

Songwriting Workshop Notes

1. This is important. Don't make songwriting into work. It's supposed to be fun. If it's not fun, you're doing it wrong. Adjust accordingly.
2. It's helpful (though not essential) to have some basic understanding of music theory fundamentals, knowing how chords relate to each other, how rhythms fit together, etc. I use this knowledge to intentionally break standard forms, it's kind of what I do. So much easier to sabotage a car if you know a little bit about how cars work. Same with a song.
3. Don't be afraid to ignore other people's songwriting advice, especially mine. Also, don't be afraid to pay attention to other people's songwriting advice. Songs are mysterious beasts, they seem to exist on their own, out there in the universe somewhere. Your job as a writer is to bring them into this world as near to their pure state as you can manage. Sometimes that's easy, sometimes not. To me, the art of songwriting is learning to be patient and sensitive to what the song wants to be, not trying to force it into what YOU want it to be. I have so many examples of bits of songs that I tried for months or years to hammer into some heady thing that I wanted to accomplish, then sat down one day and took one original fragment and uncovered a completely different song that was so much better than what I'd been able to make before, because this is what the song actually wanted to be. Listen and be patient.
4. Verse/Chorus/Bridge models are really useful in the same way as anything else. They give you a roadmap to start with. And like any other element, their usefulness ends as soon as the song wants to be something else. Above all, remember that you might be the only person in the whole world that has the right eyes and ears to uncover this song, maybe no one else is going to like it, that's not the point. It's an apple growing on some cosmic tree that wants to be tasted, it grew there just for you, not for Darrell Scott, or Taylor Swift, or your uncle Greg. You.
5. From a performance perspective, I'm a big fan of building arrangements. A lot of what I do is solo performance and I think it's pretty important as a solo singer-songwriter to fill space in certain places. It's also really important to understand the value of sparseness, and to learn how to use both techniques to create a compelling arrangement.
6. I'm also eagerly entering the frontier of approaching my own songs from more of what I call a jazz perspective. That is, building a framework, a chord progression and a basic melody, a set of lyrics, and then trying to understand that basic framework so fully that you can follow your impulses off into the woods in new directions during performances without too much fear of getting lost. Not every song is at that level for me yet, but it's something to work toward.
7. Consider taking some of this stuff out of the context of songwriting and applying it to things like washing the dishes, cooking dinner, driving to work, etc. I often wonder what kind of beautiful surprises I'm missing by doing life too rigidly, by not listening carefully enough to the world around me. Maybe that sounds dumb, but over and over through life I keep finding that when I take a moment to be really present, no matter where I am or what I'm doing, there's something happening around me that is really cool that I've completely ignored, being absorbed in my inner thought dialogue. Maybe you're not like that, I have no idea.
8. Remember rule number 1 above all else, and everything will be just fine.