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Stop Not Writing Songs: Using Time and Collaboration to Overcome Self-Doubt, Imposter Syndrome, and Writer's Block

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Stop Not Writing Songs: Using Time and Collaboration To Overcome Self-Doubt,
Imposter Syndrome, and Writer's Block

by

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Introduction

Many songwriters relate the idea of an “inner critic”¹ as an obstacle in their work at some point or another. Typically deprecatory, but occasionally debilitating, the inner critic is widely understood to be a generally negative extension of the self that prevents a songwriter from doing satisfying work, and can degrade their self-esteem even beyond the writing process. Most commonly, the inner critic manifests as an internal voice that stops creativity in its tracks by planting seeds of doubt, disappointment, or downright disgust. Other iterations of this affliction include writer's block, imposter syndrome, anxiety, perfectionism, self-doubt, and insecurity—what I refer to collectively as the internal obstacles that comprise the overall impediment to creative growth. However these troubles present themselves, the vital point is that they ultimately prevent songwriters from doing the work that allows them to grow and develop as artists and as human beings. (I would like to clarify at this point that this paper and its language will be specific to the craft of songwriting, but these concepts are applicable to any creative medium, and indeed can be applied beyond the realm of the arts as well.)

As a songwriter myself, I am well-acquainted with the negative self-talk that can arise during the writing process. Songwriting is an elusive art, where the perfect solution always seems just out of reach, and it is very tempting to abandon things that do not immediately satisfy. Over time, my relationship with creativity has changed, and with it the ways that I perceive and deal with my inner critic. The result has been a decrease in debilitating stress and anxiety, which has led to greater prolificity and, perhaps most importantly, the ability to engage in the creative process with joy instead of fear. I have often wondered what led to this transformation. In examining my years spent as a professional singer/songwriter, I noticed that two particular events that became enduring annual rituals in my life were centered around the use of constraints. As Orson Welles once said, “The enemy of art is the absence of limitations,”² a sentiment that visual artist Phil Hansen echoed in a 2013 TED talk when he said, “We need to first be limited in order to become limitless.”³ It seems counterintuitive that constraints would lead to greater creative freedom, but anecdotally, it appeared to be true, so I decided to explore the idea further.

¹ Wikipedia, “Inner Critic”

² “What Is the Meaning of the Famous Orson Welles Quote, ‘The Enemy of Art Is the Absence of Limitations?’”

³ “The Power of Constraints: Phil Hansen at TEDxKC”

My intentions with this paper are:

- To describe my experience working under two particular constraints to better understand how they function;
- To offer ideas about how songwriters can use them to push the inner critic and its accompanying internal obstacles out of the creative process;
- To help songwriters develop confidence in themselves and their craft;
- To support the given ideas with research and insights from other songwriters; and,
- To recount the events of a weekend workshop that I organized to put these ideas into practice. It is my hope that the results of this work will encourage other songwriters to face down their internal obstacles and learn how to cultivate more joy and confidence in their creative pursuits.

Time & Collaboration

When I began writing songs over 20 years ago, it was mostly a self-guided process. I took inspiration from the songwriters and musicians I admired, trying to learn why I liked what I liked so that I could incorporate it into my own work. This origin story is fairly common among creatives. The problem, as *This American Life* host Ira Glass noted during a now widely-shared interview,⁴ is that the gap between what a beginner wants to achieve and what they are capable of as a beginner may as well be the Grand Canyon. Over time, as I accumulated experience, I could feel that gap closing ever so slightly, but I was still very much at the mercy of my internal obstacles. A song was not good enough, or not finished enough, or not in the style I wanted, and as a result, I would usually get frustrated and abandon it. In the following years, it eventually occurred to me that the only way to improve a craft is to practice it, and the inner critic is quite adept at sabotaging consistent practice. Therefore constraints become necessary to serve as braces, allowing us to push back against internal obstacles by relying on external forces. The two most beneficial constraints I have experienced, and now strongly advocate for, are time and collaboration.

Time - FAWM

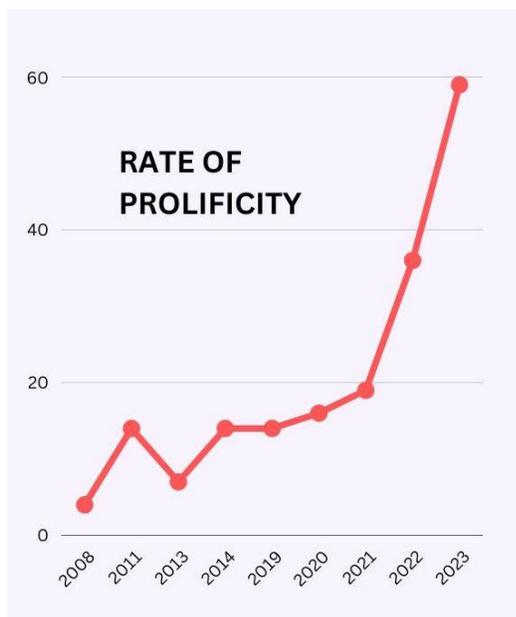
In 2008, I joined an online community called February Album Writing Month (FAWM), which encourages participants to write an average of one song every two days, for a total of 14 songs by February 28th. Songwriters of every skill level from all around the world participate, and to this day it remains one of the most uniquely positive creative communities on the internet. Started by Burr Settles and a handful of friends in 2004, and opened to the public in 2005,⁵ FAWM introduced me to the

