'Finding clarity'

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Creative Process CW2 Reflective Statement

Sophie's Question

Sophie Daniel's opening question of Creative Process was 'What is a song?' Despite the confidence of my initial answer - a combination of words, music and structure - (West, 2016), I was stumped by her follow-up question: 'What is a great song?' As a measure of my learning over the 12 weeks of study, I now feel in a position to confidently answer Sophie's question.

Quantity over quality

"Do you have the courage to bring forth the treasures that are hidden within you?" dares Liz Gilbert (2015: 8). Challenged to write as many songs as possible, reflecting upon feedback received each week, thus began a 'quantity over quality' approach (Bales and Orland, 2001). I wrote 16 songs during the module. Though someway short of Malcolm Gladwell's '10,000 hours' (2008) and Ed Sheeran's 'five songs a day' (BBC Radio 4, 2017), I have learned to really value practice-led enquiry. Spurred on by Gilbert's words, my takeaway message from her 'Big Magic' is still echoing: "Write another song."

Define 'Professional'

I have aspired to be a professional songwriter for many years. Where I once interpreted 'professional' as a *noun,* I now interpret it as a *verb*. I interpret the noun 'professional' to describe a *fixed status,* static and determined by external factors (i.e. the amount a songwriter earns), whereas I interpret the verb 'professional' to describe an *active state*, an attitude and a self-determined approach (i.e. the way a songwriter goes about their work). John Cleese (1991) likewise defines 'creativity' not as a talent, but rather "a way of operating".

At the heart of the distinction between amateur and professional is the question 'why'. Guest lecturer Mo Cohen posed the question *Why do I write songs?* On reflection, I would say 'Because I love it.' For Oscar Hammerstein (Webb, 1998: 2), this is evidence of professionalism: "The professional loves songs and loves songwriting." Steven Pressfield (2002: 62) writes "The conventional interpretation is that the amateur pursues his calling out of love, while the pro does it for money… In my view, the amateur does not love the game enough…The professional loves it so much he dedicates his life to it." This perspective affirms my own practice as being professional.

Creative Process

Despite having written hundreds of songs over the past 18 years, I had been unfamiliar with the term 'creative process'. I am now aware of the role creative process plays in determining the outcome of my songs. "Linking processes to the outcomes, the songwriter will be able to create a roadmap specific to the development of his or her own creativity." (West, 2016: 15). From Don Mclean sitting on his veranda with a print of Van Gough's 'Starry Night' writing the lyrics to 'Vincent' "on a paper bag" (Brown, 2010) to The Ting Tings opting to build "makeshift studios in spaces, and throw parties and record off the back of those" (BBC Newsbeat, 2008), variety in application is vast, yet I have learned that there are a number of stages common to most songwriting processes. These are listed as headings in the following description of my own creative process. Andrew West (2016) emphasises that these stages should not be interpreted as a linear progression as the songwriter to naturally jumps from one stage to another; something I can attest to. In this regard I have found Simon Hawkins (2016, 22) "Tools not rules" summary to be most helpful.

My Process

Generating ideas

Writing brief's were set on Thursdays. On Fridays, while teaching guitar at a school, I would take any opportunity afforded me to begin to compose either at the piano or guitar, singing wordless melodies, searching for emotional connection with the music.

Collecting and Organising ideas

I would then record a voice memo, giving it a title either relating to the chords, fragmented lyric idea or mood, also noting down any lyrics. Of this stage Dan Wilson warns: "Data storage is the easy part. It's data retrieval that's hard" (Opipari, 2017), however I found it easy to keep track of working on one or two songs each week. I would 'rest' these ideas over the weekend due to family and work commitments. Says Wilson (ibid) "Once you have kids, scheduling becomes a necessity."

Developing and Editing Ideas

Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday evening I would search for lyric ideas and give the song a general shape, typing lyrics up on my computer as soon as they had formed.

Producing a first draft

Finally on a Thursday morning I would book a writing room at Tileyard and spend two hours refining and drafting a lead sheet of the song ready to share with class.

Surprisingly the time constraints were constructive as I they focused me, however writing lyrics straight to my computer often led me too quickly into the editing phase. Austin Kleon (2012) divides his studio in half: analogue (paper, pens etc) for developing ideas and digital (computer, camera etc) for editing. I used this methodology in the writing of my final

song of the module, 'Birthday' and found it a really helpful approach that I intend to continue with.

