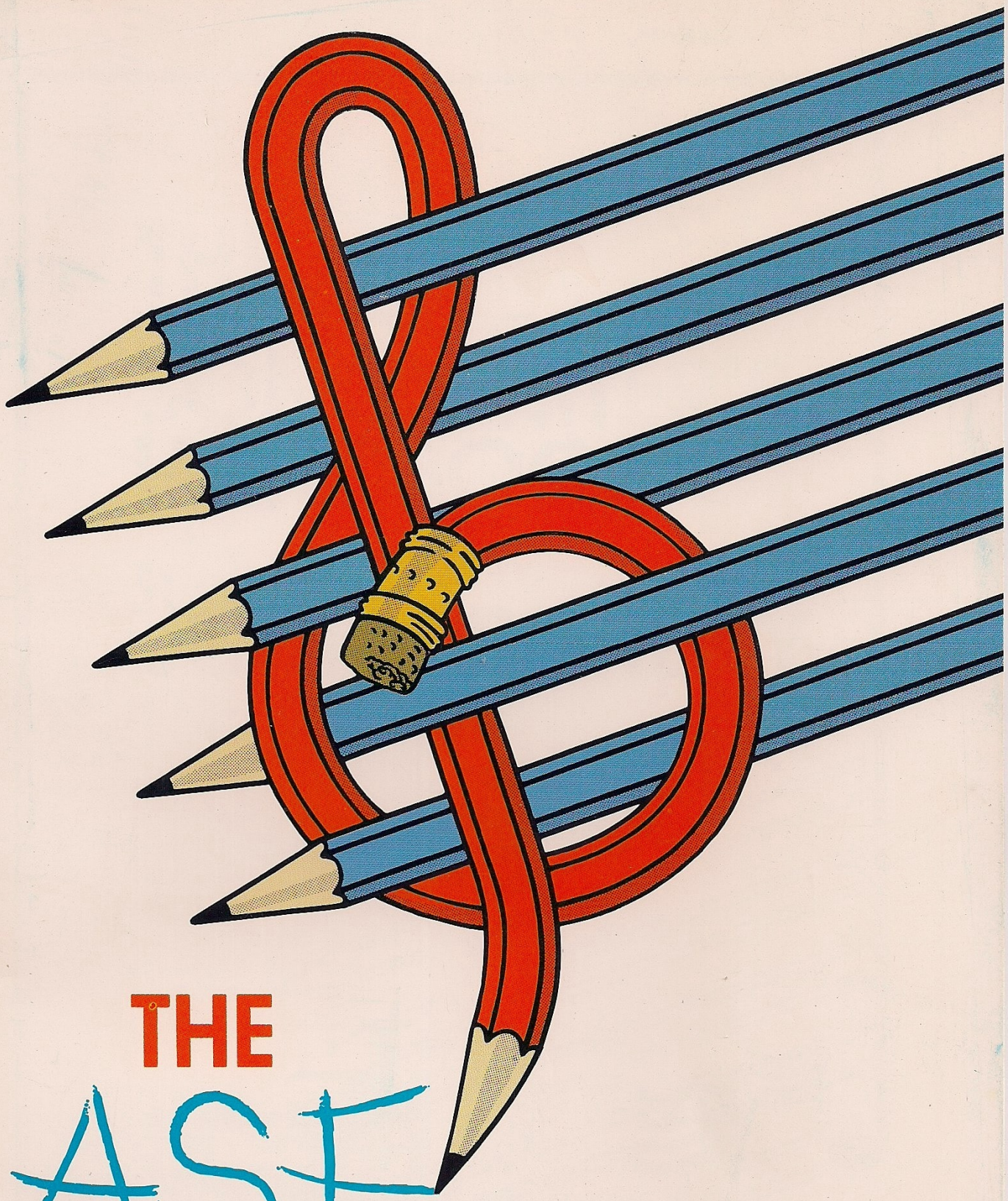

# THE ASF SONGWRITER'S HANDBOOK

BY JOHN BRAHENY

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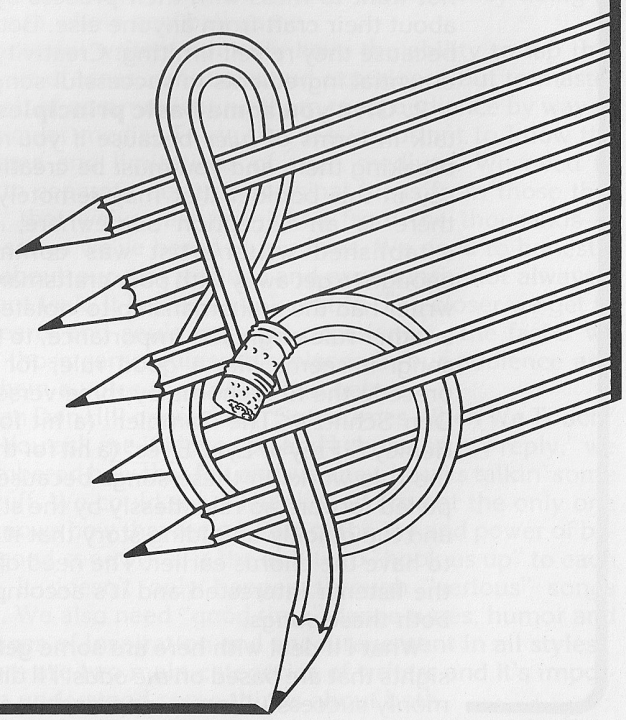
# THE AMERICAN SONG FESTIVAL SONGWRITER'S HANDBOOK

BY

## JOHN BRAHENY



# THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

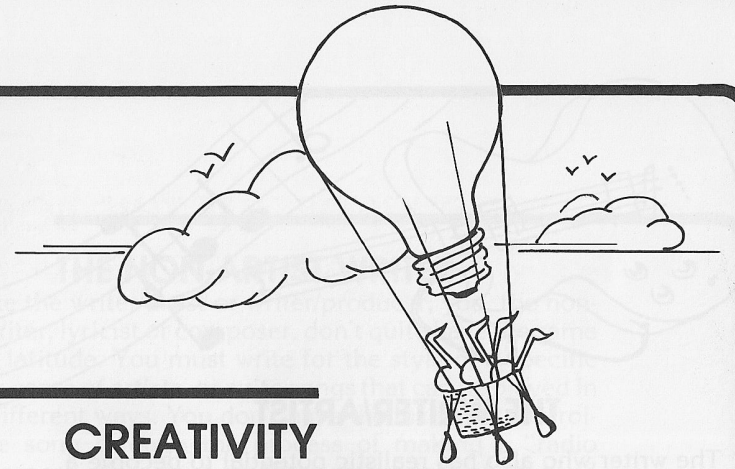
If you didn't feel you had a flair for lyrics and/or music already, you wouldn't have entered the American Song Festival and wouldn't be reading this now. I don't believe you can get talent from a book but I do know that there are a lot of tricks of the trade that can help that talent blossom a lot sooner than it would in the "school of hard knocks." I hope this book will help you in the following ways.

**1. Show you some options** that may not have occurred to you. Maybe you never knew anyone who wrote songs, or if you did, you never asked them how they did it. In over 400 interviews that my partner, Len Chandler, and I have had with music industry people, including many hit songwriters and producers, we've discovered that there are *lots* of successful ways to write great songs. New writers tend to either want to have a simple ABC formula for writing a successful song or to only trust their instincts and not want to mess with their process by learning anything about their craft from anyone else. Both are a big mistake because they're self-limiting. Creativity *and* craft are both essential ingredients in successful songs.

**2. Give you some basic principles to go by.** I hate to talk in terms of *rules* because if you're creative you'll be breaking them and you *must* be creative. For everything I say in this booklet that may remotely sound like a rule, there is an exception somewhere, either because an established writer/artist was commercially powerful enough to get away with poor craftsmanship or because the writer had the craftsmanship to violate one rule in favor of another rule of greater importance, to fulfill the needs of a song. It seems like a good rule, for example, never to precede the first chorus by three verses, until you look at Don Schlitz's "The Gambler" (a hit for Kenny Rogers) or Henley & Frey's "Lyin' Eyes" (a hit for the Eagles). Breaking the rule works in these songs because the listener is propelled forward so relentlessly by the strong visual imagery and the quickly unfolding story that it would be a mistake to have the chorus earlier. The need of the song is to keep the listener interested and it's accomplished brilliantly in both these songs.