⁴ This American Life, "The Gap"

⁵ "FAWM: February Album Writing Month 2004"

concept of using time as a viable constraint: by setting such an ambitious output goal, it is simply not possible to indulge the whims of perfectionism. In support of this goal, the definition of “song” is fluid; it may be a fully-produced recording, a lyric sheet, an instrumental, a song fragment, or even just a title. FAWM’s stated purpose is simply to get people to write more. Its culture of positive-only feedback all but eliminates the risk of being harshly judged by peers for ideas that are in various stages of coalescence. Removing that fear, combined with the lowered expectations of what exactly constitutes a song, makes it a lot easier to write freely. What it meant for me was that I started experimenting pretty much immediately in an effort to make the goal. For example, at that point I had never used a digital audio workstation before, but suddenly I was using Garageband, Apple’s built-in recording software, to loop drum beats and write melodies over them. Because I thought of it more like a game than a serious pursuit of art, I gave myself permission to take chances, add whatever I wrote to the tally, and move on. As a result, the speed at which I was learning new lessons and tricks, including how to make decent home recordings on my computer, accelerated the rate of my growth and development as an artist. What might have taken me years to figure out at my own pace was internalized in a fraction of the time.

In support of this assertion, I consulted archives of my previous FAWMs, which confirm the upward trajectory of prolificity over the last 15 years. It took me three years to meet the goal, and then another three years to do it again, but since 2014 I



have always reliably written 14 songs by the deadline. Then things got interesting: February 2020 saw the first time I surpassed the goal to land at 16 songs, and the following year, the final count was 19. During last year’s event, with a considerable amount of effort, I made it to 36 songs. This past February, I wrote 56 songs on my own and co-wrote 3 more, covering a variety of genres including ukulele chamber music, electronica, golden country, indie rock, torch jazz (also dubbed “uke noir”), folk, polka, punk, funk, lo-fi, psychedelic space-pop, kids songs, and two foreign-language pieces. This was partially thanks to one of the most celebrated mini-challenges within FAWM, the songskirmish. In a skirmish, everyone meets up at an appointed time and a prompt is given, and

participants have one hour to make it into a song. After the hour is up, everyone reconvenes and checks out what others did with the same prompt. Skirmishes happen often throughout the month and they are a great way to get a song on the board, while

also engaging with the community and hearing the different interpretations of the prompt. Of my 59 songs in 2023, 16—or 27%, or more than an entire FAWM’s worth of songs— were skirmishes.

Collaboration - Steel Bridge Songfest

The other most important constraint I have experienced in my songwriting career is collaboration, and I learned this skill at Steel Bridge Songfest, hosted by the Holiday Music Motel in Sturgeon Bay, WI. The festival was started by pat mAcDonald, an acclaimed songwriter whose band Timbuk3 rose to prominence with their hit “The Future’s So Bright (I Gotta Wear Shades),” which earned them a Grammy nomination for Best New Artist in 1987. A native of Sturgeon Bay, mAcDonald took up the cause championed by his sister to save the city’s historic rolling-basculle bridge from demolition in 2005. He called in some of the friends he’d made throughout his career, including Jackson Browne, to throw a benefit concert to raise awareness and build solidarity with the community. As he recalls, the first concert was such a success that all he wanted was to do it again. The following year, he introduced a songwriting element, where everything written would pay homage to the bridge or otherwise invoke a sense of place and local pride for Sturgeon Bay, and the new tradition was born.

At the beginning of the weeklong festival, a group of songwriters would stand in a big circle and play spin-the-bottle, except they were spinning for songwriting partners instead of kisses. Once everyone spun and got placed into a group of three, they had 24 hours to write a song and record it in one of the ad-hoc onsite recording studios, with mAcDonald serving as the creative director, listening to the songs and offering lyrical tweaks when necessary. After 24 hours, the writers would reconvene, listen to the recordings of the previous day’s songs, and then spin the bottle for new groups and begin the process all over again. At the end of the week, the new songs would be performed at various venues around the city, and the best of the bunch would be featured on a compilation album the following year. For the festival format, mAcDonald borrowed certain elements from his time on I.R.S. Records, a label run by Miles Copeland. Copeland owned a chateau in southwestern France, referred to as “The Castle,”⁶ and he would periodically invite songwriters and recording artists to do a songwriting bootcamp there. It was there that mAcDonald first experienced the magic of group songwriting, which he had been resistant to up until then. It was also where he learned that in collaborative writing, three was the perfect number: “I could break off from the group and go walk in the countryside while trying to figure out where the lyrics should go, while two people were behind working on the music part... Three takes the pressure off of everyone a little bit. Collaboration continues even if one person has to take a breather.” However, he emphasized that Copeland’s

