium audience, you need to always spot when the opportunity for a song arises.

In 2007 Take That got invited to a special early screening of Matthew Vaughn's new film, Stardust. We were blown away by his incredible movie, and Vaughn, who was at the screening, asked us, "Would you write a song for the film?" We said yes straight away – we'd never written a film song before, and here was a chance to reach a new audience.

After the meeting, we got ready to go in our various taxis home, when I said to the rest of the group, "If Matthew has asked us, he's probably asked five other bands. I think we need to go and do this song now."

We went back to my house, vibed up from having just seen the film, with no ideas other than the film itself. There was also the mild panic that Elton John might be writing a song for the film too! Stardust is uplifting, but also dramatic. This was a time before our big dramatic ballads like Greatest Day, so a song like this was a new area for us. I started with three dramatic chords, which I thought represented the movie while keeping Take That's voice too.

> **You have to be in control and spot when the time is right to write your next song. Don't be scared. Feel the thrill.**

When an opportunity arises, do what you want to do. Don't be led too far from who you are, and if that means the opportunity isn't right, so be it. Stardust is a great film, but our song Rule the World had to represent us as a group.

Soon enough, I had the idea of going from minor to major while staying in the same key. The chords sounded dramatic, but I didn't have a melody yet. As I pushed the chords, the chorus presented itself, though I realised the song needed a linking section from the verse to the chorus. The answer was to keep the G chord and add a 7th. That's a chord that was heavily used in the rock 'n' roll era, and maybe with Rule the World it was time for its revival. It's where the melody comes in, and in the way we sing "World!" That 7th becomes key to the song.

Rule the World didn't come from Take That being told to go into the studio to write new songs. It was a reaction to an opportunity. You have to think on your feet and be your own CEO. You have to always be in control and spot when the time is right to make your next song and decide how to progress your songwriting. Don't be scared. Feel the thrill.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Think on your feet. Be ready for a new opportunity – and if it's right, be prepared to drop everything else to chase it
- Know when an opportunity isn't right for you. If it goes against who you are as a musician, don't say yes. Be willing, but don't be desperate
- Remember: always be ready to get a song down. If it's a song that won't wait, clear everything else and go for it

EXERCISES

1. Can you think of a time when you had to grab an opportunity?

2. How would deal with sudden pressure?

3. Pick a film you like and come up with a theme song. Where would you start?

25. Creativity

I don't believe anyone is a natural-born songwriter. Anyone can do it, if they practise.

PUSH YOUR CREATIVITY

When I came up with Back for Good I had some chords, but I didn't want the song to sound like same chords were going round and round. Adding another chord worked, but the verse and chorus are similar. When you've got such a simple backdrop, you really have to work the melodies, as you don't have much to play with. That brings the idea of range into play: if the verse is down low, maybe the chorus should be up high – pop songs often do this.

I added a link, to let listeners know something different is coming in the chorus. The link in Back for Good is quite country music. I really wanted to go off and use other chords, but I had to stay strong for the sake of the song's simplicity.

There was a great Michael Bolton song at the time, in which he goes into falsetto in the chorus. Other than a small part of Pray, I'd never really sung falsetto. That was the main reason for Back for Good – pushing the idea of singing something in falsetto. To me, at that moment, trying something new was more important than the melody or lyrics.

The "I want you back/I want you back" section didn't come until we were in the studio, working out how everyone else in the group could fit in. That stresses the importance of adding new ideas to a song. There's no such thing as a song with too many hooks. Keep adding that ear candy all the time!

> **Some days, your head just isn't right, so I think you're better off getting out of the studio and talking to someone.**

WHEN IS A SONG FINISHED?

The only time a song is finished is when someone claws it out of your dying hands, because you can't fiddle or mess with it anymore. I used to be in a hurry with songs, but now I realise that every area of a song is as important as each other: the melody, the lyrics, the chords, the arrangement, the performance… You have to keep going on a song until you've stopped enjoying it and feel drained by it.

Usually, the problem is not going far enough. So often, I listen to the radio and think, "I wish they'd spent another hour on that." At the last minute, you might accidentally press a button in the studio and it'll sound incredible.

PRACTICE

I used to think I practised a lot, until I realised it wasn't practice. There's no practice to writing songs, you're just doing it. I practise singing scales, but otherwise the practice is in the doing. But there are days in the studio when I needn't bother sitting down, because it's not right.

Some days, your head just isn't right. I won't just flog at it on the piano, as I think you're better off getting out of the studio and talking to someone. I promise that you'll get a lyric or something else useful from that conversation. I'm annoying to be out at dinner with, as I'll often be tapping ideas into my phone of what other people are saying.

