

Responsible Songwriting: Problems of Ethics and Negotiation
in Collaborative Autoethnographic Composition

by Alex Wilder

Introduction

There are five things to write songs about: I'm leaving you. You're leaving me. I want you. You don't want me. I believe in something. Five subjects, and twelve notes. For all that, we musicians do pretty well. —Elvis Costello¹

While this statement is clearly tongue-in-cheek, Costello points out an issue here that plagues popular music—a lack of diversity of subject matter. Take, for instance, the top three tracks on the Billboard Top 100 as of the time of this writing (April 4, 2017): “Shape of You” by Ed Sheeran, “That’s What I Like” by Bruno Mars, and “Something Just Like This” by The Chainsmokers and Coldplay.² All three tracks are, at some level or another, about love, sex, or romantic relationships. This trend is fairly consistent through the rest of the charts—a 2011 study of one thousand Billboard number one hits found that 658 were love songs. An additional 66 songs were so-called “anti-love songs”, falling into Costello’s category of “I’m leaving you”.³ Cumulatively, 72.4% of chart-toppers pertained to romantic and sexual relationships.

The effect of this thematic saturation is that we only hear about a very narrow range of experiences when we listen to popular music. While there is certainly diversity

¹ Elvis Costello, quoted in Bill DeMain, *In Their Own Words: Songwriters Talk About the Creative Process*. (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004), 11.

² “The Hot 100,” *Billboard.com*. Accessed 4 Apr. 2017. <http://www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100>

³ Gary Trust, “The Power Of Love: Analyzing The Hot 100's 1,000 No. 1s,” *Billboard.com*. February 23, 2011. <http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/472921/the-power-of-love-analyzing-the-hot-100s-1000-no-1s>

within the pop songwriting community, I would suggest that there are many people outside this realm who have gripping stories and points of view. Specifically in the realm of popular music, we could use some new voices.

Documentary songwriting is an autoethnographic, collaborative songwriting method that provides a potential solution to this problem. First developed by composer Malcolm Brooks and expounded in his 2013 dissertation “Autoethnography of a Composer with a New Composing Method,” documentary songwriting aims to “document the emotions of people’s experiences in songs and to express feelings in a way that only music can.”⁴ It generally follows an established process, as outlined here by Brooks:

- a. I [the musical guide] sit down with a person, listen to her tell of an experience, and type it verbatim into a laptop computer.
- b. Then I ask her to review the words on the screen and instruct me where to break up the sentences, so as to transform her spoken prose into free verse.
- c. I then ask her to read this free verse aloud as I record it on an Apple iPhone.
- d. Next, I ask her to sing the free verse through, even though no melody yet exists. I record this seemingly random singing of free verse on to the iPhone.
- e. Then we listen to the recording, and I help her detect the melodic and rhythmic patterns in her spoken and spontaneously sung words.
- f. Together, we expand these patterns into a complete, original song.⁵

While seemingly simple, these six steps entail a complex synthesis of ethnography, collaboration, and songwriting technique that can elicit emotionally impactful stories and turn them into meaningful, accessible songs. I know this because I have participated in and observed a great number of documentary songwriting sessions.

⁴ [Finish citation] <http://documentarysongwriter.org/wp/>

⁵ Malcolm Brooks, “Autoethnography of a Composer with a New Composing Method,” 2013: 9.

When Brooks was first developing his process in 2009, I was his student.⁶ After the release of his dissertation in 2013, we began working together as colleagues along with several other songwriters in exploring the benefits of documentary songwriting on popular song. What we have found since then is that although not all songs written using the method have or should have Top 40 potential, documentary song can be optimized for creating songs that fit standards of popular music in a given community. In this article, I hope to substantiate these findings through personal reflection and research.

For the purpose of this study, I will take popular music to mean accessible music—i.e. music that taps into a common cultural understanding and does not require specialized knowledge. If we then make accessibility a goal of documentary songwriting, a potential conflict appears: personal expression is balanced against the adherence to norms that accessibility often entails.

The goal of this study is therefore to provide potential solutions for the following questions: How can a musical guide ethically and accurately help a story source to represent their own story through popular song? Or, more broadly, how can a guide optimize documentary songwriting sessions in terms of depth of material, excellence of craft, and fulfillment for the participant? Finally, how can documentary songwriters negotiate a balance between these goals and the established standards of popular music? In this study, I aim to show that documentary songwriting, through its unique synthesis of collaboration, ethnography, and songwriting technique, provides a method of writing popular songs that can adapt the existing paradigm by sharing stories of real people.