⁶ Vaucher, “Hollywood Storms Castle Walls”

operation was a commercial enterprise, and that “they scientifically put these writing groups together.”⁷ mAcdonald took a more organic approach: spinning the bottle let fate assemble the groups, and the results were far less calculated. This led to occasionally unexpected results, especially in groups where writers had little influence or vocabulary in common, and that was part of the thrill. In my experience, learning how to communicate and work with people in aid of a shared goal made collaboration indispensable as a development tool. Egos had to be put on hold, since a three-way tug-of-war would result in a waste of everyone’s time. Additionally, the added influence of other writers and perspectives meant that songs would often go in directions I would never have chosen for myself. While sometimes this felt uncomfortable, I found that if I let go of my expectations or beliefs that I knew what was best, I was often pleasantly surprised with the outcome by the end.

It was during the Steel Bridge Songfests (and their seasonal counterparts, Dark Songs in October and Love on Holiday in February) that I learned that, for as much as I loved the positive collaborative experiences, the negative ones had benefits as well. Everybody likes doing things when they are easy, but it takes practice and hard work to look at a difficult situation and find the parts that teach something useful for the road ahead. I began to adopt a beginner’s mindset, going into each new situation by abandoning everything I thought I knew or assumed would happen. Every new writing group had something to teach me. Considering that I was spending three weeks every year working with the writers who flocked to these festivals, I was learning a lot.

These experiences and their corresponding constraints clearly made an immense impact on me as a songwriter, and that impact has carried over into how I handle life outside of music, but I had doubts about whether there was enough merit to the idea to pursue it as a line of inquiry in service to a wider population. To gain some insight, I put out an informal survey to members of the FAWM community this past February. Among 52 participants, 88% of whom have been writing songs for 10+ years, an overwhelming majority expressed having experienced the following:

- Self-doubt (90.4%)
- Imposter syndrome (76.9%)
- Creative/writer’s block (75%)

A significant percentage of participants also mentioned having experienced:

- Fear of criticism (61.5%)
- Fear of failure (59.6%)
- Generalized anxiety (48.1%)
- Depression (46.2%)

Participants were able to add their own answers to the prompt, and these included:

- “Frustration”

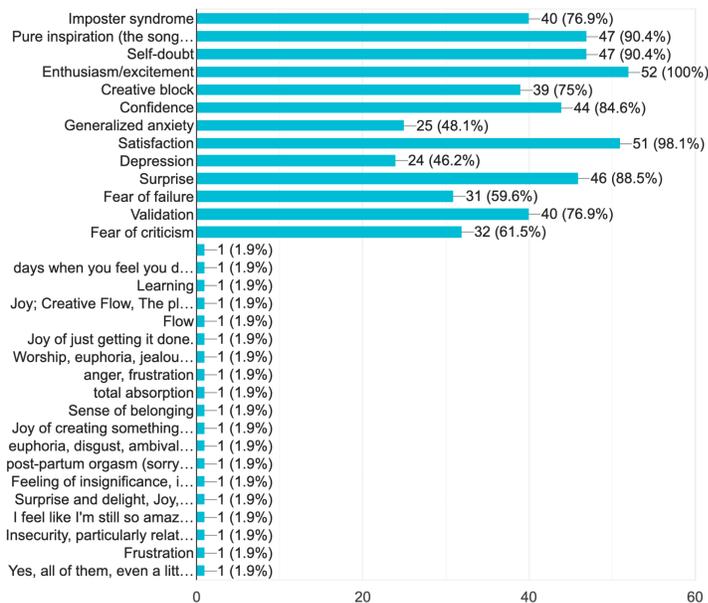
⁷ mAcdonald, interview

- “Feeling of insignificance, insufficient...ness(?), not a good enough musician to ever earn respect amongst others”
- “days when you feel you don't know how to write anymore”
- “Insecurity, particularly related to my age and my skill level”

However, despite the strong representation of negative feelings associated with songwriting, participants also expressed having experienced the following:

- Enthusiasm/excitement (100%)
- Satisfaction (98.1%)
- Surprise (88.5%)
- Validation (76.9%)
- “Joy of just getting it done.”
- “Sense of belonging”
- “Joy of creating something i like”

When it comes to songwriting, or other creative endeavors, have you experienced one or more of the following? (check all that apply)
52 responses



I was immediately struck by the breadth of negative emotions described, especially considering how long most of them have been writing, but the unanimity of enthusiasm and excitement was equally striking. This told me that these writers do not engage with their craft for the romanticized martyrdom of tortured artistry. They write for the joy of it, and these internal obstacles are just roadblocks (or chasms, or mountains) on the road between them and creative joy and satisfaction. It seemed as though figuring out how to acknowledge internal

obstacles without becoming beholden to them was a worthy line of inquiry after all. I could tell from my own writing that the solution to becoming a stronger writer was simply to write more, but that is easier said than done. How could I convey what I have found to be true in such a way that it could be useful to other songwriters? It started with asking the ultimate question: why would anyone write more, especially if they do not like what they are writing?