What I'll deal with here are some generalizations and insights that are based on *the odds*. I'll discuss the most commonly successful forms, approaches and considerations.





# CREATIVITY

We all have an innate ability to create, to think our own original thoughts. We all share basic human emotions. Those of us who want to express them in words and music find that, at the very least, it's a kind of therapy. It feels good to get it out somehow. Whether or not our song ever gets recorded it's had value for us. We should write anything and everything we feel like writing. However, at the point where we decide to communicate those ideas and emotions to others and we want to make money doing it, we're in a whole new ball game.

Successful writers not only have the ability to tap that reservoir of ideas, emotions and experience but to master the craft of communicating them to an audience by way of a particular media. To do that it's important to know the freedoms and limitations of each medium. We need to learn to separate our truly original ideas from those that aren't, that we've just mimicked from the thousands of other songs we've heard in our lives. We need to honestly write about our real feelings and experience, not always a pleasant task. It leaves us vulnerable. The closer we get to our hearts and souls and real experiences, the faster we reach those same vulnerable places in our audience and give them a voice they never had before.

When Dan Hill opened his "Sometimes When We Touch" with "You ask me if I love you and I choke on my reply," we remembered how that felt and we knew he was talkin' some *real* stuff. We could say, "Thank God I'm not the only one who knows how that feels." Part of the joy and power of being a good songwriter is the ability to "hook us up" to each other. It doesn't only happen through "serious" songs either. We also need "good time" dance tunes, humor and messages of inspiration and encouragement in all styles.

There are two main categories of writers and it's important to understand some things about both.

## THE WRITER/ARTIST

The writer who also has realistic potential to become a recording artist has a little more latitude in his or her songwriting. That writer must have a command of the principles involved in commercial songwriting because it's still necessary for a record company to have marketable hit singles on each album the artist releases. However, the appeal of a writer/artist is in his/her personal viewpoint and style. If we as an audience like the style and like who we perceive the artist to be, we allow for more flexibility in the songwriting. We buy the albums and read the lyrics as we listen. We experience the artist more intimately and completely as we listen to an entire album. So we don't care if the song is five minutes long or if he/she makes personal references that may take us a little longer to decipher. We're *into* that artist and are willing to get more involved. We accept and expect a certain amount of experimentation. The Beatles' "Baby You Can Drive My Car," "Eleanor Rigby" and "I Am The Walrus" were all quite experimental and different from each other, but we accepted them, didn't we?

So how do you know if you have a realistic potential to be a writer/artist? You need the following ingredients:

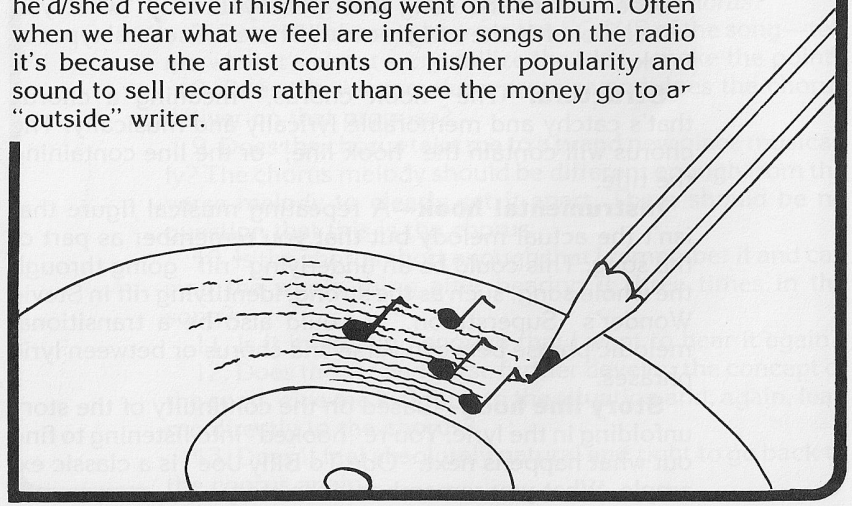
1. You need to be an excellent songwriter, totally in command of your craft.
2. You need to have a unique, identifiable sound or style. When a listener turns on the radio and hears you, you should be instantly recognizable.
3. You need to want it badly enough to put up with long hours of rehearsal and live performance, grueling road tours, interpersonal hassles with musicians, producers, managers, agents, etc., and probably a lower standard of living than you'd like until you're an established artist. Then you'll have to deal with the loss of your privacy.
4. You need to *love* to perform. There will be many times when it's the only thing to make you continue.



## THE NON-ARTIST WRITER

Unlike the writer/artist or writer/producer, you, the non-artist writer, lyricist or composer, don't quite have the same kind of latitude. You must write for the style of a specific artist or genre of artists, or write songs that can be played in many different ways. You don't have the luxury of controlling the song through the process of making a "radio ready" record. You must go through barriers of "second guessers." If you want publishers to be interested in a song it's going to need to be one that they instantly see commercial value in. It must be immediately accessible on a primary level. They shouldn't be able to say, "What the hell is this writer talking about?" It should be a song that needs no defense or explanation. Often, publishers are harder to please than producers. Their credibility is at stake every time they play that song for someone, so they tend to be more conservative in what they want to make a commitment to sell.

The song must be as good as or better than what that producer will hear from some of the world's best writers. When the publisher pitches the song to a producer whose artist is also a writer it obviously must be better than anything that artist has been able to write for that project. Otherwise, there's no reason for the writer/artist to give up the royalties he'd/she'd receive if his/her song went on the album. Often when we hear what we feel are inferior songs on the radio it's because the artist counts on his/her popularity and sound to sell records rather than see the money go to an "outside" writer.



# THE CRAFT

You have a melody going around in your head but you can't make your voice hit the notes you hear and you don't know how to play an instrument so that you can show it to someone else. It involves learning a craft, just as you learned to talk, read and write. Knowing how to talk doesn't mean you're automatically able to make a moving speech and being able to carry a tune doesn't make you a pro singer. Learning to write good songs, though you may have a natural talent, also involves learning a craft so that you can *effectively* communicate all those great ideas and feelings.

## TITLES

A title should, if possible, be interesting in itself and, as a practical consideration, should appear in the chorus or another position where it's repeated enough for a potential record buyer to be able to identify the song.

## HOOKS

One of the words you'll hear most frequently in the songwriting biz is "hook." It's been variously described as "what reaches out of the song and grabs you" and "what you remember after the song is over." There are several types of hooks:

**Structural**—The "hook chorus," meaning a chorus that's catchy and memorable lyrically and musically. The chorus will contain the "hook line," or the line containing the title.

**Instrumental hook**—A repeating musical figure that isn't the actual melody but that you remember as part of the song. This could be an underlying "riff" going through the whole song, such as the strong, identifying riff in Stevie Wonder's "Superstition." It could also be a transitional melodic phrase between verse and chorus or between lyric phrases.

**Story line hook**—Based on the continuity of the story unfolding in the lyric. You're "hooked" into listening to find out what happens next. "Ode To Billy Joe" is a classic example. What you remember is the story.



## FORM

One of the most valuable tools is a knowledge of form. Again, I want to stress that all this information is meant to be a guide. Don't fall into the trap of thinking these are absolutes or rigid parameters. *There are many, many variations* that *work*. Some of the most important hits are those that broke new ground by daring to stretch out. Hopefully you'll get a good idea of what can be effective and why the odds are better for getting a song on the radio if you keep some guidelines in mind.