Creative Intention

The term 'creative intention' was also new to me. Initially I imagined a very straight interpretation: that a clear creative intention was essential *from the beginning* of a writing process. This partly reflected Ralph Murphy's (2013) approach to hit songwriting. In his visiting lecture he likened hit songwriting to scriptwriting, emphasising the importance of the pronoun 'you' and the title as hook. Guest lecturer Angela Blacklaw also stressed the importance of creative intention, but suggested that it may enter the process at a later stage. This is often true for me. It has been empowering to find that it is also true many of the writers whose work I admire most. Midway through writing a lighthearted list song, Dan Wilson (Barber and O'Connor, 2015) realised 'A Song Can Be About Anything' was "taking a crazy curve ball" to be about the loss of a close personal relationship.

Music First

Guest lecturer Professor Andrew West (2016) spoke of his process changing from one resembling Murphy's, starting with a title, to one much more resembling to my own. West now begins with composing music and wordless sung melodies that he connects with emotionally, later searching for appropriate lyrics. Whereas his former method led to completed songs in a couple of hours, this new process might take weeks. It dawned on me that my own creative process might also be considered professional. Later I learned that a number of my favourite songwriters also adopt a 'music first' approach. Ben Folds (Barber and O'Connor, 2012) emphatically states "It's almost always melody first". On 'Stranger to Stranger', Paul Simon (ibid, 2016) recorded and manipulated rhythms and samples to create sounds that inspired his lyrics. Joy Williams (Opipari, 2011) describes

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her initial lyric ideas as "baby words". Thom Yorke (Lee, 2000), hoping for "happy accidents" during the making of Radiohead's 'Kid A', used Burroughs' 'cut-up' technique (Jones, 2015) literally pulling phrases out of a hat to be sung over the bands music.

Cowriting

Interestingly Williams (Opipari, 2011) and Wilson (Barber and O'Connor, 2015) both speak of their process cowriting for other artists being quite different to writing for their own projects. Wilson suggested a song title in response to the Dixie Chicks sharing their experiences of being blacklisted by country radio due to speaking out against the war in Iraq. The result, 'Not Ready to Play Nice', was awarded Grammy Song of the Year (2007). Guest lecturer Oli Rockenberger stressed the importance of emotional intelligence when collaborating with others. Martin Brammer adds weight to this idea: "Getting to know the artist is a much better way of collaborating than saying 'Hey I've got a great song for you'." (West, 2016: 175), as does Simon Aldred: "You've got to be a master of communication really. You've got to remove yourself from it: you've got to help them say what they want to say." (ibid: 176). Also crucial for Rockenberger was matching the right skillset with what the collaborator required.

These principles have surfaced in the variety of roles I have adopted for my six cowritten songs. I have started off providing a set of simple chords and then taking up an 'A&R' role encouraging my collaborators to explore their melodic range vocally; have worked primarily as lyricist; have worked primarily as a composer and producer; and been an editor forming lyrics from fragments of ideas. Due to time constraints the majority of these collaborations were 'asynchronous' (West, 2016: 190). Sharing ideas via email enabled me to work independently when I could fit it in. Five of the six collaborations were then completed together on Thursday mornings at Tileyard.

Research

Throughout the module, the feedback I most consistently received was: 'give more focus to words', 'more space to music' and 'more clarity to structure'. This led to a number of enquiries in my research. I wrote 'Gold' copying the template of Steve Pilgrim's 'Sunshine' considering the direct focus of his lyrics; I revisited some of my primary influences including Radiohead, Ben Folds and Jeff Buckley considering their use of musical interlude; and I transcribed the structure of all 100 of Radiohead's album songs applying Ralph Murphy's (2013) '6 forms' to consider their shape (appendix A). I have also been drawn to the theme 'Tragedy' after spending some time last year processing in therapy the effects of my mother's cancer during my teenager years. Researching Aristotle (Kenny, 2013), Shakespeare (Wells, 2017), and an illuminating essay 'Tragedy and the common man' from Arthur Miller (1949) led to three songs: 'Mosaic Eyes', 'Till the hurting hurt no more' and 'Trap' based on Cleopatra. My research culminated in a performance at St Mary's Church on 28th November, where I experimented by performing a set of six tragedy songs. It felt strange not to perform a more varied set, but audience feedback was very positive. This research played a major role in empowering my decision making when writing 'Birthday'.