Quantity Begets Quality

In their book *Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking*, David Bayles and Ted Orland make a compelling case that the quality of an artist's work is directly correlated to the quantity of work they produce. They relate a story about a ceramics teacher who divides their class in two, tasking one half with spending the term making one single "perfect" pot, and the other half with making as many pots as possible. At the end of the term, so the story goes, the pots generating the most interest and demonstrating the most ingenuity came not from the group striving for perfection, but from the group whose skills inadvertently yet measurably improved simply by creating so many pots and learning along the way.⁸

At first presented as apocrypha, a little digging reveals that the story is actually based in fact. The professor was University of Florida's Jerry Ueslmann, an innovative photographer known by some as the "Godfather of Photoshop," and the medium, unsurprisingly, was photography. Why the change? According to Orland:

Admittedly, it would've been easier to retain photography as the art medium being discussed, but David Bayles (co-author) & I are both photographers ourselves, and at the time we were consciously trying to broaden the range of media being referenced in the text. The intriguing thing to me is that it hardly matters what art form was invoked—the moral of the story appears to hold equally true straight across the whole art spectrum (and even outside the arts, for that matter).⁹

The "moral of the story" is that spending a given amount of time trying to create a perfect work does not yield a greater chance of doing so. In the first place, perfection is a mirage, a nebulous idea with arbitrary definitions that change depending on a variety of factors. Secondly, by striving for an ephemeral sense of perfection, we tend to get bogged down by all the things a work is *not*, instead of building upon what it is.

By contrast, when the task is to meet a quantity threshold in a fixed amount of time, perfection cannot be given priority. There simply isn't time to get lost in the weeds of minutiae; a work must be finished as quickly as possible in order to move on to the next one, and so on. While this seems at first glance like a recipe for dissatisfaction—and indeed, there will always be a fair amount of that—the less obvious side effect is a gradual accumulation of experience, and a growing awareness that the presence of inspiration, while lovely when it happens, is not strictly necessary.

⁸ Bayles and Orland, *Art & Fear*

⁹ Clear, *Atomic Habits*

Elizabeth Gilbert, bestselling author of *Eat Pray Love*, speaks to this with her 2009 TED talk on “Your Elusive Creative Genius,” and in further detail with her 2016 book *Big Magic*. Gilbert’s approach comes from trying to disentangle society’s association of artistry with suffering, by externalizing the source of creativity and creating a protective barrier between the artist and their work, which is noble and also relevant to this paper. Externalizing inspiration disarms the pressure we place on ourselves to create something amazing every time we sit down. More importantly, she talks about the importance of simply showing up. Making art becomes far more possible when time and space are created for it. Then, if something magical happens, you are in the best possible situation to capture it. On the other hand, if nothing magical happens, you can at least spend time improving the mechanics of your process. Either way, the bottom line is more creative work, every day.¹⁰

So let us suppose that a songwriter who is trying to become more prolific, or at the very least less riddled by anxiety, decides that time and collaboration are effective strategies to implement in aid of that goal, but when they sit down with a stopwatch, their inner critic is instantly shouting to the rafters and by the time the deadline passes, nothing has actually gotten written. In fact, that songwriter might be even more frustrated now than when they started. What then?

The Improv Mindset

The first step is to just get the ball rolling. It might be a word on a page, or a chord on an instrument, but whatever it is—whether you like it and decide to run with it, or you hate it and decide to try something else—it gets the process started. This is where a lot of songwriters stumble, because we have a tendency to judge the first things that come out of our heads. We look at it like the end point, when it is actually only the beginning. Getting around this tendency requires a shift in mindset, and here songwriting could take a cue from improv comedy.

There is an essential tenet of improv known as “yes, and.” According to Second City, “The basic concept of these two words is that you are up for anything, and will go along with whatever gets thrown your way.”¹¹ By saying the first thing you can think of, or playing the first note or chord your fingers find, it gives you a jumping-off point; it creates traction where there was only a nebulous void. As many sources point out, “yes, and” is not meant to be an obligation to agree with every premise. The “yes” acknowledges our intent to help move the process forward, and the “and” gives us permission to build on the ideas presented.

In considering the link between songwriting and improv, I talked with Danielle Anderson, a ukulele singer/songwriter who goes by Danielle Ate The Sandwich, who has also become a fixture in the improv community in Kansas City, MO. She

¹⁰ Gilbert, *Big Magic*

¹¹ Second City, “How to Say ‘Yes, And.’” Accessed 12 May 2023

corroborated a lot of my suppositions about the shared elements of both practices. “What I find in improv that’s similar to songwriting is obviously just trusting yourself to say the next thing,” she said. “Don’t judge, let it out, see what happens, react, and then carry on.... It’s not about loving everything I say, it’s about being comfortable with *not* loving everything I say, that has gotten me to be a better songwriter.”

