

Songwriting Tips

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Originally in the April 2021 Songsmith

My girlfriend, Jocelin, has been helping me clear out my place as it has too much clutter in it. One of the things I'm getting rid of are old guitar magazines – don't worry, the important articles and notes I'm photographing for future reading.

While going through the March 2017 issue of Guitar & Bass I noticed there was an article on "10 Top Tips" by Charlie Starr, the guitarist & frontman of Southern Rock band, Blackberry Smoke about songwriting. I can't print the article without permission, but I can summarise the main ideas so that it might give you some songwriting ideas!

1. **Write in different keys and tempos:** This one of my favourite ideas to change what I am doing. I also suggest trying different rhythms like when I challenged jazz maestro Ken D'Aran to write a reggae song. Charlie Starr suggests using capos and different tunings but keeping the song within your vocal range.

2. **Try not to plagiarise:** We are all products of the music we listen to, but if a song feels too like something else then maybe we need to change the melody, the phrasing, the chord sequence etc. Then again when Paul McCartney wrote "*Yesterday*" he was so convinced he'd nabbed it from somewhere he played it to everyone he knew before accepting it was totally original.

3. **Pay attention and be ready for inspiration:** Charlie Starr says that we, as songwriters, need to be open to all forms of inspiration as the muse comes in so many forms. He suggested listening to older, experienced people as they come out with classic lines.

4. **Don't try and cram too many ideas into one song:** I often hear at Society Concerts and open mic nights players, who are very good, but they try and add a thousand ideas into one song. It's the KISS principal (Keep It Simple Stupid) as people can only take in so many ideas then the brain gets overcrowded, and it turns into cacophony. Charlie Starr says you need to be a good editor, cutting out the chaff and leaving the good grains.

5. **Learn how to sing:** If you can't convey your melodic ideas you won't have people listening to your songs – they'll only hear the atonal notes. Charlie Starr thinks that if you can't sing you are basically just a lyricist. You don't have to be a great singer, ask Bob Dylan, or Tom Waits about that one, but you have to get the melody across.

6. **Write on various instruments:** Charlie Starr relates that Tom Waits had said to get off your main instrument occasionally and write on other instruments as it stops stagnation. Our hands always go to the same place when we play, but if we write a song on piano, when we usually play guitar, then we go in different directions. Personally, I find that if I use different guitars, I have different voices that push me in different songwriting directions. Humbuckers, single coils, P-90s, etc all have different flavours.

7. **Be prepared for criticism:** I've heard from a lot of judges at songwriting nights say they always criticise the best songs as they are almost there. You'll always be criticised when you put yourself out in the Industry. Remember The Beatles were rejected by Decca Records as they thought guitar bands were on the way out! Other acts that were initially rejected include: The 1975, Madonna, Ed Sheeran, Dave Grohl, U2, Linkin Park, Lady Gaga, The Supremes, Morrissey, etc. You need to develop a thick skin and fight through!

8. **Think about the other instruments:** This has more to do with those playing in bands, but you may be writing for bands to play your material. Do you leave pauses, or blank areas for someone to fill? Do you have dynamics in your song already?

9. **Always carry a notebook, or recording device?** Charlie Starr acknowledges that this is easier these days when everyone has a mobile phone to grab ideas. I have so many times had a great melody, or lyric, only to forget it later on. I personally have a Zoom H2n Handy Recorder in my office desk onto which I've played so many song ideas that I then can drop onto my computer.

10. **When you write a song be prepared to play it for the rest of your life:** I like this one as it's such good advice. If you write a funny song that's popular, you'll have to play it forever. I tend to road test songs at Society Concerts/open mic nights and keep playing the ones I get the best reactions from. Some make you scratch your head as to the reaction, but they could be the biggest hits. Late Society member Geoff Mack wrote "*I've Been Everywhere, Man*" in 1959 and initially was a hit in Australia for Lucky Starr. Then it was a hit for Rolf Harris in England, a number one in the US for Hank Snow and a big hit for Johnny Cash. It's the only song Geoff was known for, but what a song to write!

It's always great to get tips from different artists and these are some good ones. I saw Blackberry Smoke play at the Bluesfest a couple of times, and I can tell you Charlie Starr knows what he is songwriting about! I hope you've learnt a few ideas as well.