Birthday

The final song (appendix B) I wrote on the module is also, I believe, my strongest. Interestingly the feedback I'd received regarding words, music and structure closely resembled Sondheim's (2010: xv) influential 'Three Rules of Writing'; detailed below in my account of writing the song.

I began by improvising chords at the piano reminiscent of Ben Folds' 'Fred Jones part 2'.

Instead of abandoning the idea because it wasn't 'original' (Kleon, 2012 and Fergus, 2012) I saw the association as positive and decided to revisit the lonesome character from Folds' song, itself a sequel to 'Cigarette'. I imagined this character celebrating their birthday alone 'blowing out the candles'. It was a return to Miller's (1949) 'Tragedy of the common man'. I felt I knew how to write this song from the off.

I edited the structure to its simplest and clearest form: Intro A B A[1] Outro; "Content Dictates Form" (Sondheim, 2010). Initially the B section repeated, however using it just once carried a lot more impact; "Less is more" (ibid).

The lyrics were like filling in a 'crossword puzzle' (West, 2016: 163), searching for phrases of precise length and meaning. Each line was 'auditioned' with multiple options until I found the clearest story. The chords and instrumental 'bookends' were also carefully constructed to give space to the lyrics and to convey the emotion of the song; "God is in the details" (ibid). Upon completion, I spent the next hour rehearsing the song, enjoying the sense of balance of words, music and structure. As such the song felt complete. The effect: "clarity" (ibid). Feedback was universally positive. I think of 'Birthday' as a 'gateway song'.

My Answer

In conclusion, I now feel equipped to confidently answer Sophie Daniels' question 'What is a great song?' My answer: 'a *balanced* combination of words, music and structure'.

- 1,980 words

Appendix A

Ralph Murphy's "The Six Forms" applied to 100 Radiohead songs.

Description of Form   **# of songs**

Description of Form	# of songs
1st Form: V Refrain (verse often in different key/tempo)	0
2nd Form: V (V) Ch V Ch Instr Ch Ch OUT	35
3rd Form: V Ch V Ch Br Ch Ch OUT	15
4th Form: V Pre Ch V Pre Ch Instr/Br (pre) Ch Ch OUT	13
5th Form: AABA	1
6th Form: Ch V CH Instr Br CH (Rondo)	0
"7th Form": AAAA (not included in Murphy 6 forms)	*8*
Other:	*28*
(Taken from "Murphy's Laws of Songwriting")	

Individual songs largely follow the above structural shapes allowing for minor variation such as number of verses, instrumental breaks and intro/outro. Where above forms aren't applicable to a song it is listed in the "Other" category with the form outlined in the following column. Generally Intro's/Instrumental breaks aren't included.

