

Writing Great Songs

First, let it be said that there are very perfect songs. Even many of the greatest, most successful songs ever written display some weakness in terms of melody, lyrics, form, harmony, or the like. This should come as a relief to aspiring songwriters and provides you with inspiration to forget chasing perfection and instead strive for excellence.



What makes for an excellent song then? Shallow pop ditties sometimes make the charts, but **emotional depth and honesty** certainly rank among the most important traits shared by truly great songs. They create what is often referred to as **authenticity**.

Take the lyrics from a song like John Mayer's "Comfortable." Its description of the woman that inspired it and their

relationship is both deep and honest, establishing a clear authenticity:

Grey sweat pants
No make up
So perfect
Our love was comfortable
And so broken in

While emotional depth and honesty are important to songwriting, you should **never let reality hamper truth**. Huh? Songwriters weave myths—a myth being something that never was but always is. To explain, let's go back to John Mayer's "Comfortable."

In it, he sings about Ms. Grey Sweat Pants jumping on his shopping cart and riding down Aisle Five of a market. In reality, maybe it was Aisle Four. Maybe the whole thing just took place in Mayer's head. Whatever the case may be, the lyrics still wield the clear sting of truth.

The Songwriting Process

The songwriting process often begins with **finding a truth to express**. Sometimes, you stumble upon it. Sometimes, it works itself out of you slowly, beginning with an artistic inkling and only fully emerging during the creative process.

Many songwriters keep notebooks to jot down ideas as they surface and then work on them over time, sometimes for years. Then again, you may find yourself seized by an idea that tumbles out of you fully formed almost as fast as you can write it down.

There is danger, however, in giving yourself over to the idea that songwriting is just blind inspiration. **When you write a song in a flash, don't automatically assume it's a jewel.** It might indeed be precious but good songwriting is usually more than being the then declared, "What a good boy (or girl) am I."

To make your songs as good as they can possibly be, **pair the art of songwriting with a thorough understanding of its craft**. You can develop this craftsmanship in several different ways. One is to become intimately familiar with great songs, regardless of style. Even if you're into heavy metal, you can still learn a lot from the songs of country legend Hank Williams.

A number of good books have been published on the craft of songwriting. Here are Amazon links to a few Young Guns particularly recommends.

Here also are a number of time-honored tips for writing great songs.

Hints and Tips

When it comes to lyrics, **imperfect rhymes are perfectly fine** and in fact are often better than their perfect counterparts. Perfect rhymes for cat are dove, above, glove, and so on. You can immediately see the problem. There are so few perfect rhymes for most words that they've been overused down through the years to the point that that they're now clichéd.

Your love is like the stars above
We're like hand in glove, my turtledove

Yuck!

Now, here are just a few of the many imperfect rhymes for love—tough, scuff, bluff, hush, was, does. See how many more words and associated meaning you already have to work with? Think of all the different places you can now go lyrically with the concept of love. And this is just the tip of the iceberg. Get yourself a good thesaurus and whole constellations of rhymes can open before you.

Melody and harmony should be tailored to fit the essence of your song. Looking at Mayer's "Comfortable" one last time, we find that the verses begin with a tumbling or falling melody that's both repetitive and emphasizes a single pitch. These traits create a

reminiscent, contemplative quality that frame the lyrics perfectly and contrast beautifully with the emotional rising-pitch phrase at the end of the verse.

Mayer also uses chords for “Comfortable” that are softer and more complex than what you would get with plain-old triads like E, A, and B or power chords. Mind you, complex doesn’t necessarily mean better. Triads and power chords can give an elemental strength to a song. They just wouldn’t be right for “Comfortable.” **Every chord has a flavor, and you should season a song with the ones that best enhance its essence.**