⁶ Brooks, “Autoethnography of a Composer with a New Composing Method,” 115.

Furthermore, I wish to show that through a variety of techniques in ethnography, collaboration, and songwriting, documentary songwriters can make strides to write songs that share unconventional stories while fitting into the popular music genre.

In this document, I will introduce the reader to a number of fundamental concepts in documentary songwriting, share thoughts on how to apply the method to writing popular song, and bring up challenges relating to that application. The remainder of this section covers notes on terminology and the collaborative nature of the method. The following section provides practical steps for musical guides who wish to optimize documentary songwriting for writing pop. Lastly, I have included additional considerations that may be of use to musical guides.

Terminology

Given that this is an emerging field of composition, terminology is in constant development as new issues and revelations arise. However, Brooks has established a distinct set of terms with which to refer to the process. The person who tells the story is called the “story source.” This terminology is self-explanatory, but it should be noted that it leaves the degree of involvement of the participant up to those involved, ranging from literally providing the source material for the story, to having an equal hand in all parts of the compositional process. The person who leads the process is called the “musical guide,” as they are responsible with guiding the participant through the process.

This terminology is significant, as it does not restrict the label of “songwriter” or “composer” to one participant or the other. Instead, both participants are songwriters and composers, as they are both contributing to the creation of a song. Brooks and a number

of associates alternatively use the term “musical Sherpa” to describe the musical guide’s role, but I avoid this characterization because of cultural connotations that might obscure the intention of the role. With this terminology in mind, let us explore the reason behind these roles.

The Case for Collaboration

Why can’t the story source simply write a documentary song without a musical guide? After all, lack of songwriting experience does not diminish an individual’s ability to tell a compelling story. Additionally, the act of introducing additional people into the situation ostensibly increases the possibility that a song will not reflect the feelings of the story source accurately. This begs the question, then, of what good the musical guide does. Why collaborate?

Documentary songwriting is an inherently communicative medium: just as the purpose of telling a story is to convey an experience or feeling, this form of songwriting aims to do the same. Thus, to write a song based on a spoken story, a story must first be told. An active listener will help the story source to formulate their experiences in a compelling way.⁷ Attentive listening can elicit a greater depth of emotion from the story source, as well as more focused storytelling—traits that can lead to a more compelling song and a faster process.

⁷ Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, (Sage, 2011), 29.

Collaborative creative work is also more productive than individual work. The myth of the lone genius has long been debunked and scholars agree more than ever that working with others leads to greater progress.⁸ This is especially true in documentary songwriting, due to the amount of text accumulated. In a long story, especially one's own, the focal point can be hard to find. The crux of an experience that will come to define the song is sometimes hiding in plain sight, and it can take a second pair of eyes to recognize what it is. Going it alone can become a frustrating head game, and having other perspectives is often a great benefit.

Multiple songwriters also strengthen and clarify the message of a song simply by virtue of their cognitive differences. What makes sense to one person may be incomprehensible to another. By raising questions and having conversations about areas of misunderstanding, those areas can be subsequently modified or defended and increase the communicative ability of the song.

Not only will a song benefit from collaboration in its compositional elements, but it will also benefit in its distribution. As popular music scholar Joe Bennett writes, "When two or more songwriters collaborate, they will share a desire for their song to be heard by others; this is frequently economically-driven, but also born of a creative and artistic goal – to make an object that communicates emotionally."⁹ It is much easier to promote the work of one's team rather than oneself. The act of supporting a fellow songwriter by

⁸ Alfonso Montuori and Ronald E. Purser, "Deconstructing the Lone Genius Myth: Toward a Contextual View of Creativity." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, Vol 35, Issue 3 (1995): 69 – 112.

⁹ Joe Bennett, "Collaboration Songwriting: The Ontology of Negotiating Creativity in Popular Music Studio Practice." *Journal on the Art of Record Production* 5 (2011), 2.

distributing shared work feels much less self-centered than telling the world about one's own brand.

Perhaps the most salient reason for the importance of collaboration, however, is expertise. While every person is an expert on their own experiences, not everyone knows the mechanics of writing an accessible, enjoyable song. A musical guide will have studied melody, harmony, and rhythm, and have an extensive mental library of song models they can draw from in order to find solutions to creative problems that may arise during a songwriting session.