## A SAMPLE CHECKLIST

1. Is the opening line one that will get me, the listener, interested? Grab my attention?
2. Does the first verse put me in a mood or setting—does it give me a picture of where I am and who I'm with? Who I'm talking to?
3. Does it set up a problem or conflict that makes me curious about what's going to happen?
4. Does it create a character or situation I can identify or sympathize with?
5. Is a second verse immediately needed to accomplish these objectives? If so, is there enough continuity, visual imagery, musical interest and/or anything else happening to maintain interest until the chorus comes? (Most songs have a chorus.)
6. Does the verse lead me directly to *the chorus*?
7. Does the chorus show me the FOCUS of the song—tell me what it's about—crystallize the idea—make the point?
8. Does the verse make a promise and does the chorus deliver on that promise?
9. Does the chorus take me to a brand new place musically? The chorus melody should be different enough from the verse melody to clearly set it apart. There should be no question that this is the chorus.
10. Is the chorus short enough that I remember it and can sing the whole thing after hearing it three times in the song?
11. Is it interesting enough that I want to hear it again?
12. Does the second verse further develop the concept of the song, give me insight into the situation and, again, lead me directly to the chorus?
13. Does it feel absolutely natural and right to go back to the chorus again?

## BRIDGE

If there's been a lot of musical repetition *within* the verses and choruses, or if there's a need lyrically to depart from the time and place established in the song and take another point of view, perhaps to express a philosophical overview, you need a bridge. Using totally different musical and lyrical content, the bridge is designed to grab the listener's attention once more.

After the bridge you assess the length of time it's taken to get that far. If you're close to three minutes, and you've said what you need to say in the verses you could end with a final chorus. If you still have more time or haven't "wrapped up" the song yet you'd go to another verse, then end with the chorus. Obviously there are a lot of variations on this scenario.

## COMMON SONG FORMS

There is no one *formula* but a lot of *forms* and variations that work. In discussing these forms, the first melodic section is "A," the next new melodic section is "B," the third is "C," etc. Here are some of the most common:

---

A—Verse
A—Verse
B—Bridge
A—Verse

This is known as the "classic" song form and many hits today continue to use it. The repeated "hook line" or "title line" occurs in either the first line of the verse (Lennon & McCartney's "Yesterday") or the last line (Billy Joel's "Just The Way You Are"). The bridge may or may not contain the title line and is different musically from the verses.

---

A—Verse
A—Verse
B—Chorus
A—Verse
B—Chorus
B—Chorus

OR

A—Chorus
B—Verse
A—Chorus
B—Verse
A—Chorus

Two of the most common forms. The option to begin the song with two verses or with the chorus, or to repeat the chorus at the end, depends on the lyric content, tempo and length of the song when finished.



A—Verse
B—Chorus
A—Verse
B—Chorus
C—Bridge
B—Chorus

OR

A—Verse
B—Chorus
A—Verse
C—Bridge
B—Chorus
B—Chorus

OR

A—Chorus
B—Verse
A—Chorus
B—Verse
C—Bridge
A—Chorus

These variations which include the bridge are all very common. Bridges almost invariably occur in the second half of the song because they're used to rekindle musical interest by breaking the established pattern.

---

A—Verse
B—Transition
C—Chorus
A—Verse
B—Transition
C—Chorus
B—Transition
C—Chorus

In recent years new forms have emerged due to their successful use by groups such as the Bee Gees, Foreigner, etc., in which there is a "B" section with music that is different from the verse and chorus but is not a bridge. Musically, it's usually constructed in a way that heightens the tension and sense of expectation leading to the chorus. Since it usually contains the same lyric information every time (but not necessarily) it's sometimes thought of as part of the chorus, though it doesn't usually have the same "release" or "hook" feeling of the actual chorus. It's easier to think of it as a "transitional" section.

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Instrumental sections can be very effective, either as a short 2 to 4 bar transition or as an instrumental version of the chorus, verse or bridge. It offers our mind a short vacation from listening to lyrics and renews our interest.

## BALANCE

Form is one of our most important tools. Predictability is important, but so is surprise. To be able to accomplish both creatively it's important to strike a balance between these requirements:

1. The audience must not lose track of the main melodic theme by being presented with too many different consecutive melodic sections.

2. In choosing a form, don't preclude radio play with excessive length (2½ to 4 minutes, with the odds better at the short end). Those getting away with long songs are usually self-contained, established acts.

3. Transitional sections between verse and chorus, whether they're instrumental or contain lyrics, should *feel* like they're leading toward the "hook chorus" regardless of how long they are.

4. Audience interest should be constantly rekindled. One of the most important reasons for forms with recurring segments is to offer the listener enough repetition to make him/her remember, though not enough to induce boredom. The reason it's hard to make rules about how much is "too much" is that there are different audiences for different styles of music and different mediums. A good illustration is that disco music, which doesn't seem too repetitious when you're dancing to it, may suddenly get boring when you're just listening, unless it has a lot of melodic variety or lyric interest.

As a songwriter learning your craft, it's important, like all great artists before you, to spend some time analyzing the music of the writers you respect and see what kind of creative problem-solving they used. A valuable exercise is to write new lyrics to a current hit, using the form of the hit as a pattern, then write a new melody to it. It's a great way to give yourself a repertoire of forms.

## CONSTRUCTING A CHORUS

Keep a chorus short and spare. Practically anyone should be able to memorize it after hearing it three times in the song.

Most choruses are 2 or 4 lines long, but that's not a rule. Some are 3 lines, some 5, some 8 (it depends on what you call a line). The bottom line is that it feels right and is easily remembered.

The most powerful positions for the title or hook line are the first line in the chorus and last line. Anytime a line is repeated it should be your title or hook line, otherwise this repeated line will *seem* like the hook line even if it isn't.

### SOME VARIATIONS:

**1. Repeat same line 4 times**—tends to get too monotonous, be careful! (Ex., "Le Freak," the Chic hit by Bernard Edwards and Nile Rodgers.)

**2. 1st and 3rd line the same, 2nd and 4th lines different**—offers the possibility of having a "payoff" strong line to end the chorus. The last line in the chorus is a very strong position and there are high expectations for it to be powerful and satisfying. (Example: "I Fall To Pieces," the Country classic by Hank Cochran and Harlan Howard.)

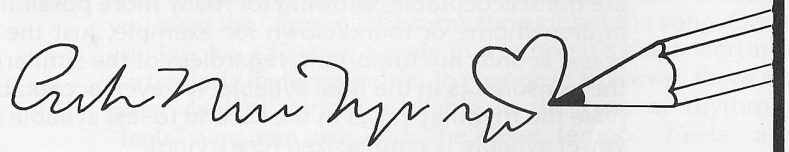
**3. First 3 lines the same, 4th line different**—has some of the risk of the first variation and the advantage of the second variation. The last line better be powerful. (Example: "Hit Me With Your Best Shot," the Pat Benatar hit by Eddie Schwartz.)

**4. All four lines different**—doesn't risk monotony, doesn't set up as strong an expectation for the last line position. It's more difficult to remember and therefore demands more simplicity. (Example: Smokey Robinson's "Being With You.")

**5. The 1st or last part of each line is repeated**—this is one of the oldest and most common structures, particularly in rock and R&B. It goes back to "call and response" songs in primitive tribal music, as well as Gregorian chants. (Example: "Fame," the Irene Cara hit by Dean Pitchford and Michael Gore.)

**6. The 1st and last line the same, 2nd and 3rd different**—gives you a chance to repeat the hook line at the beginning and end. (Example: "Could I Have This Dance," the Anne Murray hit by Wayland Holyfield and Bob House.

The chorus usually has the same lyrics every time. Again, this is a concession to the ease of an audience to learn and participate in the song. *This is not a rule*, but you should have a good reason to change the content of an established chorus. There may be enough of the chorus repeated to allow repetition and still vary part of the chorus each time (variation #5).



## RHYME

There are two major reasons why rhyme is important. One, it helps people to learn and remember your song. Two, rhyme is *expected*. Ninety-nine per cent (I'm guessing) of all hit songs rhyme. When a publisher or producer sees or hears a lyric that doesn't rhyme it tells him/her that

you're a lazy craftsman. Most songs have a lyric meter that creates a rhyme expectancy at the end of a line. As an audience our brains begin to search for that rhyming word once the rhyme scheme has been established. We get ready to hear it, so when we do we store it much more easily and recall it faster the next time.

