

Inspiration? Stories that Might Help with Writer's Block

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I was thinking of an article to put in this month's Songsmith, racking my brains on what to write about. I was looking for something to inspire me, then realised, that I should do one on inspiration!

So, what inspires you to put pen to paper. To pick up the guitar, run your hands over the keyboard, or any manner of ways to write songs?

I know with me its powered by a new bit of kit. Some people don't realise that with me a new guitar is always a source of inspiration e.g. the new Reverend Agent Orange OG I recently brought has let loose "Hey, Mr Executive" and "More" onto the world. They'd both become quite popular new songs! I normally write on my Maton Em225 acoustic, but when I pick up a different guitar it inspires me differently. I started trying to do a new reggae tune I'm writing on my Maton T-Byrd, but it was too bluesy, not the right guitar for the job.

I also get inspired by walking, the beat of my feet giving me a rhythm. That's where "Walk Right Back" came from. Riding on the bus, watching the other passengers gives me ideas. Going somewhere new always sparks the muse. My family always considered me strange for wanting to take a guitar when I visited them, but I always had new material by the time I left. I once wrote seven songs in one day when I visited a mate of mine down in Nowra. His then girlfriend didn't like me and I had to share a flat with her while my mate worked. It was a strange and awkward situation. Three of the songs created that day appeared on the Velvet Road album "Saturday Morning".

Playing other writers material also inspires me, as it gives me new chord shapes, or rhythms that get me out of a rut. I've been playing a lot of The Police songs of late and they've given me new ideas. I also try and play a style different to my usual blues rock to give me new ideas, then mix them up to create new directions.

So, what inspires you? Each of us are completely different and the below stories of song creations show that we can be inspired by so many varied ideas.

If you are in a writer's block sort of situation, then the following might inspire you:

1. When Aerosmith were recording songs for the album "Toys In The Attic" they took a break to see a screening of the Mel Brooks movie "Young Frankenstein". In the movie Dr. Frederick Frankenstein (Gene Wilder) is met at the Transylvania train station, he is met by a hunchbacked, bug-eyed servant named Igor (Marty Feldman), who uses a cane and tell him to "Walk this way". When Dr. Frankenstein follows Igor normally, Igor turns around gives him the cane and gets him to hunch over saying "No, walk this way". It's a funny dialogue in the movie, but it inspired the guys in Aerosmith to write the song "Walk This Way".

2. Joni Mitchell travelled to Hawaii for the first time and arrived at her hotel at night. She opened the curtain next day, seeing the beautiful green mountains in the background. But, then she down and saw a big parking lot as far as she could see. "They paved paradise to put up a parking lot" – "Big Yellow Taxi". While there she visited the Foster Botanical Museum. "They took all the trees, and put 'em in a tree museum / And charged the people a dollar and a half just to see 'em". Even the "big yellow taxi" was possibly about Toronto police cars after a drug bust – they were bright yellow till 1986.

3. PSY's hit "Gangnam Style" is in Korean, but it's a criticism of the rich, upper class, who live in Gangnam. PSY said, "they are good-looking because of plastic surgery, stylish because they can splurge on luxury goods, and slim thanks to yoga and personal trainers... this song is actually poking fun at those kinds of people who are trying so hard to be something that they're not."

4. Canadian rocker Bryan Adams topped the charts in 1985 with his smash hit "Summer of '69." At face value, the protagonist in the song seems to be reminiscing about this incredible summer during his youth: "those were the best days of my life." Adams came right out and admitted, during an interview in 2009, that the song has nothing to do with the year 1969. "A lot of people think it's about the year," Adams said, "but actually, it's more about making love in the summertime. It's using '69 as a sexual reference."

5. REM had a big hit with the happy sounding "Shiny Happy People". But the title phrase was the translation of a Chairman Mao era Chinese propaganda poster that read "shiny happy people holding hands." The song was written and recorded less than a year after the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing, an event that weighed heavily on the band.

6. Van Halen's 1984 hit, "Jump", wasn't about a metaphorical jump, but an actual guy who was about to jump off a building. David Lee Roth claimed he was watching the news and saw a live report about a man threatening to jump off the Arco Towers in Los Angeles. While everyone was calling for the man not to jump, Roth thought "jump" to himself, wrote the lyrics and turned it into a monster hit.

7. Bachman-Turner Overdrive's big hit "You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet" started its life as a rehearsal piece that Randy Bachman had only written temporary words for. The trademark stutter in the song was a way for Randy to help his brother Gary's stutter. It was never meant for public consumption, but was included on the band's 1972 album *Not Fragile* because they needed one more track. Incidentally, Gary got his stutter treated soon after the song was released.

8. German band Nena had a massive hit with "99 Luftballons/Red Balloons," few people stopped dancing long enough to figure out that the song was actually about nuclear holocaust. It suggests a flight of balloons (99, to be exact) flying from East Berlin to West Berlin, and setting off the Allied early warning radar, which thinks it's a flight of bombers. Atomic horror follows.

9. Blondie's hit "One Way or Another" comes from a terrifying experience for lead singer Debbie Harry - being stalked by an ex-boyfriend. If you read the lyrics carefully you'll find words about following, watching, and cataloguing Harry's activities.



10. Included on the 1972 album "*Harvest*", "*The Needle and the Damage Done*" reflects Neil Young's guilt feelings after he lent money to bandmate Danny Whitten, who would overdose on heroin.

11. The song "*Born In The USA*" seems like a patriotic song for Americans. But it's actually about the treatment that Vietnam vets got from society and the government when they returned.