That being said, there is not, at the time of this writing, much in the way of training materials for musical guides. In the following section, I aim to synthesize and share a number of documentary songwriting principles that may be of use in guiding the process. I will maintain the focus on pop for the sake of clarity, but it is important to note that pop and other related popular genres are just one set of options for the direction of a documentary song. The musical guide and story source should make sure they agree which values they are pursuing both before and during the process.

Optimizing Documentary Songwriting for Pop Music:

Advice for Musical Guides

Finding a Story: Gathering Material

If we are to write successful documentary songs that break from the norms of popular music, it is essential that we create songs out of stories that are vivid and meaningful. How can a musical guide support a story source in telling such a story?

Furthermore, how can we gather these stories in a way that is accurate, thorough, and ethical?

Specifically in the process of listening to and guiding the telling of a story, there is much to learn from an ethnographical technique called *in-depth qualitative interviewing* or simply *depth interviewing*. The three core characteristics of depth interviewing, according to Herbert and Irene Rubin, are as follows:

1. The researcher is looking for rich and detailed information.... He or she is looking for examples, for experiences, for narratives and stories.
2. The interviewer does not give the interviewee specific answer categories; rather, the questions are *open ended*, meaning that the interviewee can respond any way he or she chooses, elaborating upon answers, disagreeing with the question, or raising new issues.
3. The questions that are asked are not fixed. The interviewer does not have to stick to a given set of questions or ask them in a given order; he or she can change wording or skip questions if they don't make sense at the time, or make up new questions on the spot to follow up new insights. He or she can pose a separate set of questions to different interviewees.¹⁰

These characteristics are particularly helpful in setting up appropriate expectations for a musical guide, specifically an attitude of flexibility toward the direction of the story. Stories often take turns that a guide will not be able to anticipate. Honoring those unexpected divergences is a key part of encouraging new and unique song material.

However, the above characteristics widen the scope of a given storytelling session in a potentially challenging way: without further criteria, the process remains hopelessly ambiguous and lacks direction. How can a musical guide avoid accumulating an

¹⁰ Herbert Rubin and Irene Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, (Sage, 2011): 29.

overwhelming amount of material and pursue the subjects that are more likely to create compelling songs?

Raymond L. Gorden provides a helpful general framework for answering this question in his article *Dimensions of the Depth Interview*:

The success of depth interviewing will, in the long run, depend upon having (a) a frame of reference which provides a theoretical bridge between the type of information needed and the techniques to be used in obtaining it; (b) interviewers trained in the skills and sensitivities needed to detect which dimension they are dealing with at a given moment as the interview progresses; and (c) interviewers trained in the skills and techniques applicable to each dimension.¹¹

In other words, we must define what kind of information we need, what kind of skills we need to get that information, and when and how to apply those techniques. I will focus on the first two desired definitions here: necessary information and necessary skills.

What Kind of Information Do We Need? One thing that working on many documentary songs has taught me is that a viable song can be created from an account of virtually any experience. A story about a daily walk to school can become an engaging up-tempo number; a tale of a lost cat can become a haunting yet uplifting spiritual meditation. However, not every account of an experience has the potential to be a compelling song. After much trial and error, my colleagues and I have found three salient criteria of a song-ready story. They are as follows:

1. The story source must be emotionally invested in the story.
2. The story must be personal in nature—i.e. it must come from the firsthand experiences of the story source.
3. The story must contain relevant, specific details and/or imagery.

¹¹ Raymond L. Gorden, “Dimensions of the Depth Interview,” in *Interviewing*, Vol. I, ed. Nigel Fielding, (Thousand Oaks, Calif; London: SAGE, 2003): 170.

The emotional investment component matters because something must be at stake if we are to engage our audience. Otherwise, why should they listen? This may explain the popularity of songs concerning romance, as it is often clear what the purpose is: an expression of joy stemming from being in love, a desperate plea for a lover to stay, a declaration of self-empowerment after a breakup, etc. However, emotional investment can be found in many areas of life.