**RHYME SCHEMES:**

**1st & 2nd** rhyme, **3rd & 4th lines** rhyme

**1st & 3rd, 2nd & 4th lines** rhyme

Just **2nd & 4th lines** rhyme

**All 4 lines** have the same rhyme—be careful of this one because it sometimes gets monotonous and has a tendency to draw attention to itself.

Be consistent with your rhyme schemes. Use the same rhyme scheme for *all* the verses and possibly a different one in the chorus and/or bridge.

**Don't** invert the natural order of the words in order to achieve a rhyme. Example: "About my love you don't need to worry," instead of "You don't need to worry about my love."

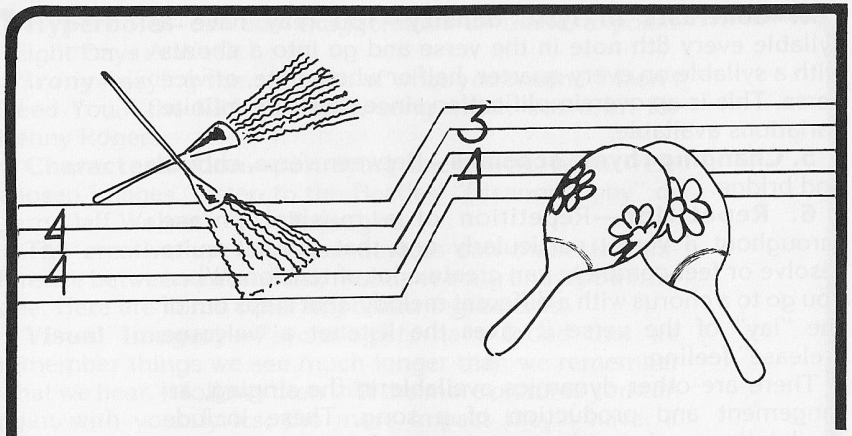
**Don't** use the same word in a position that needs a rhyme. Don't rhyme "you" with "you" or use *eye rhymes* like "no" and "know." Again, it just comes off as sloppy, lazy writing.

**The basic principle** is that you don't use a rhyme at the expense of the naturalness of the line. Writing styles have changed greatly from 30 years ago when rhymes were expected to be perfect (the final syllables agreed exactly, i.e., love/above or stone/alone). Now *imperfect* or *near* rhymes are quite acceptable, allowing for many more possibilities. In alone/home or found/clown for example, just the final *vowel* sounds are important, regardless of the similarity of the consonants in the final syllable. It's even acceptable to have the rhyming vowel in the second to last syllable if the vowel syllable is emphasized (cry/trying).

**Colloquial rhymes** (sang/thang) and other rhymes dependent on the pronunciation of words work just fine. The only problem they present is that they reduce the number of artists who could record tthe song to artists who would naturally pronounce the word that way. In the same category are words that are currently in vogue but may not be next year. "Groovy" was an "in" word in the 60's but sounds very dated today.

Use of a *rhyming dictionary* can be very helpful.






## DYNAMICS

One of the most important factors in commercially successful songs is dynamics, the ways we construct contrasts in order to continually rekindle the listener's interest and attention. Different styles of music rely on different methods of achieving dynamics and some are common to all styles. Here are some of the most common:

**1. Melodic contrasts**—The melody in the chorus should be distinctly different from that of the verse, but still feel as though it fits the mood of the song. Most frequently contrast is emphasized by starting the melody above the tacitura or "lay" of the verse so it has the feeling of "lifting" you out of the verse.

**2. Rhythmic contrasts**—Your odds are much better if you keep the "tempo" the same throughout the song. Once you involve a listener's body in a tempo it's disconcerting, particularly in dance music, to change it. However, there's a great deal of variety available in the type of rhythmic "feels" you can use with the same tempo. "Feels" are created by your choice of which beats are emphasized within a time signature and how strongly they're emphasized relative to each other. Using a different, contrasting rhythm pattern in the chorus than you use in the verse can be very effective.

Changing the actual time signature is also effective. Going, for instance, from 4/4 to 3/4 (waltz-time) even for a bar or two can create effective tension.

**3. Contrasts in lyric meter**—This dynamic is similar to what we just discussed about rhythm "feels." It also involves what is called "phrasing" or the way the words are sung relative to the musical accents. The syllable can come just before, right on, or after the beat.

**4. Contrasts in lyric density**—You may have a syllable every 8th note in the verse and go into a chorus with a syllable on every quarter, half or whole note, or vice versa. This is an oversimplification since there are infinite variations available.

**5. Changing rhyme schemes**—Between verse, chorus and bridge.

**6. Repetition**—Repetition of a musical phrase throughout a verse, particularly one that doesn't quite resolve or feel complete can create a lot of tension. When you go to a chorus with a different melody, that steps out of the "lay" of the verse it gives the listener a welcome "release" feeling.

There are other dynamics available in the singing, arrangement and production of a song. These include modulations, volume changes, the use of space and density in the instrumental and vocal arrangements, instrumental solos, etc. However, it's important to build as many dynamics as possible into the song when you write it. It's impressive to any producer who hears the song, it suggests arrangement and production ideas and saves the producer or arranger the problem of *creating* dynamics.

Listen to some hit songs, paying close attention to the dynamic devices they employ.

## POETIC DEVICES

In their best use they enhance the flavor of your song like spices in a gourmet dish. When poorly used they call attention to themselves and can distract a listener from the intended focus of the song. Here are some common poetic devices:

**Simile**—comparisons using "as" or "like." "Straight as an arrow."

**Metaphor**—comparisons *not* using "as" or "like." Paul Simon's "I Am A Rock" is a good example.

**Extended Metaphor**—a comparison extended throughout an entire song. Life is compared to a card game in "The Gambler," and a state of mind is compared to a hotel in "Hotel California."

**Assonance**—the stressed vowels agree. "He tried to like the silence."

**Inside Rhyme**—rhyme which occurs within the line as well as at the end. "The fate of the great state."

**Alliteration**—repetition of first syllable sounds. "Our founding fathers were the first."

**Personification**—giving human characteristics to inanimate objects. "The old house remembered."



**Hyperbole**—obvious exaggeration to make a point. "Eight Days A Week."

**Irony**—saying the opposite of what you mean. "I Don't Need You," the Rick Christian song which was a hit for Kenny Rogers.

**Characterization**—portraying a character with well-chosen images. Listen to the Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby" or Jerry Jeff Walker's "Mr. Bojangles."

The creative use of these devices can make the difference between a common, mundane song and a powerful one. Here are some other important ingredients.

**Visual Imagery**—Psychologists have found that we remember things we see much longer than we remember what we hear. It follows then that the more pictures you can paint with your lyrics, the more impact they'll have. If you've written a line like, "I thought I'd go downtown and see what was goin' down" you realize you don't get a real picture there, nor do you get an "attitude" or "energy." What if you wrote, "I jumped in my Ford, punched the pedal to the floor and headed for the fun downtown"? You can usually say more with one visual scene or one line of dialogue than you can by telling *about* something.

**Direction and Focus**—One of the most common songwriting problems is lack of focus. Don't start a song apparently directed at someone and end up philosophizing to yourself, or start in the first person "I" and end up in the second person "You." Don't go from the concrete to the abstract, particularly in the same verse. It makes it confusing to listen to. When you finish a song, double check to make sure everything follows logically. It's helpful that when you begin a song you establish who you're directing it to. If you're relating a story *about* someone, don't suddenly start talking *to* them unless you bring the audience with you by setting them up with "and then I told her," or some other transitional line. Ask your friends to tell you if they can follow the song and understand everything.

**Understand your audience**—This is an important commercial consideration. A song I recently heard had three characters: a guy, his wife, and his wife's best friend. In the song, the guy (from whose point of view the story is told) is propositioning his wife's best friend, asking her to have a secret affair with him. But he reminds her that he's still in love with his wife, so she shouldn't think about getting too involved with him. The musical style of the song was mellow pop, a type of music bought primarily by women, and this song was obviously directed at a woman. The woman being propositioned in the song is being asked to betray her best friend, and this is the woman the au-

dience is being asked (by the writer) to identify with. Even if this woman *was* attracted to the guy, she wouldn't feel good hearing him say he was still in love with his wife! The other category of potential record buyer represented in this song is wives, and wives are not likely to enjoy a song in which a husband cheats on his wife with her best friend. So the song obviously produces negative reaction in the very audience potentially receptive to that song.