29 Songs feature a CODA - boxed below - many of those in 2nd form are ABABC

Album Title (year)	1st Form	2nd Form	3rd Form	4th Form	5th From	6th Form	"7th Form"	Other	
Pablo Honey (1993)		How Do You	Creep	Anyone Can Play Guitar	Reckoner* with CODA		Lurgee	You	(ABCABABB CAA)
The Bends (1995)		Thinking About You	Stop Whispering	Ripchord			The National Anthem	Blow Out	(ABAAA)
OK Computer (1997)		Planet Telex	Bones	Vegetable			Pyramid Song (half A for inst)	Paranoid Android	(ABABCCC DDDCC)
Kid A (2000)		High and Dry	My Iron Lung	Prove Yourself			Where I End and You Begin* with CODA	Exit Music (for a film)	AABACA
Amnesiac (2001)		Fake Plastic Trees* with CODA	Nice Dream (inst Br)	I Can't			Scatterbrain* with CODA	Fitter Happier	Poem (Piano A A1 A2 A)
Hail To The Thief (2003)		Bullet Proof … I Wish I Was	Sulk (inst Br)	The Bends			Videotape	Kid A	ABA¹BBCA²C
In Rainbows (2007)		Street Spirit (Fade Out)* with CODA	Let Down (inst Br)	Just* with CODA			Bloom	Tree-fingers	(Linear ambient)
The King of Limbs (2011)		Airbag* with inst CODA	No Surprises (inst Br)	Black Star			Give Up the Ghost (alt A last verse)	Pulk/Pull Revolving Doors	Poem/Rhythm Track
A Moon Shaped Pool (2016)		Subterranean Homesick Alien (no inst/ch3)	Lucky (inst Br)	Morning Bell				You and Whose Army	AA¹AA¹B* with CODA
		Karma Police* with CODA	Optimistic	Morning Bell/ Amnesiac				Dollars & Cents	ABCDE (over same chords)
		Electioneering* with inst CODA	I Might Be Wrong* with CODA	Bodysnatchers* With CODA not ch3				Like Spinning Plates* with CODA	AAB
		Climbing Up the Walls	We Suck Young Blood	Lotus Flower (no ch3)				2 + 2 = 5	AABB¹CC
		The Tourist	House of Cards	Burn the Witch (br after ch1)				Sit Down Stand Up* with CODA	AAAABC

Album Title (year)	1st Form	2nd Form	3rd Form	4th Form	5th From	6th Form	"7th Form"	Other	
		Everything In Its Right Place (starts with ch)	Morning Mr Magpie (Br post ch1)					Sail to the moon	AABAAC
		How To Disappear Completely (inst ch3)	Little By Little					There There* with CODA	ABABCCC
		In Limbo (inst ch3)						I Will* with CODA	ABAC
		Idioteque						15 Step	ABCBCDA[1]
		Motion Picture Soundtrack* with CODA						Weird Fishes/ Arpeggi* with CODA	AAAABCC
		Packt Like Sardines in a Crushed Tin Box						Jigsaw Falling into place* with CODA	ABBCBBAAB
		Knives Out						Feral	AABC
		Hunting Bears (Instrumental)						Codex	AABBABCA
		Life in a Glasshouse* With CODA						Decks Dark* with CODA	AABBAC
		Backdrifts (goes to v1 not ch3)						Desert Island Disk	AAABACA
		Go to sleep						Ful Stop* with CODA	AAAABBCC
		The Gloaming (no ch3)						Glass Eyes	AABBCDA
		A Punch Up at a Wedding						Identikit	AABBAA
		Myxamatosis						The Numbers	AAABCAAC[1]
		A Wolf at the Door (instr after ch1)						The Present Tense	ABCDADB
		Nude* with CODA (inst ch 2)							
		All I Need* with CODA							
		Faust Arp* with CODA							
		Seperator* with CODA							
		Daydreaming* with CODA							
		Tinker Tailor Solder SailorRich Man Poor Man Beggar Man Thief* with CODA							
		True Love Waits							

Appendix B

Birthday

Intro

Db		Bbm		Fm		Ab		x2

A
Blow out all the candles
Wave all the years goodbye
Leave the invitations
Stacked up on the side

Db		Bbm9		Fm		Ab		
Gb		Fm		Ab		Ab		
Db		Bbm9		Fm		Ab		
Gb		Fm		Ab		Ab		

B
Watch how your love in the ageing photograph
Keeps hold of your hand
Think of your mother who always listened
She would understand

Ebm		Ebm		F/A		Bbm	
Gb6		Gb6		F		F	
Ebm		Ebm		F/A		Bbm	
Gb6		Gb6		Ab		Ab7	

A1
Hear the ringing doorbell
Turn on the hallway light
Welcome in an old friend
"Please stay the night"

Db		Bbm9		Fm		Ab		
Gb		Db/F		Ab		Ab		
Db		Bbm9		Fm		Ab		
Gb		Gb/Ab		Db		Db		

Outro

Db		Bbm		Fm		Ab		x4
Db								

Appendix C

J M W Turner 'Snow Storm - Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth'
Exh 1842, Photo © Tate (Appendix C) CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0 (Unported)

Turner's 'Snowstorm…' was my selection when, in week 11 I was tasked by Angela Blacklaw with selecting an art card that represented my creative songwriting process. 'Finding a way through the fog' was how I described writing for my own artist project.

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