Keeping stories personal is a way of ensuring a story is accurate and ethical. In *Qualitative Interviewing*, Herbert and Irene Rubin stress the importance of interviewing experts or authorities on a matter, and any person is an authority on their own experience.¹² Conveniently, a first-person narrator is a common characteristic in many popular songs.¹³

Imagery and specificity are important because a song that is too general will leave the audience disengaged. Details also provide an effective starting point to understanding what the song is about. We can always leave specifics out when they are unnecessary, but it is much easier to start the editing process with plenty of details than to enter back into the storytelling phase halfway through editing due to a lack of information.

Necessary Skills. Ethnographical skills are essential to achieving these three criteria. The first criterion—emotional investment—is the most significant, as it will facilitate the fulfillment of the next two criteria—personal narratives and detail. It is also the most difficult, as it requires emotional openness from the story source.

¹² Rubin and Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, 64.

¹³ Bennett, “Collaboration Songwriting: The Ontology Of Negotiating Creativity in Popular Music Studio Practice,” *Journal on the Art of Record Production* 5 (2011).

How can a musical guide facilitate emotional openness in a session? Documented tactics in depth interviewing range from being conscious of the tone of one's voice to considering when asking a question may threaten an interviewee's self-esteem.¹⁴ Most of these strategies relate to or can be distilled down to a single overarching theme: the importance of the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee.

Booth and Booth (1994) list and expand on many essential components of building and maintaining a relationship with an information source, such as ethical considerations, obtaining consent, establishing trust, building rapport, and withdrawing or finishing a study in which a relationship was formed.¹⁵ They also list a set of "flexible ground rules" that can help ease initial connection-building:

- Take your cue from the informant and be prepared to adapt according to their emotional needs and responses.
- Generally speaking, just listening is the best approach.
- Do not go in with a predetermined set of questions to ask or topics to discuss.
- Allow the informant to dictate what and how much is talked about.
- Do not feel pressured to record; you can always return to points again later.
- Any data collected at the first meeting should be regarded as a bonus.¹⁶

With these principles in mind and an emphasis on the relationship with the story source, the musical guide will more likely find emotional engagement.

The ease of making and strengthening a relationship, however, is not entirely dependent upon the skill of the interviewer. Having cultural context in common with the

¹⁴ Rubin and Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, 36. Gorden, "Dimensions of the Depth Interview," 171.

¹⁵ Tim Booth and Wendy Booth, "The Use of Depth Interviewing with Vulnerable Subjects: Lessons from a Research Study of Parents with Learning Difficulties," *Social Science & Medicine*, Volume 39, Issue 3 (1994): 415-424.

¹⁶ Booth and Booth, "The Use of Depth Interviewing with Vulnerable Subjects," 418.

interviewee, for instance, also greatly facilitates rapport. Conversely, lacking a shared cultural or linguistic background can prove a significant setback. For example, when I spent two weeks writing documentary songs with an American colleague in Barcelona, Spain, it became immediately apparent that our story sources were less comfortable because Spanish was not our first language. Additionally, I found I was far less able to ease our story source's anxiety and ask productive follow-up questions due to my lack of experience with Spanish customs. While this is a difficult challenge to address even with a serious investment of time, it may aid documentary songwriters in choosing story sources to approach.

When a story source is comfortable and emotionally invested in the process, they will also become more likely to make personal statements. The more intimate the relationship, I have found, the easier it is for the story source to center their story on their own lives and perceptions.

Similarly, the amount of relevant detail a musical guide can gather depends heavily on the quality of the relationship with the story source. Knowing the story source well, as well as having common cultural context, will make it much easier to tell whether or not a detail adds value or nuance to a story.

Aside from relying on rapport with the story source, a musical guide can elicit detail through the way they ask their questions. Simply put, specific questions yield specific answers.¹⁷ For instance, if a story source tells his musical guide about an altercation he had with a friend at the supermarket, the musical guide can, instead of

¹⁷ Rubin and Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing*, 69.

asking, “How did you feel during the incident?” ask, “What were you feeling physically, standing there in Aisle 4?” There is a subtle but critical difference between signaling the desired level of detail and leading a story source toward a specific answer through word choice. The musical guide should therefore be careful to avoid loaded language.

While all these techniques can be of great use, they are not all necessary in order to create a viable song. My two weeks in Barcelona, for instance, yielded two songs that were well received by their story sources. However, incorporating these strategies can enhance the story gathering process, make for more vivid stories, and increase fulfillment for the story source.

