

How I Write a Song Lee Chapman

Can't sleep. A voice in my head says write a song! No! It's too much work! But if I were going to write a song, what would it be about? At that moment, I know it's too late.

Songwriting is hard. Like half a dozen *Lord of the Rings* dwarfs, elves, and wizards who climb a mountain, battle a thousand monsters, fall into a cavern where they battle ten thousand monsters, and are then swept over a waterfall into a boiling lake where they battle a sea monster and somehow wind up with a piece of shiny gold jewelry. The good guys must stick together: melody, harmony, rhythm, and words must all overcome absurd obstacles and arrive not only unscathed but sparkling. And still friends.

Getting the words to sound good, be clever, be interesting, and make sense is hard. Getting the notes to obey most of the rules and break or bend enough of them to be interesting and still make sense is hard. Getting words and notes to reinforce one another is hard squared.

Writing poetry is simple. A poem is just a song with very bad music. And the words don't even have to make sense! As every high school student knows, if you can't discern the hidden meaning that means *you're* stupid, not the poet.

Writing music is easy. Every chord sequence is beautiful if played on a sufficiently gooey synthesizer, and Schoenberg taught us that every possible pitch sequence is beautiful. But my friends don't listen to Schoenberg, they listen to *songs*.

Writing songs is hard. When I get an idea for a song my guts shrivel, my eyes itch. I won't be sleeping seven hours anytime soon. Each time I approach mindless oblivion a word, a phrase, a metaphor, a melodic fragment, or a bit of rhythm will pop into my head. The table lamp will come on, the ballpoint will be fumbled with, the back of an old library receipt written on. I quit drinking so I won't have to get up to pee and song-write at 4am. Over the next few weeks the ideas will flow. Parts will congeal, break up, reform, be discarded. Holes will be filled, verses discarded, rhyming dictionaries consulted.

If the gods will it there will come a moment of gilded joy: when I know the song is finish-able. I'll see the promised land! The work will continue. Innumerable problems and subproblems will be solved. Then, on the beltway driving to the mother-in-law's, or on a treadmill at the gym, the song will coalesce. There'll be no way to write it down but that won't matter—I'll sing it to myself over and over.

I learn to play it. I choose a key in which I can fake the high notes. I arrange it for guitar or computer. I wake one morning somehow knowing it needs a flute solo. Every day it gets better.

Eventually the great day arrives: out of excuses, I finally perform the new song for Bob the musicologist. He's been hearing about it for months. The computer part is too loud for his classical ears so I turn the stereo down. He doesn't understand the words but has a few suggestions for changing them. The music is quite simple and breaks at least three laws of harmony but he knows that's me and there's nothing to be done.

My recording engineer offers no opinion except that my voice is even flatter than usual (it's against his professional ethics to comment on the quality of the song itself). His wife calls my masterpiece "a nice little song." My best friend says it's great but "not as good as your old stuff, of course."

Why do it?

No choice. Gold glitters.