

# SONGWRITING WITH DANNY CARNAHAN A Lark Camp Online Class August 2021

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## DANNY'S INTRODUCTORY SPIEL

This very condensed workshop is tailored to provide some fun kick-starts to your creativity and to open a few proven doors to help you create your own songs (both lyrics and melody). The simple fact that you are here means you want to write songs and believe you have something to say. I heartily agree and stress that **ONLY YOU** can write **YOUR** songs! You have a unique viewpoint, unique life experiences, and an emotional, imaginative landscape just waiting to be shared with the world. Songwriting is the least competitive of all creative arts—I can't write your songs and you can't write mine.

I also believe that our world is constantly dishing up ideas or seeds for songs. Your job is to turn your attention outward and start grabbing them as they float by. Whether you have never written a song or have a dozen albums to your credit, you'll always want to be alert to the next intriguing idea. We'll be snatching song seeds out of thin air... more on this below.

Not everybody feels equally comfortable writing both lyrics and music. You may self-identify as a Word Person or a Music Person exclusively. No worries. I'll encourage you to pair you off with another creative soul in a delightful, challenging exercise that almost guarantees that you will increase your comfort in both aspects of songwriting, and exit the class with one finished song.

I'm offering this advance prep package since I don't have time to warm you up to my attitude toward creative possibilities, complete with musical examples. Instead, here are some of my favorite slam-dunk exercises that we as a class will try to play with this week. If you download this document in advance of our August 4th start date, feel free to play around with any or all of these exercises on your own. I hope to be able to share as much stuff you write for class as possible, either working fragments or completed songs. Much depends on the size of the class, which will, alas, be a mystery until Day One.

## **YOU'LL ABSOLUTELY NEED:**

- **Lined paper**
- **Pens or pencils**
- **A recording device**

I see a hand raised. “Pencils? Really? Can’t I write on my computer?” Well, sure. But I’d love it for this class if you’d try it with real pencil and paper. I find that the physical act of writing down your thoughts adds something to the creative process—unquantifiable, maybe, but at least give it a try for starters.

Important note: It’s called “songwriting” and not “songthinking”. Your song isn’t done until you’ve locked it down either on paper or in a recording to communicate it to another human being. However you choose to do it is fine... you need make no apologies. Remember: Paul McCartney couldn’t read music and Irving Berlin could only play piano in one key.

## **ALSO USEFUL, DEPENDING ON YOUR SKILL SET:**

- **A musical instrument**
- **Staff paper**

## **HOW THE CLASS WILL WORK**

We’ll have an hour a day together for five days. During that hour we’ll be doing some real-time writing exercises and I’ll be demonstrating some of the techniques I have used for years to write songs. Conversations will be tricky, so please ask questions using the Chat function of the Zoom meeting and our moderator will call them out to me.

Starting on Day Two, I hope we’ll start getting writing examples from you and your fellow students that we can share, discuss, and build on. You’ll get the most out of the workshop if you join in every day and build on what we’ve already done.

The last day (or the last two days, depending on the volume of songs), we’ll be sharing your songs with the class, and discussing what works. There will be a few rules about song-sharing and commentary:

- Positive input only (what do you particularly like?)
- If something isn’t clear to you, yes, do mention this. This is useful.

## SONG BUILDING BLOCKS

We'll be working with the basic popular song building blocks. These blocks are so useful because they work. They allow the songwriter to express pretty much anything and they deliver the song in a way in which the listener can follow the flow and even intuit what might be coming next. Blocks will include but not be limited to:

- Meter
- Rhyme
- Verse, Chorus, and Bridge
- Repetition
- Setting up and releasing tension

### A NOTE ABOUT GENRE AND STYLE

“Genre” is more about marketing than about songwriting. So is “Style”. Pretty much all styles and genres of songs use and manipulate the same basic building blocks. I advise that you try to write a good song, not a good [insert genre here] song.

Rap and Hip-Hop are new, evolving styles that are challenging many assumptions about how meter, rhyme, and structure can work. But at their core, even these styles rely on the tools every songwriter uses, even as they flaunt them and stretch them every which way. My view about songwriting, as with any art form, is to recognize and master the basic rules and then, once comfortable, start pushing the boundaries.

In the short time we have together, I want to work on the basics and hope you will find our explorations meaningful and satisfying.

# EXERCISES

## LURKING EXERCISE

When you're out in the world, shopping, walking, in coffee shops and restaurants, taking the kids to school, on public transportation, anywhere where there are people, turn your attention to what people around you are saying. Listen for words that strike you as odd, scraps of conversation that make no sense, out of context phrases. When something hits you as memorable, write it down! (This is the important part! You have to write these down when you get them. They won't come by twice and you won't remember them later, no matter what you tell yourself. So always be prepared with something to write with, or a phone recorder.). When you get about ten lurks, read them through and ask yourself if you can expand one into a lyric idea, either as itself or as subject matter. Now either free-write for a minute or two or write a stanza starting with your lurk.

This is an on-going exercise. Once you get into the habit of sniffing out good lurks, it will become second-nature and you'll never stop noticing them. These are free song seeds, dished up by a benevolent universe. And they're all yours!

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In this class, I'll always want to hear a good lurk, especially if it's something that led you to write a little something. We'll share them throughout the workshop.