Now look at a hard rock song describing a similar situation, Rick Springfield's "Jesse's Girl" (not "Jesse's Wife" because the audience for hard rock is primarily *young* males). In this song, the guy expresses a desire for his friend Jesse's girl. The guy flatters the girl and by implication compliments his friend's good taste. We also get the feeling that although he wants to, he won't take "Jesse's Girl." Everyone can identify.

So double check to make sure that the audience who will relate to the music will also be able to identify or feel positive about the point of view of the lyric. Otherwise, they're not going to buy the record.

## REWRITING

It's often said that writing successful songs is 10% writing and 90% rewriting. It was an eye opener for me hear hit writer Parker McGee say that he had about 22 pages of rewrites for his England Dan/John Ford Coley hit, "I'd Really Love To See You Tonight." The truth is that it's often very difficult to write something that sounds simple and natural. There are, to be sure, those writers who can get close to the finished song the first time around. Their processes are so well-honed and they've been doing it so long that their creative flow and critical faculties practically work in unison. Those of you who aren't as experienced will also find that you can occasionally write a song in 15 minutes and discover that it's as good as it can get. Usually, though, you're so relieved to finish a song that you overlook some real problems or get too lazy to look for ways to improve it.

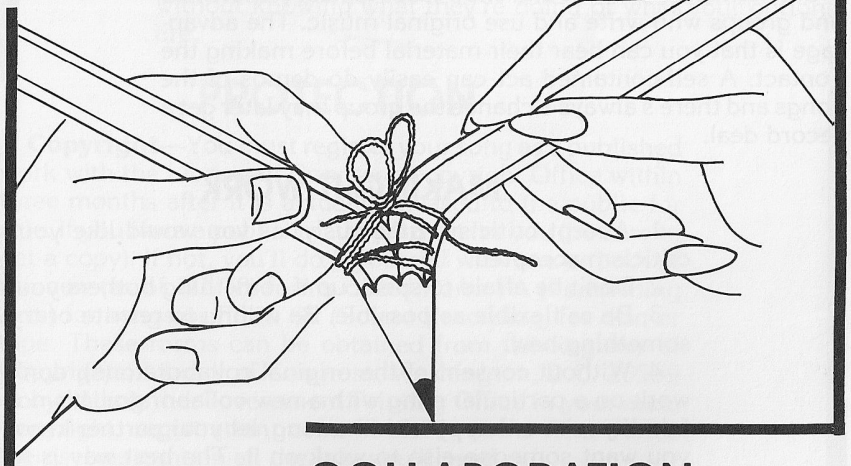
Here are some things to look over for possible rewrites:

1. Make sure your lyrics and music work well together and you haven't placed accents on the wrong syllable, or tried to fit too many words together in a short musical space. Words need to be easily sung, so make sure that words to be held sound pleasant.

2. Can you find an image or action or dialog line that will condense and heighten the impact of something you've written? The less wordy a lyric is, the more room an artist has to phrase it in his/her own style.

3. Is every line important and every word necessary? Hit songwriter David Gates says that if he can omit a line without affecting the meaning and flow of the song he knows he has to replace it with a stronger line. Every line should contribute.

4. If you're trying to deliver a message, don't preach. Tell a story a listener can identify with and help him/her *get* the message without being *told*. Harry Chapin's "Cat's In The Cradle" is an excellent example.



## COLLABORATION

A great many successful songs are the result of collaboration. There are several good reasons why writers collaborate:

1. A writer may have more expertise as a lyricist than a composer, or vice-versa. Come on now, be honest. You can't afford not to find the best composer for your great lyric or best lyric for your beautiful melody.

2. Writers sometimes get trapped in their own cliches and habits and it always helps to have fresh ideas.

3. It aids discipline to make plans to write with someone else.

4. It's good to have a partner who will give you honest feedback and critique.

## FINDING A COLLABORATOR

It's not unlike finding the right mate. It's hit and miss to find the right combination. Here are some places to start:

1. Leave notes on bulletin boards in college music or English departments, musicians' union, music stores or anywhere else that songwriters and musicians congregate. Mention your stylistic preferences.
2. Place ads in music-oriented magazines and newsletters of songwriter organizations.
3. Attend lots of clubs and showcases to hear performers and groups who write and use original music. The advantage is that you can hear their material before making the contact. A self-contained act can easily do demos of the songs and there's always a chance the group may later get a record deal.

## MAKING IT WORK

1. Accept criticism graciously, as you would like your criticism accepted.
2. Don't be afraid to speak up if something bothers you.
3. Be as flexible as possible. Be willing to rewrite or try something new.
4. Without consent of the original collaborator(s), don't work on a particular song with a new collaborator. It's not fair. If you're unhappy with the song, let your partner know you want someone else to work on it. The best way is to have an understanding, on paper if possible, that the attempted collaboration doesn't become an actual copyrightable song until both parties agree on paper that it is. In lieu of that decision you're free to take your contribution elsewhere.
5. Get all business agreements worked out before you start to work. Is the publishing split? If not, who gets it? A big question is always, "How do we split the writers' royalties?" Almost unanimously, the hit writing teams we've interviewed have advised writers to split 50/50 (or another equal split if more writers are involved) *before* you start writing. That way no one has to worry about whether a criticism of a line is a bid to get a bigger share of the split.

## DOING BUSINESS

There are a few things to remember in dealing with the music biz:

1. Don't sign a contract without advice from a music industry attorney.



2. Don't assume someone is trying to rip you off just because they hand you a contract that's slanted in their favor. Expect them to do it. Don't be intimidated or upset, and remember that it's up to you and your attorney to negotiate. If you're asked to sign a contract without getting any legal advice, walk away from the deal.
3. Always get a "reversion" clause in a single song contract. The clause says that if the publisher doesn't get the song *released* on a record within a specified period (two years at most) the rights revert back to you.
4. Learn as much about this business as you can. Never leave career decisions in the hands of someone else without knowing what they're doing or what your options are.

## PROTECTION

**Copyright**—You must register your song as a published work with the Library of Congress Copyright Office within three months after it is actually released to the public for sale. If you have a publisher, they'll do it for you (be sure to get a copy). If not, you'll do it yourself with one or both of the new (as of 1/1/78) forms called Form PA (Performing Arts) for songs or Form SR (Sound Recording) for disc or tape. These forms can be obtained from the Register of Copyrights, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20559 or by calling the Government Printing Office in your area. Copyright registration costs $10.00 each. The forms themselves contain all the info you'll need.

The copyright on a song lasts for 50 years after the death of the last surviving writer of the song.

**APS Registration**—is another way to protect your songs less expensively. Write or call the American Song Festival for information on their American Protection Service (APS).

## DEMOS

After you've written your song, the next step is to get someone to listen. In order to do that you'll need a demonstration tape or "demo." This is a business that runs on tape. It's rare to be able to get an in-person interview and even if you do they'll usually want you to leave a tape so they can listen again or play it for someone else. A good demo for presentation to a publisher or producer shows off

the melody, lyric, rhymic feel and emotional content of your song in a simple uncluttered way. Here are some Do's and Don'ts on producing demos:

1. Do find a good recording studio (you shouldn't need more than 8 tracks) where the engineer will discuss the session with you ahead of time and let you know the best and most economical way to get what you need. The studio can also be valuable in finding musicians for you.
2. Do find good musicians who learn their parts quickly and don't waste studio time by forgetting their parts.
3. Do prepare lead sheets or chord charts and rehearse the songs before going into the studio. It'll save you money in the long run.
4. Do find a good singer to perform your song. One of the most important factors in a demo's impact is a convincing vocal performance. If you're not a *good* singer, don't kid yourself.
5. Do make sure the lyrics are clearly audible in the final mix. A problem, even for pro producers, is that once they're familiar with the lyrics they lose perspective regarding the ability of anyone else to understand them.
6. Do remember to keep it simple; you're not making a record, you're making a demo.
7. Don't do long intros. Four bars is usually enough.
8. Don't do an instrumental solo unless it's a short, melodic transitional figure between verse and chorus that can become identified with the song, usually not more than two bars.
9. Don't repeat the chorus more than twice at the end of the song.