That second point—getting comfortable with not loving everything—is crucial, because even if you write something you do not love (or even like), it still has value: as a way to uncover a fragment that might lead to something you do love; as something that speaks to your audience even if it does not speak to you; or just simply as a way to get closer to the proverbial 10,000 hours needed to attain mastery.¹² Anderson does an annual project called the 24 Hour Album, in which she writes, produces, and records an album’s worth of songs in 24 hours, and invites fans and patrons to look in on the process to see what exactly goes into it. Over the eight years that she has been doing the project, she has learned a lot about pushing through to meet a deadline:

The deadline forces me to let go of worrying too much about what I don’t like; sometimes it’s like, ‘I don’t really like this but it’s $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way done and I need another song on this album so I’m gonna finish this song.’ And what’s interesting is that I’m able to push through... [and] it’s always a really rewarding experience but a lot of times I don’t like the songs afterwards... But I also find something very liberating in showing people the process of like, sometimes we show up and write a song that we don’t like. You open up my computer or my notebook and there’s like 60 million unfinished bits and bobs, and most of it is not gonna be a complete finished hit song at the end of the day, but it’s all part of the process to get closer to the next one that’s gonna feel important to me.¹³

In other words, practice makes progress.

The Finish Line

Another songwriter with a staggering collection of fragments of songs that will never see the light of day: Sir Paul McCartney. According to an interview he gave with Mark Radcliffe on the BBC’s program *Sold on Song* in 2005, “I’ve got cassettes with millions of snatches of tunes, but that’s where they stay.” His preferred approach is to start fresh, grab an instrument, and see what suits his fancy, as opposed to trying to capture a mood or build on a preconceived idea. “There’s no method really, and if I work at it, it’s to work at not having a method.” McCartney’s preternatural gift for

¹² Gladwell, “Complexity and the Ten Thousand Hour Rule”

¹³ Anderson, interview

melody belies a hardy work ethic that typically involves mapping out an entire song structure in one sitting.

I just write it as I go along: first verse, second verse, middle eight, third verse, and just try and get to the end in one go. That's normally then pretty much written; you've got your melody, your words, your middle eight, and then you may look at it and just sort of think 'oh, that line's a bit ropey,' or 'I should change that,' but if you're lucky, more often than not, you suddenly find you've just sort of done it.¹⁴

McCartney brings up a vital point here. The inner critic is often talked about as though it is a fearsome dragon to be slayed, but it does have an essential role to play when we transition from the creative process to the editing process. Creating and editing are two distinct functions that utilize two entirely different mindsets. The creative side imagines possibilities and generates something out of nothing, and the editing side pares down superfluity to a nicely manicured and structurally stable final product. When we try to edit while we are still creating, we can get hung up on individual words or lines, instead of thinking about the song as a whole. It is when we lose momentum or worse, stop altogether. To bring it back to McCartney, most people have heard about the famous origins of "Yesterday," one of the most enduring Beatles classics that, although credited to Lennon/McCartney, was written solely by Paul. As the story goes, the melody came to him in a dream and he was quite sure it already existed, but, when no one seemed to be able to place it, he took it as his own. However, although the poignancy of the melody and underlying harmonic structure was undeniable, the lyrics took some wrestling. As a placeholder, McCartney wrote something along the lines of, "Scrambled eggs/ oh my baby I love your legs." He knew those were not to be the final lyrics, but he refused to let the song wither simply because he could not at first write words that suitably matched the melancholy of the music. Perhaps intuitively, he understood that pulling the entire form into the tangible world was the top priority, and that editing could come later.

In that same interview, McCartney alludes to the way Brian Epstein would call them up to say they were about to go into the studio for a week to write an album. In relating this story, McCartney points to the usage of both strict deadlines and the value of having a collaborative partner in achieving the aim of creating another Beatles album:

We never looked at it like, 'what?! Right, an album in a week!' It was more like, 'yeah, that's a good idea!' So every day, John and I sat down to write opposite

¹⁴ Paul McCartney Reveals His Songwriting Secrets - BBC Radio 'Sold on Song' - 17 September 2005

each other...sort of looking at each other as if it was like in a mirror, both playing the same chords. We didn't get too fancy you know, we just both played the chords. We would start off...with some sort of idea, roughly get a first verse and then bounce off each other so by the time we'd done two or three hours, which is normally our attention span, we had a little sheet with lyrics written down on it, and we just had to remember the tune.

In listening to McCartney relate this story, he never betrays a hint of doubt in his or John Lennon's abilities to get a song finished, even under the tightest deadlines, even with enormous pressure (they were the Beatles, after all). On the contrary, it almost seems like it was a game to him. His approach, to start fresh every time and see where the song goes, is dependent on two things:

- Trust in the process and in one's own instincts.
- The malleability necessary to amend any expectations one might have carried into the process.