Refining the Story: Editing

While compelling source material is essential to the success of a documentary song, the process of translation from story to lyric is equally important. In this section I will contend that the goals of editing a documentary pop song are, first and foremost, accuracy and ethics, followed by clarity of message and structure, a narrative arc, and what I will call “singability”—the quality of being enjoyable to sing.

I place accuracy and ethics at the top of this list because if the lyrics of a documentary pop song do not adequately reflect the experience of the story source, and the story source does not feel as though they and their story have been treated with respect, the entire premise of the song’s creation is rendered meaningless. I also place a priority on ethics because the two roles in documentary songwriting can lead to uncomfortable power dynamics if handled incorrectly. The bottom line is that the two parties are equal partners in the editing process. The musical guide may have a clearer

conceptual framework for the process, and often more songwriting expertise, so they may feel as though they should have authority over the process. However, the story source provides their own personal expertise because they alone know what it felt like to live the story they are telling. Without mutual respect between parties, the songwriting process breaks down.¹⁸

Clarity is a key part of both storytelling and popular music, and should be held at high value in the editing process. In his handbook on songwriting, Stephen Citron devotes the first section of the first chapter to having a clear, specific message, or “concept.” “Concept is the distillation of what the song will say,” writes Citron. “The clearer your concept, the more professional your song.”¹⁹ If we look for examples in the pop world, we can see a clear concept in nearly every number one hit: songs ranging from The Beatles’ “She Loves You” (1964) to Kanye West’s “Gold Digger” (2005) have a main message that is succinctly stated and displayed in the title. That message is also sung repetitively in the chorus, which points out the importance of structure. Since pop music, like spoken stories, is not written down, the form must clearly drive home the song’s concept. This is most commonly done through verse-chorus form, in which choruses state the main message and verses support and lead back into the choruses.²⁰

¹⁸ Walter Carter, *The Songwriter’s Guide to Collaboration*, (Writer’s Guide Publications, 1988): 56–59.

¹⁹ Stephen Citron, *Songwriting: A Complete Guide to the Craft*, (New York: Limelight Editions, 2008): 1.

²⁰ John Covach, “Form in Rock Music,” in *Engaging Music: Essays in Music Analysis*, ed. D. Stein (Oxford University Press, 2005): 65–76.

A strong narrative arc draws an audience in and leads them through an emotional journey over the course of a song. This can be done by structuring each verse as a distinct vignette that illustrates the song's message, as an extended story that unfolds over the course of a few verses, verses that each unveil a different aspect of the message, etc. If the story source has provided substantial detail, it is likely one of these formats will be possible.

Regardless of how moving lyrics may be, the song will fail if they are not singable. This is one of the great challenges of documentary songwriting, as the words we speak are not always the easiest to sing. This is especially true in academic communities, where inordinately expansive vocabularies loom large. Songwriting books often contain helpful tips on which types of syllables create issues, but many issues can be avoided simply by reducing the number of words per line.²¹

Given the amount of careful work that goes into an interview with a story source, it can be difficult and even emotional to eliminate words and lines. However, conciseness is necessary. Pop music is not known for its verbosity—the song “Barbara Ann” by the Beach Boys, for instance, contains less than 40 different words. “Provide just enough details to help the listener picture the singer's world and situation,” Malcolm Brooks writes. “An autoethnographic song portrays the ‘group’ or ‘ethno-’ or situational context

²¹ See, for example: Stephen Citron, *Songwriting: A Complete Guide to the Craft*, (New York: Limelight Editions, 2008): 125-127.

through the experience of the singer. Since songs are short, providing full detail is not possible. Let the listener's imagination fill in the blanks."²²

If implementing these four goals seems daunting, we can frame the editing process as a search for a central message and details that support that message, making sure that lyrics remain accurate and singable along the way. Even within this framework, however, it can be unclear where a team of documentary songwriters should start in the editing process. In his original methodology, Brooks (as musical guide) asks his story source to break up the transcript of their spoken story into workable lines before singing.²³ Over the course of many sessions, my colleagues and I have found success expanding the initial editing process to include a "highlight-and-delete" system in which songwriters sift through the story source's words together, highlight all potentially relevant material, copy and paste the whole text into a new document (to preserve the original), and then delete all the un-highlighted text in the new document. Highlight-and-delete is much faster than copying and pasting individual desired lines, and can be repeated multiple times if necessary. In each newly pared-down iteration of the story, the general concept of the song will often appear with increasing clarity. Consequent reordering and singing-through will give additional shape to the story.²⁴

Singing the Story: Musical Composition

²² Malcolm Brooks, "Autoethnography of a Composer with a New Composing Method," 148–149.