12. In 1967, John Lennon received a letter from a student at a high school near Liverpool whose professor had assigned his class to analyse Beatles lyrics. That prompted Lennon to write a song that defied analysis, The Beatles "*I Am The Walrus*", filling it with lines like "crabalocker fishwife, pornographic priestess" and "elementary penguin singing Hare Krishna," all summed up by the refrain: "goo goo goo joob." Try writing about that one kids!

13. In Donovan's song "*Mellow Yellow*" there's a line that says, "Electrical banana is gonna be a sudden craze," a line that sparked a rumour that smoking dried banana peels would get you high. In fact, it referred to a yellow vibrator that caught on around the time Donovan wrote the 1966 song. As for the phrase "mellow yellow," it first appeared a half-century earlier in James Joyce's "*Ulysses*" - in a description of Molly Bloom's buttocks which Donovan had been reading.

14. If you listen to the lyrics of "*I Shot The Sheriff*", a famous Bob Marley song, you'd think it was about an outlaw. However, lines like "Every time I plant a seed, he said kill it before it grow" indicate a different idea. Bob Marley actually wrote the song to protest his girlfriend's decision to take birth control pills, which he considered sacrilegious. The "sheriff" is the doctor who prescribed them—the man Marley refers to when he sang the above line.

15. Another Beatle's song, this time "*Ticket To Ride*" from the album "*Help*" was said by John Lennon to refer back to the Beatles' early days in Hamburg, Germany, where prostitution was legal, but streetwalkers were required to carry a document certifying a clean bill of health. Lennon dubbed that certificate a "ticket to ride."

16. The big disco hit "*Le Freak*" began as a riff that Chic guitarist Nile Rodgers came up with after a doorman refused to let him into the club Studio 54. The original lyric - directed at the doorman in particular and Studio 54 in general - was changed to "Aaaahh, freak out!"

17. The song "*Mother And Child Reunion*" was a food influenced idea. Paul Simon explains: "I was eating in a Chinese restaurant downtown. There was a dish called Mother and Child Reunion. It's chicken and eggs. And I said, I gotta use that one."

18. Phil Spector based his song "*To Know Him Is to Love Him*," on words etched in the tombstone of his father, who committed suicide when Phil Spector was 9 years old. Recorded in 1958 by his group the Teddy Bears, it reached No. 1 before Spector turned 19. Although, he would become better known as a producer of '60s pop classics.

19. The late great Ray Charles's song "*What'd I Say*" came from a moment of improvisation at the end of a performance, when he had no songs left to play but 12 minutes left in the concert. Before writing it on the spot, he said the orchestra who was accompanying him, "Listen. I'm gonna fool around. Y'all just follow me."

20. Harry Nilsson wrote the song "*One Is the Loneliest Number*" after trying to call someone and getting a busy signal. For those of you who've never heard a busy signal before, it sounds like boop, boop, boop, boop, boop. He stayed on the line and used the signal tone while writing, and that tone became the opening notes of the song.

21. When they were writing "*Tommy*," Pete Townshend played some of it for music reviewer Nick Cohen. Cohen told Townshend that the God stuff was passé and dull. But knowing that Cohen was fan of pinball, Townshend asked, "What if Tommy was a pinball champion?" Cohen perked right up, so Townshend added it in, reworked the music to incorporate the pinball theme. Townshend later called "*Pinball Wizard*" "the clumsiest thing he ever wrote."

22. Many people try to find that deep, hidden meaning in Cream's "*White Room*," due to its mysterious lyrics, such as, "In the white room with black curtains near the station." Writer Pete Brown once expressed his astonishment that the song was a hit, saying, "It was a miracle it worked, considering it was me writing a monologue about my new flat."

23. Another from-the-headlines song is "*Heartbreak Hotel*," popularised by Elvis. This song was co-written by Mae Boren Axton and Tommy Durden. Durden found his inspiration in a newspaper article about a man who committed suicide, whose suicide note read, "I walk a lonely street."

24. "*Save The Last Dance For Me*" was recorded in 1960 by The Drifters with Ben E. King as the lead singer. The lyrics were written by Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman. Doc Pomus had polio and spent his wedding day on crutches, or in a wheelchair. So, on his wedding day, he had to watch his new bride dancing with everyone but him. Hence the lyrics: "You can dance every dance with the man who gives you the eye . . . but don't forget who's taking you home and in whose arms you're gonna be."

25. John Fogerty told the story of what inspired him to write Creedence Clearwater Revival's hit "*Bad Moon Rising*" in 1969. Fogerty came up with the opening riff and tried to put together the chords and melody with a line ("bad moon rising") he had found in a book of song titles he'd had since 1967. He then remembered a scene from an old movie he liked called "*The Devil And Daniel Webster*" in which a hurricane struck, blowing houses and trees around like they were nothing. This was the inspiration for lines such as "I hear hurricanes a-blowing, I know the end is coming soon" as well as "Looks like we're in for nasty weather." Fogerty also stated that the uncertain and tumultuous times added to the ominous feel of the lyrics because Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy had just been murdered at that point.

I hope the above stories help inspire you to song write some more. As I said it's the different that inspires many people. A different environment, a holiday, a new way of getting around, a new book, trying new musical ideas, or even, like Aerosmith going to see a movie.

It's when we stay in our comfort zones that we tend to get stuck in a rut. The best description I've ever heard about a rut is it's a grave with the ends kicked out!



Even if you write crap the first time you come back after writer's block it all leads somewhere. Pat Pattison gives his students "permission to write crap". You never know where the crap could lead to! Remember The Beatles' "*Yesterday*" started with Lennon and McCartney's substitute working lyric, titled "*Scrambled Eggs*" (the working opening verse was "Scrambled eggs/Oh my baby how I love your legs/Not as much as I love scrambled eggs"). This was used for the song until something more suitable was written. Now "*Yesterday*" is the world's most recorded song!

So, write more crap!!!!