Amending Expectations

The ability to amend expectations is a skill worth honing, because a decent amount of songwriting stress and impediment of progress comes from its absence. When we set out to write a song, we typically carry some expectation into the process. Perhaps the expectation is to write about a certain subject, or in a particular style or genre. Maybe the expectation is to write a "hit," the most dangerous expectation of all. The critic latches onto those expectations, constantly pointing out the disparity between the ostensible goal and the work's present state, and progress is stymied while we cast about to find the thing that will finally quiet our inner voice. If we can learn to amend our expectations, we may discover that there is always a way forward, although perhaps not always quite how we imagined it. If we cannot do this, we risk falling victim to one of the most dreaded internal obstacles that a songwriter can face: writer's block. For the uninitiated, writer's block is when the inner critic's voice is so loud that it cannot possibly be ignored. Nothing is good enough, so nothing gets written, and this can go on for days, weeks, or in the most extreme cases, even months.

On a recent visit to Portland State University, composer Jake Runestad was asked how he dealt with writer's block. His response: "I don't believe in writer's block." He began describing an imaginary cabin in the woods where the water has not been turned on in a while. Once the water is turned on, what comes out of the taps is brown, rusty, sputtery, and definitely not something anyone should be drinking. Eventually, though, there is less and less rust until finally the water runs clear. He likened this to his approach to a new composition:

As I'm creating a piece, it's very rusty. I start feeling like 'I don't know how to do this,' and then I start throwing ideas at it, I improvise with lots of different concepts or ways I could go, and slowly things are getting clearer. Then maybe there's a chunk of gunk that comes through. There's still water coming through, but maybe that one interrupts the stream a little bit, and then I need to go away, go for a walk, exercise, try turning it on its head, try a different approach. But I never want to think of it as a block, because if you think of it as a block, then it is a block.¹⁵

As Runestad went on to explain, even the ideas that do not make their way into the final piece serve the purpose of helping the final idea to emerge. Like McCartney, Runestad seems to possess an awareness that the only real impediment to completing a piece is internal. If that is the case, then overcoming the obstacle is simply a matter of mindset. With the right attitude, blocks become opportunities to demonstrate the development of self-trust and intuition, and songs become explorations of possibilities. Giving writer's block the power to fully halt the creative process is a tale as old as time. Refusing to give it that power gives the story a twist, and opens us to the potential of surprise. It is in this space that the magic happens.

The Workshop

Taking all these ideas into account, I began to envision a songwriting workshop that borrowed elements from FAWM, Steel Bridge Songfest, and other concepts I have encountered along the way. In April 2023, I decided to put it all to the test with a small group of songwriter friends from Portland and Seattle, at a beach house on the Oregon coast. I chose the participants based on how familiar they were with some of the concepts I was implementing, and how well I imagined the personalities would mesh, since some of them had never met before. Participants were invited to arrive on Friday and stay until Sunday. Food and lodging would be provided. They were briefed on the expectations before arrival: there would be three writing sessions (one individual and two groups); each session would be timed; and the only rule was that we had to finish whatever was started.

I had originally planned to do some writing activities on Friday night, but with workdays, travel times, and dinner, it was almost dark by the time we were all finally able to congregate at the beach house. Instead of writing, we went around a circle playing songs. This served to introduce people to each other's skills and personalities, besides just being a lot of fun. We did a few rounds of the song circle before everyone went off to their rooms to get a good night's sleep before the next day's 10:00 am call time.

¹⁵ Runestad, guest lecture

Saturday started with the solo writing session, because I felt it would be a less intimidating way to get warmed up for the day ahead. I'd brought an old cigar box that I repurposed into the Prompt Box, full of words and phrases to help jog the mind. We each took a turn picking from the Prompt Box, deciding on the fly that we would not reveal the prompts until after the songs were written; then everyone was given 60 minutes to write a song based on that prompt. The prompts are as follows, in the order they were chosen:

- Jimm McIver - "Something out the window"
- Writer A - "The pressure of miracles"
- Carley Baer - "Unseen forces"
- Vincent Gates - "All the somber kids"
- Elke Robitaille - "Pollination"
- Aidan Currie - "Complications of time"

Once everyone had their prompt, we dispersed around the property to write. I went to my room, which had a deck and an ocean view, and considered my prompt. That morning, a few of us had taken a beach walk and noticed how many houses were on stilts, and how the sandstone bluffs were showing obvious signs of erosion. The "unseen forces" acting upon the landscape were gravity, time, and wind, so I started strumming a D11 chord on the guitar and sang the first words that popped into my head: "Look at these people/ Perched high on the hill." I was not sure that I liked the idea but in the interest of time, I ran with it. The process was pretty straightforward after that, and even though I had my doubts about the song, I ended up with some lines that I thought were actually quite good. After the hour was up, everyone reassembled and presented their song, along with insights into the process.

The second session was the first co-writing session of the day, and for this session, both groups would write to the same prompt— "Changed"— with a 90-minute time limit. While I had considered borrowing the spin-the-bottle idea from Steel Bridge Songfest to choose the groups, it seemed like a chaotic process for only six writers, so instead we drew names from a hat. The names initially drawn for the first group were me, Jimm, and Vincent, but we are all Steel Bridge Songfest alumni which seemed like an unfair concentration of co-writing experience, so we redrew. This time it was me, Jimm, and Elke, leaving Aidan, Writer A, and Vincent to form the second group. We set the timer for 90 minutes and broke off to start writing.