²³ Malcolm Brooks, "Autoethnography of a Composer with a New Composing Method," 2013: 9.

²⁴ For further information on lyrical selection and structure, see Appendix C of Brooks, "Autoethnography of a Composer with a New Composing Method," 147–149.

Even the most touching, well-structured lyric will get a song nowhere without music that expresses it in an enjoyable and memorable way. Musical composition is a broad field, spanning techniques in melody, harmony, rhythm, arrangement, production, and more, and consequently this section will only touch on some general objectives and techniques for working on the musical side of a documentary song.

What makes a pop song a success? In my experience, pop songs are accessible (the music must be easily understood), memorable (identifiable, catchy, and attention-capturing), expressive (the music must embody or give meaning to the lyric), and enjoyable to sing or play.

How does one make music accessible—easy to understand to a large plurality of people? An essential part of communication is putting ideas into terms that others will understand—framing new ideas in relation to preexisting concepts. For example, Carolyn Ellis, an early proponent of autoethnography, had to present the emerging field as it related to ethnography, even though she had strong disagreements with the way ethnography was often conducted. In Ellis' words, "If you want to be successful, you have to connect to the categories that are already there. You have to connect to something that people identify with rather than starting with completely new categories."²⁵ This principle applies especially in the realm of popular songwriting. For instance, music theorist Joe Bennett writes "songwriters create meaning by choosing particular invariants from song to song from a culturally understood but necessarily limited menu."²⁶ In other

²⁵ Marcin Kafar and Carolyn Ellis, "Autoethnography, Storytelling, and Life as Lived: A Conversation Between Marcin Kafar and Carolyn Ellis," *Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej* 10, no. 3 (2014): 129.

²⁶ Bennett, "Collaborative Songwriting," 2.

words, part of writing a song is establishing creative boundaries, and it takes considerable musical knowledge to determine which boundaries are important to maintain, and which can be broken at a given time.

It can feel overwhelming, however, to try to keep track of a seemingly infinite number of norms. In his article, Bennett provides us with a long list of these constraints, including a first-person protagonist, repeating titular choruses, an introduction of twenty seconds or less, 4/4 time, and others, but it cannot possibly be exhaustive.²⁷ How is the musical guide to know whether a norm exists and whether or not it can or should be broken?

One way to conceptualize this challenge is to use musical models. As a mode of evaluation, we can examine a characteristic of a documentary song and see if a version of that characteristic exists in a well-known song. If the characteristic does exist, we can use the song as a generative model. In other words, we can analyze what other conditions in the song may have led to its success. The concept of models can be applied to melodies, rhythms, arrangements, and other areas.

Not only can musical models facilitate the process of making music accessible, they can also be a resource for making music memorable. Here I define memorable music as having a strong identity, multiple catchy phrases or “hooks,” and enough development to capture the attention of a listener. To craft a memorable identity, musical guides can use Kirby Ferguson’s “remix” strategy—“copy, transform, combine”—to find multiple

²⁷ Bennett, “Collaborative Songwriting,” 2.

production models and combine them to form new sounds.²⁸ In creating memorable phrases, or hooks, in a song (a practice that is increasingly necessary in today's pop for every section of a song—introduction, verse, chorus, bridge, etc.) a musical guide can compare melodic material from the story source's sing-throughs to proven hooks and make alterations accordingly.²⁹

The efficacy of hooks can be assessed by way of a simple memory test. If, the day after a songwriting session, the writers have a difficult time remembering how one part of the song went, chances are it is not a hook yet. Finally, musical models can provide useful information on how to develop a song at the breathless pace of modern pop. These days, pop producers usually introduce a new sound or transition into a new section of a song around every seven seconds. Musical guides should be aware of this need, although it may not be relevant until the late stages of the songwriting process (or after).

In addressing expressivity, models become less relevant. Fortunately, one of Brooks' findings in writing his dissertation was that "All parts of a song—melody, rhythm, chorus, verses—may lie within a spoken story."³⁰ Documentary songwriters can often look to the origin of the process to make music that fits that story. Natural speaking rhythms often become tempos, syllabic stresses indicate where to draw out certain notes, and spoken inflection can become musical emphasis.

