

A Guide to Songwriting for Scared Musicians
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I have tried to write music my whole life. When I was little I spent many car rides looking out the window, picturing myself as this super cool singer-songwriter lady. I am 21 years old now, and I can sing and play the guitar pretty well. But I still have never actually managed to write a song. Every time I try, I quickly give up because I feel like I don't know "enough" about music theory. Or about writing in general. I have this idea in my head that only musical or lyrical geniuses who know everything about music can actually write songs.

I hadn't been able to get out of this mindset for many years, so I decided to ask for some help.

Debra: Sorry about the drums. I'm like next year I don't want this room. And that's on record!
(laughing) Alright so...

This is Debra Mann. She is a jazz singer, pianist and songwriter. She also teaches vocal lessons at Brown. And I have been lucky enough to be one of her students for the past 3 years.

Sounds from lesson -- singing How High The Moon

Debra: I like the key for you.. actually

Me: yeah, like lower

D: yeah, you know what? I'm just thinking it's stylistically... stylistically I think it sounds more appropriate.

Usually we practice songs and work on jazz improvisation. But this time I bring up my concerns about songwriting, and Debra kindly agrees to walk me through the process. First, we need some lyrics to start with. For this, she tells me about this inspiring quote she heard on TV while her husband was watching football.

D: So what we're talking about is this quote by, his name is Dabo Sweeney, I guess that's the right name. The head coach of the Clemson Tigers. They won the 2017 national championship... football.. College football. And he said "Let the light inside of you be brighter than the light that shines on you."

Despite the fact that this sentence is from a college football game, it's pretty inspirational, so we decide to use it. We start the writing process by looking at how the rhythm flows naturally within the sentence.

D: So we have to take a look at where is the emphasis. And the emphasis is not on “let the,” it’s on “the light inside.” “Of you” is, you know it could be, you could say we could focus that “on you” but I think “the light inside” is the primary thing.

So this seems pretty easy. We are just trying to feel out the words making them sound as natural as possible. Next comes feeling out the pauses and rhythms in the sentence.

And then where do you stop? “Let the light inside of you” Right? There’s a natural kind of pause. “...be brighter than the light that shines... on you”

D: So I’m hearing “light inside.” Let the light inside. Let the light. So it’s almost like “let the” are pick up notes into the “light.” Let the light. So and-a-one. Let the light ... inside of you. Da da da da.

Up until this point, the process of songwriting has consisted of saying the same phrase over and over again. It doesn’t seem too complicated yet. The next step is feeling out the mood of the song.

D: *with piano* Let the light inside of you. Or I could pick a minor chord. ... Just depends: do I want it to be major or do I want it to be minor? Where in my voice does that fall? *sings* let the light. You know and I start to kinda.. Let the liighttt. You just wanna go “where does this melody wanna go?” And do I want to put a chord to it yet? Do I want to make those decisions?

D: *rhythmically* let the light inside of you. Ba boo ba boo da doo da. ... So I’m gonna build a melody around that. And then I can sort of start to push and pull it in different directions.

Debra singing.

D: Maybe something like that. And you don’t even have to know which notes you’re signing.

So it’s kind of a cyclical process of figuring out what the mood of the song will be, but also figuring out melody you want it to be. And in turn your melody can affect the mood, the chords, and the chords can affect the melody. It’s getting a little bit more complicated now.

D: *with piano* let the light, or let the light. I could do let the lightttt, and I like that. I like the minor sound. Let the lighttt inside of youuu. And I could just stay on that. I don’t have to go get fancy with the chords, the chords can always be changed later. So, okay I like the sound of that, the minor. *sings*

So up until this point we've look at the structure of the sentence, played around with the rhythm, and found a melody that we like that fits with that rhythm. Everything seems pretty straightforward.

D: So there you go. It's not complicated. Everything was, *notes* (maybe it goes down and I talk over)

Well everything except...

Me: I guess my only worry is because I don't have a really strong grasp of chords and chord progressions and stuff like that I don't know how I would line -- like I can think of a melody in my head but I don't know how I would line that up with the chords.

This is the moment we've all been waiting for. How do you write a song without actually knowing music theory?

Debra: That's probably a big hurdle. And, and maybe you don't need to worry about that.

(some space) Wait... really?

D: Maybe you can just write your melody. How would this melody sound? *Let the light inside of you* And you could just collect those. Just keep collecting them. Recording them into your phone, or wherever, on your laptop. And then who knows?

D: You can put roots. *sings playing roots* That will give you a lot of information because it implies harmony. Someone will come along "Oh gosh, you've written the song, you just didn't fill in the, you know, fill it in with the inner notes." And then someone who understands harmony can say "Well it could be major, could be minor. What do you think?" You know?

Me: And I could work with them.

D: Right. You know. Now I know that's just another thing to do, but again if you're already doing that. You don't have to finish it in one day. You know. Just say "Kay, I wrote this, I'm gonna just try and put the first line to music, today." Take a half an hour, twenty minutes, fifteen min- TEN minutes. It doesn't have to take long. And that's why I say don't make it hard for yourself. Make it easy.

Unsurprisingly, I didn't come out of this class knowing everything about songwriting. But that wasn't the point of it anyway. What Debra taught me is that you don't need to know all of that to write a song. You can start from anywhere. Even if that is a Clemson Tigers football game.