Since this was Elke's first collaborative writing session ever, she took a more observational role while Jimm and I talked through the various interpretations of the prompt. Eventually we settled on the ways the world has changed since the pandemic, and how different everything feels even though we supposedly have gone "back to normal." We got the idea, started writing down examples to put in the verses, and then Jimm started playing a riff that would ultimately become the chorus while we started vocalizing possible melodies.

The group reassembled and we presented the songs, and talked about the process. Then new groups were selected, along with a new prompt. Because there were only six writers, we couldn't have two unique groups, so Aidan and Vincent were part of my group, and Jimm and Elke went to write with Writer A. This time, the groups were writing to different prompts. Our group's prompt was "The good of destruction," and the second group's prompt was "If you could go anywhere."

Perhaps because this was toward the end of an already mentally arduous day, our group struggled to finish our song. We first had trouble committing to an idea, which set us back in terms of time. Then we had an idea that we liked, but could not seem to get any lyrics that excited us enough to keep pursuing them. Eventually, we had 20 minutes left and nothing really to show for it. One of the ideas I had initially floated had to do with wildfires, since they are destructive but also beneficial, so as a desperate last attempt to make it to the finish line, I grabbed my guitar and played some power chords while singing, "Let's burn it down!" It was adhering to the prompt, while also being a call to raze and rebuild, and just having that little bit of forward momentum helped us close the deal. We finished the song just a couple minutes past the closing bell, and while the objective was technically achieved, it was certainly hard-won. After presenting the songs, we had dinner and talked about the day. The rest of the evening was free play time, and some members opted to relax while others had a 90's jam in the living room for the rest of the night. It was a good way to decompress after a big day of mental exertion.

A couple weeks after the workshop, I asked everyone to reflect on the weekend and send me feedback. I posed a series of questions meant to get the ball rolling, but many of them answered the questions directly, which was helpful for comparing and contrasting responses.

- **"How did you feel going into this weekend, and how did you feel coming out?"**
 - Everyone mentioned being nervous; one participant said they had been "dreading" it. Interestingly, everyone also mentioned being excited. Some people who used to perform a lot talked about how this weekend was a vital reminder that they are still creative beings even if they do not devote their entire existence to writing or performing anymore.
- **"What were some high and/or low points you experienced during the course of the exercises?"**
 - Highs included dabbling in new instruments, leaning into the benefits of time pressure, and coming up with good lyrics at the last moment. Lows included feeling stuck, feeling rushed, and finishing a song for the sake of the exercise and not because they liked it.

- **“What about the format of the weekend was good, and what could be done differently to make it better?”**
 - Everyone wished the weekend had been at least one day longer. The immersive quality of the location, the size of the group, and the compatibility of personalities were all cited as positive aspects. People overwhelmingly found the time constraint useful. Opinions diverged over the workload, however; one person seemed to be hitting their stride by the third song, while another felt like they had run aground by that point.
- **“What are your thoughts about time and collaboration as creative constraints?”**
 - The answers to this question were all variations on the constraints being rewarding but difficult. The difficulties stemmed from wanting things to be as good as possible, which is precisely what this thesis attempts to address. It was very insightful to see how many of the participants got to this point and were open to the idea of detaching themselves from a desired outcome in order to get the practice, and how many of them found it liberating, where others looked at the time limit and finish-line objective as perfunctory and unsatisfying.
- **“Now having written 3 songs in a day, how has your understanding about your own creative process or capabilities changed?”** This question got so many answers that really pointed to what I was hoping to address, so I will quote them directly:
 - “I had never attempted to collaboratively write songs before, really. At least not with more than one person. And the truth is, I do find it very difficult, creatively, because I like to have control and I have strong opinions musically. But I think I was able to not be a jerk about it and compromise. The most helpful piece was just experiencing the songs as temporal things, that are here now but we don't need to ‘keep’ them. That let me let them be what they were without getting too attached to my ideas. I think I calibrated my ability with my expectations. As in, I lowered my expectations to match a realistic goal based on my own level of experience and technical skill. Although I know I have good musical sensibility, I do not practice very often. And my skills just grow very slowly over time. It felt good to see that I'm at the point where I can contribute in certain ways, intuitively.”
 - “I've never really done collaborative songwriting, creative constraints, or time limits. It was a great exercise and really

helped me to push past writer's block, self-censoring, and even judgment. I loved the idea of 'just finish something, even if it's bad.' It took so much pressure off, and I'd like to practice this more."

- "I think I already knew this, but for me the crafting of the words is the most challenging part of writing under short time constraints. It definitely highlighted how difficult it is for me to leave an unsatisfying lyric in place in the name of getting a song finished. The question for me is, how can I or should I lower the bar in the name of meeting the deadline? Do I let go completely of any expectations of quality? And if I do, is the exercise by itself, carried out with a decided emphasis on finishing, still meaningful? In my opinion the answer is somewhere in the middle, but I'm not sure yet where the middle actually is. More experiments needed!"
- "Ticking clock was helpful. Intentional writing is helpful, too. I have realized I don't love writing things I don't like. I'll do it for the exercise, and it happens when I sketch/write at home, but I still feel a resistance."