## WHO NEEDS WHAT

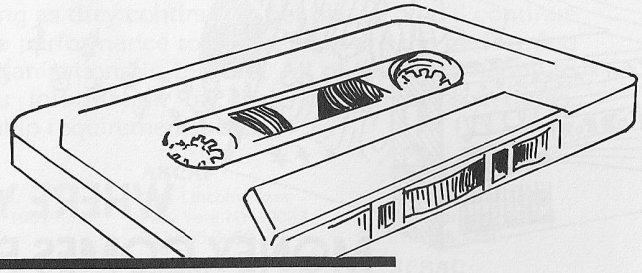
It seems to be universally agreed that the type of demo needed depends on who you're playing the song for. This is because differences exist amongst producers in their ability to imagine the song as a finished production. If the producer is a musician and arranger a simple demo that does not interfere with his/her creativity is probably better. Other producers may prefer a demo that leaves little to the imagination.

If the song is a ballad or country song in which the melody and lyrics are most important, a simple guitar/vocal or piano/vocal demo may be adequate. If, however, the song is a rock, R&B or rhythm ballad and depends on the "groove" or "feel" to put it across, a rhythm section (usually drums, bass, guitar and/or piano) should be used.



Generally, you can present a simpler demo to a publisher. It's the publisher's business to know the preferences of the producers and to take the responsibility to produce an appropriate demo of the song. However, if you're capable of producing a good, professional demo of your song, a publisher may be more willing to sign it and work it, because he/she won't have to lay out money for a demo.

A demo submitted to a record company for you or your group as artists should contain, without reservation, the best performance you're capable of. The songs you send a record company as an artist should have a cohesive style. Don't mix country, R&B, etc. They want you to have a specific musical direction and for you to determine it yourself.



## PRESENTING DEMOS

The basic philosophy is to make it as easy as possible for someone to evaluate your material and deal with your tape. Have your tape cued and ready to play. A cover letter should say basically "here's the tape" and "any feedback would be appreciated." Forget the "I know you'll see that these are hits" hype. Here are some guidelines:

1. Find out if they want reel to reel or cassette tape. Most publishers prefer cassettes.
2. Don't include more than four songs unless you're specifically asked for more.
3. Put your strongest song first.
4. On reel to reel, splice a couple of feet or white "leader" tape between the songs. It makes them easy to locate (for possible "second" listening) and looks professional.
5. Type or print your name, address, and telephone number on BOTH the box and the tape. Designate the tape

speed (if reel to reel) and whether it's recorded mono or stereo.

6. Include a list of songs in the order in which they appear on the tape.

7. Include a typed or legibly printed lyric sheet for each song. Each lyric sheet should include name-address-phone number and copyright notice; ©1982 your name or Copyright 1982 your name.

8. If you want your tape back, include a self-addressed stamped envelope.

9. Don't introduce your song. If a song HAS to have an explanation it won't make a good record.


# WHERE YOUR MONEY COMES FROM

There are four major sources of income for your song: mechanical, performance, synchronization and sheet music.

**Mechanical income**—comes from the sale of records and tapes. The money comes from the record company of whatever artist records your song. It's usually collected on behalf of the publisher by an agency such as the Harry Fox Agency, to whom the publisher pays a small collection fee. The agency regularly audits the record companies to make sure the publisher receives proper payment and an accurate accounting of the number of records and tapes sold. The current (as of July 1, 1981) mechanical royalty rate, as set by the Federal Copyright Royalty Tribunal, is 4 cents per song per unit (record or tape) sold or 3/4 cent per minute, whichever is greater. That royalty is paid to the writer by the publisher according to the split agreed to in the writer/publisher contract. The standard is 50/50 (see diagram on page 24), so under those terms you'd receive 2 cents per song per unit sold.

**Performance income**—On a hit song, this type of royalty can represent, by far, the greatest source of income. It comes from the radio and television, night club and concert performances of your song. It's collected from the radio and television broadcasters and from the club owners and concert promoters who use your song by the performing rights organizations. In the United States they're ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers), BMI (Broadcast Music Inc.) and SESAC. They're notified by you and/or your publisher when the record is released. They're told how you and the publisher wish to split the royalties, and every calendar quarter in which you've earned royalties a check and a statement is sent directly to you and another sent to your publisher, according to that agreed split. The reason you'll make more performance income than mechanical income on a hit is that your song will most likely get airplay long after the record has stopped selling. Think of the number of songs you hear on the radio that were released many years before. For as long as they continue to get played, you'll continue to receive performance royalties. Here are the performing rights organizations in the U.S. All of them are happy to send you information on their collection procedures, membership requirements, etc.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **BMI**<br>320 W. 57th St.<br>New York NY 10019<br>212-586-2000 | **ASCAP**<br>One Lincoln Plaza<br>New York NY 10023<br>212-595-3050 | **SESAC**<br>10 Columbus Circle<br>New York NY 10019<br>212-586-3450 |
| **BMI**<br>6255 Sunset Blvd.<br>Hollywood CA 90028<br>213-465-2111 | **ASCAP**<br>6430 Sunset Blvd.<br>Hollywood CA 90028<br>213-466-7681 | **SESAC**<br>9000 Sunset #605<br>Los Angeles CA 90069<br>213-274-6814 |
| **BMI**<br>10 Music Square E.<br>Nashville TN 37212<br>615-259-3625 | **ASCAP**<br>Two Music Square W.<br>Nashville TN 37203<br>615-244-3936 | **SESAC**<br>11 Music Circle S.<br>Nashville TN 37203<br>615-244-1992 |

**Synchronization income**—Your publisher negotiates the "synchronization rights" with the producers of film, video and radio and television commercials for the use of your song in those mediums. The amount of this one-time fee usually has a lot to do with your previous track record as a writer and/or the current popularity of the song. Often, it's worth a lot to an ad agency, for instance, to use a song that's currently popular for an ad campaign. The fee negotiated is generally split with the writer according to the same terms as the mechanical and performance royalties when those films appear on television. All three performing rights organizations also pay small royalties for performances of radio and television commercials.

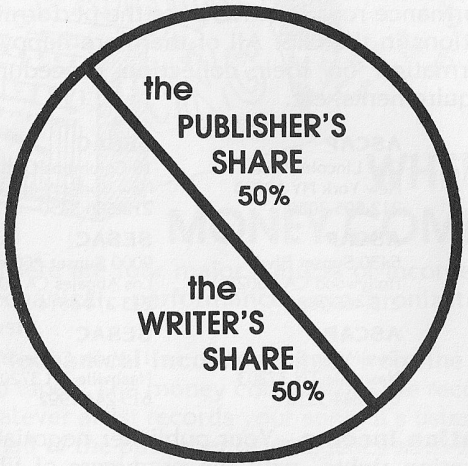
**Sheet Music**—Generally speaking, sheet music isn't important until the song becomes popular enough on record to create a demand for it. Then it appears in the form

of individual piano copies and folios (collections). In most so-called "standard" contracts (there are over 50 *different* "standard" contracts) the publisher will offer 3 to 5 cents per individual piano copy. Don't go for it. You should receive the same split (usually 50/50) that you receive for mechanical and performance royalties. Other sources of income from print music include choral and band arrangements of your song. A standard, universal type of song like "You Light Up My Life" does very well in those areas.