²⁸ Kirby Ferguson, "Embrace the Remix," *TED* video, 1:05, June 2012.

²⁹ Eric Beall, *The Billboard Guide to Writing and Producing Songs that Sell*, (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 2009): 238.

³⁰Malcolm Brooks, "Autoethnography of a Composer with a New Composing Method," 2013: 119.

Similarly, finding out what is enjoyable to sing often can be born out of the generative process of singing through the text, even before it is fully edited. In fact, finding what feels good to sing can inform the editing process just as much as considering the meaning of words.

Additional Considerations

Additional Musical Guides

Even when a musical guide has significant training, they can easily be stymied by the multitude of options a documentary song presents. For this reason, it is often advantageous to have a team of two or more musical guides for one story source. I have found this particularly helpful, most notably in the summer of 2016 when two songwriters and I led documentary songwriting workshops in which we were given two hours or less to complete a portion of a song from the story of an audience member. We established roles—I worked most directly with the story source, asking questions and directing the session, Nora typed the story source's words verbatim, and Will focused on finding phrases that were pleasurable to sing. In addition to these roles, we were all focused on supporting each other in maintaining progress toward a product. Any time I was at a loss, Nora or Will would come to my rescue with an idea to move the song forward. Having a high-functioning team takes pressure off each guide individually.

Of course, having multiple guides can lead to dysfunction if there is tension between guides. The focus of every session should be on the story source and the story

itself. Any disturbances that take away from that focus—struggles for control, for instance, among a host of other possible interpersonal issues—will detract from the process.

Ethics of Involvement

Even in an ideal documentary songwriting session in which all parties are present, motivated, comfortable, and getting along, staying true to a story source's experience is a challenge. However, it has been my experience that the conditions of documentary songwriting sessions are often not ideal—specifically due to lack of time with the story source.

What to do when a story source is not present for the entire process? Clearly, the story source must be involved for the telling of the story, but once the editing process begins any number of things can happen. Sometimes the time window is too short (as with my time in Barcelona), sometimes the story source is at a stage in life in which prolonged work is too taxing, and sometimes a documentary songwriter may want to write a song from the transcript of an interview, in which case the story source could be deceased.³¹ In these cases, the musical guide must take on more influence, as well as a great deal more caution with it.

Without a story source to check in with, a musical guide must rely on their own intuition, experience, and moral compass to make decisions about the direction of a given song. One ethnographical tactic for mitigating personal biases is a process of making oneself aware of these personal predilections. Ethnographers Herbert and Irene Rubin

³¹ Malcolm Brooks, "Autoethnography of a Composer with a New Composing Method," 2013: 132–146.

suggest listing out personal traits before any ethnographical endeavor to become aware of privilege one has that may affect input on a project.³² As sociologist Bob Blauner puts it, “To be a medium for the voices of other people, you have to suppress your own.”³³

Still, total suppression of personal traits is not desirable. After all, documentary songwriting should be a collaborative effort. A musical guide often brings a great deal of expertise to a songwriting session, and part of their contribution is an experienced, distinct voice. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz warns of the dangers of being *too* timid about influencing a work, calling these fears of subjectivity “rather exaggerated anxieties” and emphasizes the need for “signature” (the style of a given author or artist) in order to make accounts fun to read (or in our case, listen to.)³⁴ While documentary songwriters must take ethics seriously, we cannot stop writing songs for fear of misconstruing a message.

Conclusion

The great challenge of documentary songwriting is balancing myriad factors at play. Being a musical guide entails managing the thoughts and feelings of both the story source and oneself, the relationship between the two parties, and, in the case of pop documentary songwriting, the values and constraints of a genre. Still, although this role is difficult, the hard work in negotiation and ethics are where documentary songwriting draws its strength. Pop music lacks diversity specifically because questions of being

³² Rubin and Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing*, 72-73.

³³ Bob Blauner, “Problems of Editing ‘First-Person’ Sociology,” in *Interviewing*, Vol. IV, ed. Nigel Fielding, (Sage, 2003): 267-272.

³⁴ Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1988): 9–10.

faithful to a real-life experience go unasked. If a new generation of songwriters devotes themselves to asking hard questions, we could begin to see a popular music that reflects the lives of those who listen to it.

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