THE MOMENT

When I go in the studio, every day there's a moment. That moment is the silence that happens just before you play. Who knows what you're about to play? It just might be the next Your Song, Yesterday, Shape of You or Rule the World. I don't know what I'll play every day and you don't know either.

All musicians have that moment, whether it's me, you, Paul McCartney, Elton John or Ed Sheeran. Once that moment lands, you're off.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Never assume your song is finished. Until your song is released on streaming services, you can keep adding to it – unless you feel totally drained by it
- You can never have too many hooks
- Pull apart a favourite artist's music and think how they could have benefited from more work on their song
- If you're not feeling it that day, don't panic. Go and talk to a friend – but remember to log your ideas if they say something that could be a great lyric or the subject for a song!

EXERCISES

1. Is there a section in which the song is a little flat? Try adding another hook in there to bring it back to life.

2. Think of a song you like which doesn't feel finished. What could have been better about it – the arrangement? The production? Do parts of it drift by?

3. Think about vocal range. Can your song stay simple if you play with varying the vocals' range throughout the song?

4. Feel the thrill and cherish the moment. You never know what magic might result.

26. The Theatre

I've been part of three musicals, and it's definitely the most collaborative of any processes I've been involved with. What you get from the theatre that you don't get from writing by yourself is that, when the curtain opens and all the actors, lighting crew, band and sound engineer are all aligned, it's bliss. You are part of a team and you feel so happy to be in the entertainment industry.

It can take years for a theatrical project to come together, and sometimes you'll be sick of it. But when the audience love it, it's amazing to be part of that team.

The hardest part of musical theatre is writing, the best bit is the result. That's the reverse of writing for yourself, when the best aspect is being in the room writing, etching out your heart. If the song succeeds, you can only high-five yourself!

> **Musical theatre made a better editor because, as well as keeping the audience entertained, you have to follow the storyline.**

DIFFERENT DISCIPLINES

I changed a lot as a songwriter once I started doing music for stage. I suddenly had a score in front of me. You're only a part of the show, because there's a story too. Each song has to move the story along. For a big part in the story, your main song might want to go from a major to minor key.

The theatre made me use skills I hadn't used in years. It gave me a new discipline, of being a good editor. It's even harder than trimming the fat in a pop song because, as well as keeping the audience entertained, you're following the storyline. Before, I'd have thought: "Yes, that's great." But once you go back and check over it, you can see where a song could be sped up or where you could lose two bars after the first chorus.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- In theatre you are part of a team, when the curtain opens, everything should be aligned
- The hardest part of musical theatre is writing, the best bit is the result
- Each song has to move the story along

EXERCISES

1. Study a favourite musical and examine its songs. How does each one move the story along? Is there any fat in any of the songs that could have been edited out?

2. Compare a song from Gary Barlow's musicals Finding Neverland or Calendar Girls. How do his songs tell the story? Compare them to Take That's earliest songs – how could they have been edited better?

3. What film or novel do you think would be a great subject for a musical? Try writing a song for that imaginary musical. How do you drive the story along? How do you keep the song tight?

27. Longevity

The secret of longevity is simply thinking you've got more to give. I'm always wary of repetition, which leads to mediocrity. It's in your hands, that desire to strive for more and to be better. If you can keep changing direction, you've got a chance.

I'm blessed to have an audience that's been with me for more than 30 years. When I'm writing, I try to think of what they want as well as what I want. It is a big responsibility because they want me to always be at the top of my game. If you're not at least trying to put your best foot forward, don't bother showing up. If you've got that chance, respect it.

> **I'm always wary of repetition, which leads to mediocrity. It's in your hands, that desire to strive to be better.**

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The secret of longevity is thinking you've got more to give
- Repetition often leads to mediocrity
- If you keep changing direction, you'll stay fresh
- Remember to keep experimenting

EXERCISES

1. Look at your favourite long-lasting artists. How have they stayed relevant? How often have they changed direction?

2. Don't get comfortable with the same chords and keys. Be open to incorporating new genres and keep checking out new artists as well as old favourites.

28. Reaching An Audience

As a songwriter, everything is your job. No one can represent you better than you do. If you've been passionate enough to put the effort into making your music, don't stop there. Find the people who can help you: managers, writers, producers, PRs, radio pluggers, journalists… Have the hustle to match your ambition. If you just want to write songs at home, great. But if you want an audience, get out there.