## OBJECT WRITING EXERCISE

Pick an object in the room. While holding it or examining it more closely, free-associate all the possible uses for this object, no matter how outlandish or bizarre. Take one minute only.

Now read over what you've written and pick out a word or phrase that intrigues you and write a four-line stanza using it.

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This is an exercise you can do every day, wherever you are. It is a prime example of kick-starting creativity, by reminding yourself that you are always surrounded by a world that offers lyrical ideas.

## SENSE WRITING EXERCISE

What emotions and physical sensations are you experiencing right now? Describe them purely objectively, without analysis or explanation of any kind. Try to list them all. Take one minute.

Now read over what you've written and pick out a word or phrase that intrigues you and write a four-line stanza using it.

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This exercise serves as a reminder that writers too often depend almost exclusively on sight and sound. If you pay attention to all your other sensory input (taste, heat and cold, itching, tight shoes, ear worm, etc.) it will open up your habits of observation and can only make your lyrics more vibrant.

## BORROWED FORM, OR HANGING LYRICS ON THE BONES OF ANOTHER SONG

Pick a song you know well. Write it all out to map its structure: How many beats per line? How does the rhyme fall? How many verses? Is there a chorus and/or bridge? Now, forget the original lyrics and meaning of the song and write new lyrics about anything but fit them to the structure. If you can write to match the whole song, great. If you only get a verse or two, that's fine, too. Your results may be heartfelt or silly...it's all good. But write your lyrics down in some sharable form. Because this exercise leads into the best exercise ever...

## COLLABORATION

With our help, you will identify another workshop member and you will hand over your lyrics to them without identifying the song you used as a template. They will do the same with you. You will then spend some time before the next class to put your classmate's lyrics to music, using only the clues and cues provided by the words. Don't try to work out the original song... that's not the point...your take on organizing the lyrics is likely to be worlds different. When the two of you are done, you will have co-written two songs. How cool is that? We'll share as many of these as possible. We'll also share the original song you started with to demonstrate how far you and your collaborator traveled with your creativity.

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## Collaboration Example

My collaborator gave me the following lyrics that matched a song she liked. I noodled on the mandolin and a groove started to develop. I altered the syntax to better match the groove and repeated some lines, but otherwise stuck as close as possible to the original. I'll play my original melody for the class and then reveal the song that was used as a starting point.

It was a windy cold day  
The clouds flew past  
I turned the radio on  
Northbound drivin'

The towns blurred to one  
I was singing with Lucinda  
Think I lost it somewhere  
But I'm not cryin'

Never been so alone  
But I can feel you comin' to me  
Sweeter than we've ever known  
Keep it cool and wait to see  
If our love is meant to be

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## My alterations

It was a cold and windy day  
The clouds flew past  
I turned the radio on  
Northbound drivin'

All the towns blurred into one  
Singing with Lucinda  
Think I lost it, lost it somewhere  
But I'm not cryin'

Never been so alone  
But I can feel you comin' to me  
Sweeter than we've ever known  
Keep it cool and wait to see  
Never been so alone  
But I can feel you comin' to me  
Sweeter than we've ever known  
See if our love is meant to be

## **RANDOM CHORD AND MELODY GENERATORS**

### **Random Card Note Generator**

Take the aces and number cards 2 through 7 out of a deck of cards. Shuffle. Now deal yourself 4 or 5 cards at random. The numbers now represent scale steps (for instance, in the key of C, C is 1, D is 2, etc.). Now play the notes in order, using different rhythms or holding the notes as long or as short as you like. Anything good? If not, try using the numbers as chords, making chord changes based on the scale steps. Meditate and mutate...if dropping a chord sends you in an interesting direction, go for it.

If this dealt hand doesn't give you anything fun to work with, shuffle and deal again. It shakes you free of habits and expectations.

### **Letters in Your Name**

Write your name out in capital letters, first-middle-last or first-last. Now circle all the letters from A through G. For the classically-inclined or Europeans among you, you can add H, which the Germans use for B-flat. In order, these are now either a starting melody or a chord progression. Play them and see what happens. If you don't like the results, try the name of someone else in your family. My name gave me a weird, melancholy melody that wanted to be in 7/4 time and I never liked it much. But my wife's name netted me a happy little song.

## ALPHABET FREE-WRITING

Write a single sentence using words that start with every consecutive letter of the alphabet. Don't think too hard—just write as quickly as the words come. Now read your sentence out loud. When you finish laughing, pick out two or three consecutive words that sound interesting. Now write a four-line stanza (any number of metrical beats, any rhyme pattern) using those words.

**Variant:** Use the alphabet in reverse. Both templates are provided here.

A	_____
B	_____
C	_____
D	_____
E	_____
F	_____
G	_____
H	_____
I	_____
J	_____
K	_____
L	_____
M	_____
N	_____
O	_____
P	_____
Q	_____
R	_____
S	_____
T	_____
U	_____
V	_____
W	_____
X	_____
Y	_____
Z	_____

Z	_____
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X	_____
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V	_____
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T	_____
S	_____
R	_____
Q	_____
P	_____
O	_____
N	_____
M	_____
L	_____
K	_____
J	_____
I	_____
H	_____
G	_____
F	_____
E	_____
D	_____
C	_____
B	_____
A	_____