## THE ROYALTY PIE

(Standard Split)

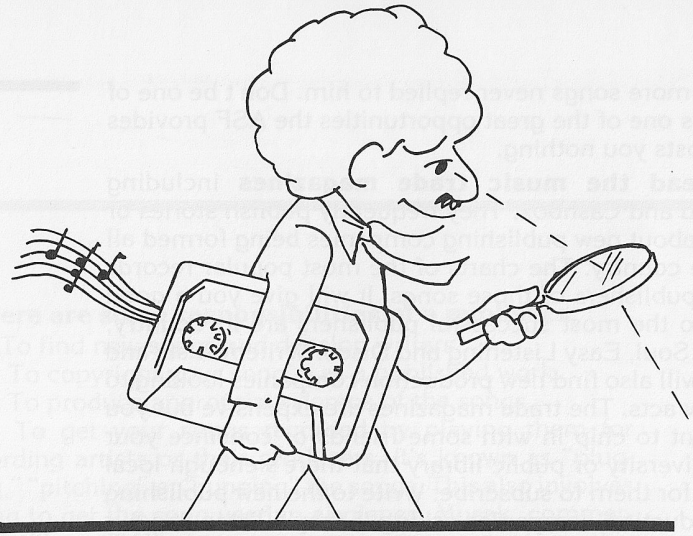
All royalty income, whether from performance, mechanicals, synchronization or sheet music, goes into the "royalty pie" and those funds are split between the writer and the publisher as follows:




Commonly referred to as "the writer's," you should never split this portion with the publisher. Unscrupulous publishers may ask for it in addition to their "publishing" share. It should only be split between the writers who actually collaborate on the song.

Commonly referred to as "the publishing." Since you, the writer, are the original copyright owner, you're in a position to negotiate the sale of the copyright to the publishing company. You may split this portion in any way that's agreeable to you both. When someone refers to "splitting" the publishing, they're referring to the division of this half of the pie.





# FINDING A PUBLISHER

Don't send songs or "songpoems" or lyrics to companies who advertise that, for a fee, they'll write music for your song and/or publish it. They're counting on your ignorance of how the legitimate music industry operates. (The only value in having a song "published" is in getting a legitimate recording released that can make you money; you never have to pay a legitimate publisher to publish your song. He or she will publish it in the belief that it has potential to be recorded and make you both money.) If you have a lyric of value, find someone who'll want to collaborate who believes in your mutual ability to write a successful song. Never pay to have a melody written. It *is* legitimate to pay to have a demo tape made or to have an arrangement written for a melody and lyric you've written.

One of the factors that makes it easier for the "songsharks" described above is the difficulty of finding legitimate publishers for those who don't live in the major music centers. Here are some things you *can* do:

**1. Buy a copy of "Songwriter's Market"** at your local bookstore or write: Writer's Digest Books, 9933 Alliance Rd., Cincinnati, Ohio 45242. It's one of the best annual lists available and includes information on the specialties of the publishers, how to present your tape, etc.

**2.** You've already taken an important step by **entering the American Song Festival.** As a judge, I can testify that judges routinely follow up on entries that impress them. What is puzzling to me is that one publisher I spoke with told me that 50% of the writers from whom he re-

quested more songs never replied to him. Don't be one of them! It's one of the great opportunities the ASF provides and it costs you nothing.

**3. Read the music trade magazines** including Billboard and Cashbox. They frequently publish stories or notices about new publishing companies being formed all over the country. The charts of the most popular records list the publishers of those songs. It will give you a good idea who the most successful publishers are in Country, Top 40, Soul, Easy Listening and Disco. Writer/artists and groups will also find new production companies looking to sign new acts. The trade magazines are expensive but you may want to chip in with some friends or convince your local university or public library that there's enough local interest for them to subscribe. Write to the new publishing and production companies asking if they'd listen to your tape. Enclose a self-addressed card for them to reply, regarding whether they want cassettes or reel to reel, lyric sheets, how many songs they'd like and what style of songs they're looking for. When you send the tape, mark "Requested Material" on the package. New companies are often your best bet because they're usually trying to acquire new songs, whereas the old established companies with huge catalogues are often reluctant to hear "unsolicited" songs (those not requested by them).

**4. Join a songwriters organization.** If there's one near you, you're likely to find other writers who'll share information with you. If there's not one near you, write to several located in major music centers. They'll often provide services and contacts you can take advantage of from where you are. Contact the American Song Festival for the address of a songwriter organization in your area.

## FUNCTIONS OF A PUBLISHER

The effectiveness of a publisher isn't dependent on the size of the company. There are small, independent one or two people operations that can be every bit as perceptive, imaginative, aggressive and effective as a major company. In pitching songs to prospective producers and artists, a publisher's personal credibility is the most important factor. The ability to "cast" the right song for the right recording project is one of the most important talents. Some large companies have the advantage of being able to financially assist the record company in the promotion of a recording of a song they own, but very few companies do it.



**Here are some responsibilities of a publisher:**

1.To find new songs and develop writers.

2. To copyright your song(s) as a published work.

3. To produce appropriate demos of the songs.

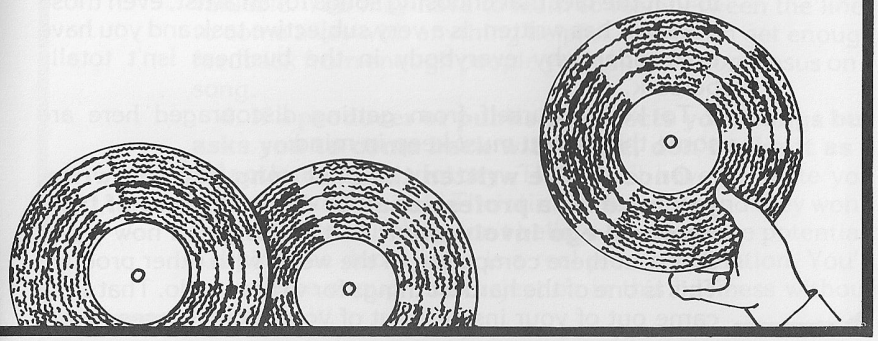
4. To get your songs recorded by playing them for recording artists or their producers. It's known as "plugging," "pitching" or "running" the songs. This also involves trying to get the song used in airplanes, Musak, commercials, films, T.V. shows and any other use a creative publisher can develop.

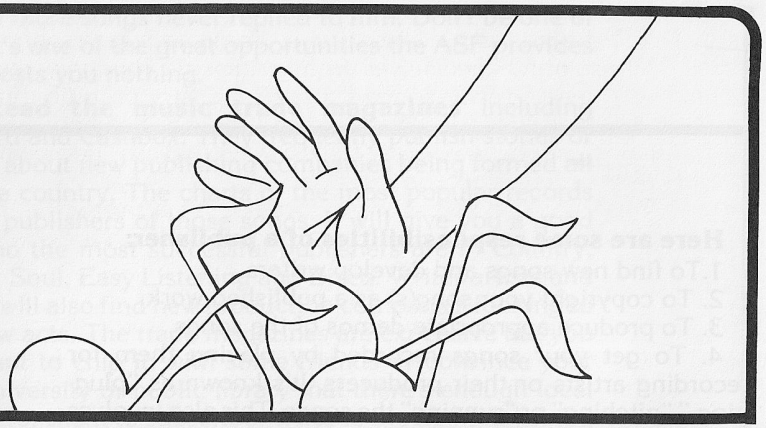
5. To grant licenses to record companies and negotiate fees and royalties for use of the song. That includes rights to distribute sheet music.

6. To collect royalties.

7. To affiliate with foreign publishing companies who will "sub-publish" by finding uses for the song in their respective countries.

Make sure that the publisher you sign your song with has the time, contacts, and experience to properly exploit your song. There are a lot of companies owned by lawyers, recording artists, producers, managers or recording studios who may be able to place a song with someone they're currently working with but aren't equipped to be full time publishers. Their publishing operations may just be a way to capitalize on their positions to make extra money. They may not have the time or personnel to do an adequate job for you.





# REJECTION, CRITICISM AND PROFESSIONAL ATTITUDE

Rejection in the entire music industry is a fact of life. Your songs get rejected by publishers or producers. Publishers with songs they believe in get rejected constantly by producers and artists. Producers who've sunk thousands of dollars into recording projects have them rejected by record companies. Record company promotion people have potential hits rejected by radio program directors. Radio plays songs that don't generate requests or sales by the public, the ultimate rejection. It's comforting, in some way, to know that the Beatles, Elton John and scores of other artists were rejected by over 20 record companies before getting a deal. I'm not deliberately trying to discourage you, I'm just helping you understand the reality. You're at the beginning of the chain, and the most important part of it. That's why people scrutinize your songs so closely. They want to avoid being rejected themselves. Add to that the fact that choosing songs for an artist, even those the artist has written, is a very subjective task and you have to wonder why everybody in the business isn't totally berserk.