I really appreciated the candor in these responses, because it demonstrated that the issues are real, and that implementing potential solutions can be really difficult. I was not expecting to change 100% of hearts and minds in a single weekend, because I know from my own experience that discomfort overshadows development in the short term; it would often take me months or even years to look back on an uncomfortable or unsatisfying writing experience and point to the benefits that blossomed over time. The negative or questioning responses provide insight into where I could focus for the next workshop. Conversely, the answers that address discovering one's intuition, surprising oneself, or embracing the idea of songs being temporal, impermanent things that do not have to endure beyond the moment, and do not have to be "good," indicate that there is merit to this approach, and it is worth further study.

Conclusion

To say "stop not writing songs" belies the inherent difficulty in reworking our entire understanding of and relationship with creativity, but it is really that simple. In order to expand our creative skill set, we have to gain experience, both positive and negative. In order to do so, we must learn how to work with our inner critic, how to get comfortable with being uncomfortable, and how to get around the internal obstacles, so that we can learn everything that each new songwriting session has to teach us.

The practice of reframing internal obstacles has applications outside the context of songwriting as well. Keeping a beginner's mindset cultivates lifelong

curiosity, a characteristic that has been shown to be immensely beneficial for the brain.¹⁶ Curiosity encourages us to experiment and take chances, which fosters joy and excitement. Experience provides evidence of past successes and lessons learned from failures that can contribute to a greater sense of self-confidence. In essence, when approaching a new situation, it is possible to keep a beginner's mindset while also resting securely in the knowledge bestowed by past experience that we can handle whatever arises. Cultivating this combination of mindsets has exciting implications for complex and creative problem-solving in nearly any discipline.

Returning to the realm of songwriting: by amending our expectations, we give ourselves permission to engage with our creativity in a way that reduces stress and anxiety. We can become as joyful as children playing in a sandbox, and make music for the fun of it and not because it is our job to be a Serious Artist. This is how we hone our instincts. Just as finding freedom in constraint seems counterintuitive, so too does the idea that cranking out throwaway songs somehow leads to better songwriting, but as Bayles and Orland suggest, it is through the making of a volume of work that we garner the experience that leads to improvement. In order to improve more quickly, it follows that one must create more quickly, and humans are far more likely to stick to an arduous or uncomfortable plan if they are being held accountable, either by a ticking clock or another human being.

To put this into practice, set a timer for 60 minutes and write the first thing that comes to mind. Listen for the inner critic saying that the idea is not good enough, then do your best to ignore it and keep writing. Take a cue from Paul McCartney and get the structure down before you take a break; use as many clichés and placeholder lyrics as necessary. Once you have the form and the musical structure in place, if there is still time, then go through and edit the lyrics. The finished song may very well not be a keeper. You may even have moments of extreme frustration, but if you commit to finishing it, you will arrive at the other side with your creative skills a little stronger than they were when you started. Just like Jake Runestad's metaphorical cabin in the woods, the most important thing is to keep the water flowing until it runs clear.

Potential Next Steps

The insights revealed throughout this thesis project have inspired me to continue refining the ideas and practices that I believe lead to greater prolificity and creative fulfillment, and my hope is to invite songwriters, creatives, and anyone wishing to strengthen their relationship with creativity and joy to participate.

- Additional workshops - The reflections I received from this workshop gave me so much information to implement in building the next gathering, starting with extending the length of time so that writers can better pace themselves.

¹⁶ "Six Surprising Benefits of Curiosity"

The immersive quality of the weekend was essential, so I am currently looking into wooded retreats and other oceanside properties that could potentially host a larger number of participants.

- Album of songs about songwriting - While working on this thesis, I have already written an instructional song on how to tell the inner critic to wait until the editing process, and this made me wonder if a Schoolhouse Rock-type collection of songs might be a fun way to try and get these ideas across. I could potentially solicit help from other songwriters as well.
- Blog/book - There was so much in the course of my inquiry that did not make it into this paper, because it distracted from the main points I was attempting to make. Considering how there is a growing call for this kind of approach to creativity, I would like to build upon this paper by incorporating everything I have learned into a series of blog posts, perhaps eventually leading to a book.
- Podcast - I am intrigued by the idea of converting these concepts into a podcast, because some people who might benefit from them might also prefer an audio medium as opposed to a written one. Every episode can end with a songwriting prompt for the audience.
- Website - Ideally, all of the above would find a central home online. I have not yet explored the logistics of this, but there would be a page for upcoming workshop dates; a page for the blog posts; a link to the podcast; and my hope is to have a page for the weekly prompt, as well as a password-protected forum where people can share their songs.

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- IRB application submitted 11/15/2022
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Participant List

- Vincent Gates (<https://vincentgates.com/>)
- Elke Robitaille (<https://www.elkerobitaille.com/>)
- Jimm McIver (<https://jimmmciver.com>)
- Carley Baer (<https://carleybaer.com>)
- Aidan Currie
- Writer A

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