I still feel like I'm hustling. I want to reach new people, and I can only do that by change. My career has gone from cassettes to CDs to downloads to streaming. You've got to adapt, and see new technology as opportunities, not enemies.

Get out and see new acts who are like you. Who is their manager? Which musicians do they mix with? Most importantly, who are their audience? That will tell you a lot. You can never stop researching.

> **If you've been passionate enough to put the effort into making your music, don't stop there. Find the people who can help you.**

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Research the people who can help your career
- Keep going to gigs of the new acts you love
- Check the sites who champion unsigned talent and send them your work too, then invite them along to gigs

EXERCISES

1. Who are the managers, A&R people, producers, songwriters, radio pluggers, blogs and magazines who will listen to your demos and give you (constructive) criticism? Be selective try to target those whose opinions and rosters are similar in outlook to your music.

2. Try to find the contacts of the management, PRs and pluggers for the newer acts you admire. Many of them have contact details on their social media profiles. Contact them with a link to your best demos.

3. When you go to a gig, what is the audience like? Are they the kind of people you could see at your own gig? Have that audience in mind next time you write. Can you see them being into that song?

4. Which blogs and magazines do you most respect? Which new acts are they name-checking?

29. Summary

I've explained a lot about what I think about when writing songs. Doing it has shocked me, as I'd taken for granted how much thought and detail goes into writing. I think – sometimes overthink – edit and process, process, process my songs so much.

But now and again songs just arrive. They don't take any thought, they just land. I look back at the lyrics I wrote at 21 and think: Where did that come from? The only way I can explain it is to say that it's good to just write. Don't think of the rules, suggestions or even other artists. Just write.

When I wrote Never Forget, I didn't have any lyrics I'd been keeping for years, nothing that I could borrow from another artist. I just needed to write that song.

If you just write and get what's inside of you out, a song like Never Forget can happen. Emotionally, that song is way more mature than I was as a person at the time. Those feelings were somewhere inside me. It goes back to the importance of sitting down and thinking, "How do I feel today?" as a starting point, because there could be a major lyric.

> **One day soon, this will all be someone else's dream.**

There's one line in Never Forget that's so true: "One day soon, this will all be someone else's dream." At the time, being in the charts felt so temporary for me. I felt like I was hanging on to success by my fingertips. I can now see how that lyric was born, but it means so much more to me now than it did then.

I hope one day I'll be replaced by one of you. As you celebrate a Top 40 song, someone else will take it off you next week. That's how music works. By trying to be the musician you admire, one day you'll replace them. You try to pass the insight on, and that's the big statement: "One day soon, this will all be someone else's dream."

Hard work is a big part, but it's the passion that will make you want to work. Passion makes you want to emulate other artists. If songwriting is your passion, I promise you'll have a great life. On a daily basis, passion is what gets me out of bed and in front of the piano. It's what gets me out of the dressing room and in front of an audience year after year. I love it with all my heart and soul.

Enjoy music. Respect music. Create music. And, above all else, have fun.



Further Reading, Listening & Viewing

TAKE THAT ALBUM DISCOGRAPHY

Take That Party
Everything Changes
Nobody Else
Beautiful World
The Circus
Progress
III
Wonderland

GARY BARLOW ALBUM DISCOGRAPHY

Open Road
Twelve Months, Eleven Days
Sing
Since I Saw You Last
Music Played by Humans

OTHER GARY BARLOW WORK

Finding Neverland (musical)
Calendar Girls (musical)
The Crooner Sessions (YouTube series)

BOOKS

Ed Bell – The Art of Songwriting
David Byrne – How Music Works
Elton John – Me
Ian MacDonald – Revolution in the Head: The Beatles' Records and the Sixties
Daniel Rachel – Isle of Noises: Conversations with British Songwriters
Jeff Tweedy – How to Write One Song
Jimmy Webb – Tunesmith
Paul Zollo – Songwriters on Songwriting

PODCASTS

James Acaster's Perfect Sounds (BBC Sounds)
Sodajerker On Songwriting
Strong Songs
Soul Music (BBC Sounds)
Three Minute Epiphany (BBC Sounds)

TV DOCUMENTARIES

The Beatles: Made On Merseyside (BBC)
Glen Campbell: The Rhinestone Cowboy (BBC)
The Carpenters Story: Only Yesterday (BBC)
Classic Albums (BBC)
Stewart Copeland's Adventures In Music (BBC)
David Foster: Off the Record (Netflix)
Pop Britannia (BBC)
Ed Sheeran: Songwriter (Apple TV)
Song Exploder (Netflix)

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