To keep yourself from getting discouraged here are some things you *must* keep in mind:

**Once you've written the best song you can write, you need, as a professional, to divorce yourself from personal ego involvement in the song.** It's now a *product*, out there competing in the world with other product. This is one of the hardest things for writers to do. That song came out of your insides, out of your secret places and to hear it criticized or rejected can hurt, even when you know they're not criticizing *you*. Some writers respond by insulating themselves from criticism. This only results in keeping their songs from the industry or in limiting their own professional and artistic growth. Subjecting yourself to criticism is one of the few ways you can "go to school" as a professional writer.

**2. The rejection of a song by a publisher or producer may have absolutely nothing to do with the quality of your work.** It's "apples and oranges" out there. You happen to present them with a beautiful apple on a day that they're looking for oranges. Producers need to be very particular about the songs they choose for their artists. This, in turn, makes publishers, who have to please those producers, very picky. They'll often be able to tell you what they're looking for. At that point you can: A. Write them something they're looking for. B. Search your own catalog for a song that fits the bill. C. Go to other publishers or producers who may be looking for what you have.

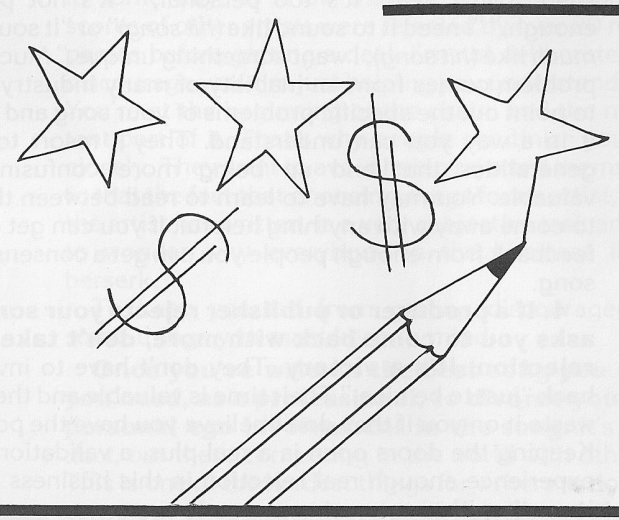
**3. Those who will bother to give you criticism will do it to be helpful.** It's never pleasant to criticize someone's song. Be thankful for the feedback and don't be argumentative. Let them feel you appreciate it or the door will close. Take the criticism seriously and think about it. You may not agree and, in fact, the criticism may not be valid at all. If you accept it all as gospel because you view the critic as an ultimate authority you're in trouble too. You'll end up hopelessly confused because you'll discover many different opinions and attitudes about any given song. You'll hear "It's too personal," "It's not personal enough," "I need it to sound like (*hit song*)" or "It sounds *too much* like (*hit song*), I want something unique." Much of the problem comes from an inability of many industry people to point out the specific problems of your song and explain it in a way you can understand. They'll resort to vague generalities that end up being more confusing than valuable. You may have to learn to read between the lines to come away with anything helpful. If you can get enough feedback from enough people you can get a consensus on a song.

**4. If a producer or publisher rejects your songs but asks you to come back with more, don't take it as a rejection. It's a victory.** They don't have to invite you back "just to be nice." Their time is valuable and they won't waste it on you if they don't believe you have the potential. Keeping the doors open is a real plus, a validation. You'll experience enough real rejection in this business without inventing it!

**5. A professional attitude will help keep the doors open.** If you should be fortunate enough to get an appointment to see a publisher or producer, be sensitive to his/her time considerations and be ready to get in and get out as quickly as possible. Don't be offended if he/she only listens to a verse and chorus of your song. That's enough usually for them to know if it's right or wrong for them. It's even a good idea to tell them you don't mind if they don't listen to it all. Same thing if you're playing live. They won't mind inviting you back if they know you'll respect their time. Don't be visibly sad, don't argue or act dejected. Don't jump out the window—at least not until you leave the office! Thank them for listening and if they've offered suggestions for changing your songs, do it and get back to them quickly. This lets them know you're willing to work with them and they'll be excited about working with you.

## GOOD LUCK

The ingredients for success, beyond your talent, are dedication to improving your craft, some knowledge of the music industry, persistence and luck. Luck is made by letting as many people as possible hear your songs and being ready for the opportunities when they arrive. Don't let yourself be discouraged by rejection. Keep writing and learning and growing. You can only improve as the years go by and there's no age limit to being a great songwriter. You've taken a good step by entering the American Song Festival. Win or lose, keep taking those steps.





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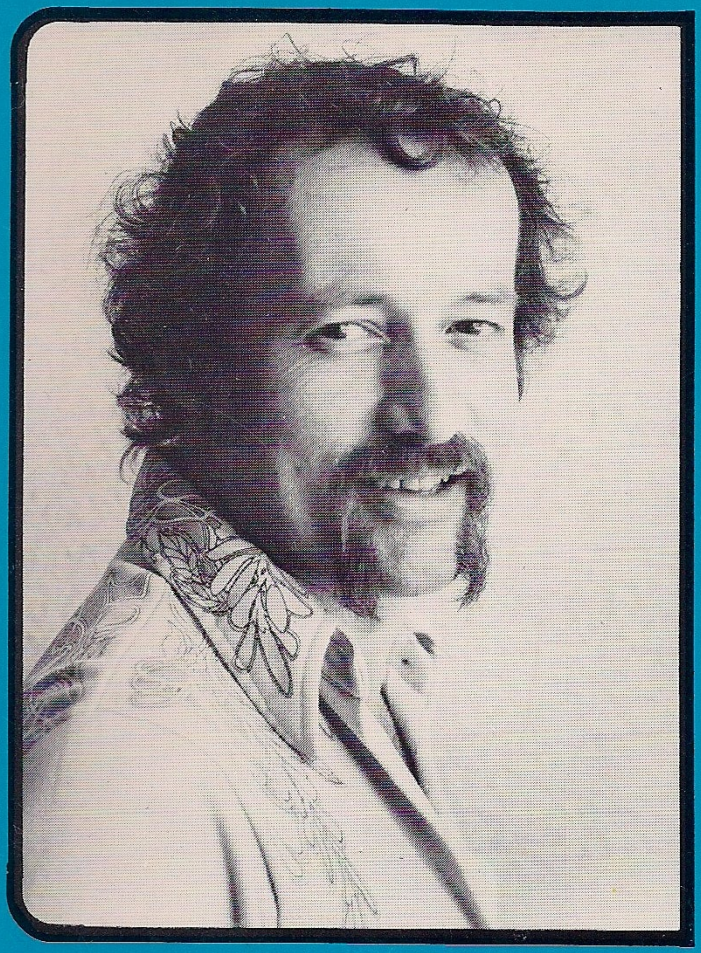

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Braheny's career in music has been many faceted. He's been a performer, songwriter, recording artist, writer and producer of music for radio, T.V. and films, educator and journalist. In 1971 he and partner Len Chandler founded what is now called the Los Angeles Songwriters Showcase (formerly the Alternative Chorus), a non-profit service organization for songwriters, now sponsored by BMI. Their ears for talent have led them to encourage and showcase such writers/artists as Stevie Nicks and Lindsey Buckingham, Stephen Bishop, Karla Bonoff, Janis Ian, Andrew Gold, Warren Zevon, RC Bannon and many others whose names are not as recognizable but whose songs have been recorded by major artists in all styles of music. They evaluate over 10,000 songs a year and showcase less than 5% of those on their weekly live showcase. Many more are presented directly to publisher and producer guests via cassette at showcase events called Cassette Roulette and Pitch-a-thon. They've also interviewed a different music industry pro every week since 1973.

John and Len have conducted seminars for songwriter organizations and universities all over the U.S., and produce a national Songwriters Expo educational event every year in Los Angeles.

John writes a bi-weekly column called "Songmine" in Music Connection Magazine and is currently at work on a book called, "Songwriting, the Art, Craft and Business."

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