

REMINDER: the next SVSA meeting will be Wed., November 19
(third Wednesday of the month instead of fourth, due to Thanksgiving)

Feature Article: When It's Just Not Happening...

By Larry Sakayama

Songwriters – in fact, most writers and others in the creative arts – experience droughts. Sometimes it seems like you'll be stuck in the dry spell forever. It's annoying and frustrating, not to mention unproductive.

I'm not a professional songwriter; amateur is even a stretch. But I like writing songs, so it's still annoying when I can't seem to get a song started or finished. I get hung up in a lot of places – the process (starting, refining, finishing) and then the song itself (lyrics, melody, chord progression, tempo, style, groove, etc.). In this article, I list some things that help me get going. And to give you more than my narrow perspective, I asked some other songwriters about overcoming songwriter's block and about their approach to writing (thanks to Glenn Pomianek, Walt Borys, Mike DiGiorgi, Tom Simmonds, and Bob Sakayama for their contributions). Hopefully you'll find something here that helps make your process a little more productive, or that helps you get back on track when you can't get moving or when your songwriting gets derailed.

Since I'm not writing songs for someone else, the motivation is all on me. Here are some things that help me get started or moving again.

- Read and listen. Under every newspaper headline is a song in waiting. Stories are everywhere – TV, magazines, advertisements, street conversations, and on cereal boxes.
- Listen to music – stuff you normally listen to and things you usually don't listen to. The latter is probably more useful for generating new ideas.
- Brainstorm – Write down words and ideas related to the song topic, no matter how remote the relationship might seem. This has worked well for me.
- Play random chords. Every now and then something really interesting pops out.
- Take an existing song and write the same story from a different viewpoint. As a bonus for performers, you get some interesting song sequences for your gigs.
- Give up for the moment and do something else. You may not be writing a song, but at least you're productive in some other way.

Often, a song I've been working on starts to sound musically boring. Maybe it's really boring or maybe I've just been hearing it for too long. Either way, when it happens, I try some of these:

- Play the song and start modifying the chords. Replace a dominant 7th with an augmented 7th or suspended 7th (i.e. replace A7 with A7+ or A7sus). Change the major chords to 7ths for a bluesy feel or soften it up by changing them to major 7ths.
- Instead of playing the usual chord in the progression, play the same chord type a half step off, up or down, and then resolve it to the usual chord (or don't resolve it).
- Modulate – change the key. Take a verse up a step (i.e. play the first two verses in the key of C and the third verse in the key of D). Or play the whole song in another key. On the guitar, the character of the chords may sound quite different because of the different inversions and fretboard positions.
- Change the style. Country to Reggae, ballad to rock and roll.

- Change the tempo. Slow it down or speed it up.
- For guitarists: Instead of strumming, fingerpick it.
- Instead of resolving back to the tonic, resolve to the relative minor (i.e. in the key of C, instead of C F G7 C, try C F G7 Am).

Some comments from Glenn:

- Find a co-writer who has a different outlook on life, and maybe different strengths – maybe a more literate lyricist, or maybe someone with different musical influences.
- Realize that songwriter's block is a natural thing. Often, an initial idea comes easily – a line, a hook, a fragment of a verse or chorus. Then it may take a lot of work to develop the rest of the song. Sometimes, with a really good idea that you can't flesh out, even with a lot of time and work, you need to put it aside... for weeks, months, sometimes, years. So a related piece of advice... if you have songwriter's block, re-visit some of your old material, complete or otherwise, and see if you can finish, fix or improve it.
- Try composing on a different instrument. If you're a guitar player, move to a piano.
- Listen to a lot of songs in your genre, especially listening for great chord changes. Use what you hear, try a different order.
- Try using software to help. Band-in-a-Box can help break the block – enter your own chord changes, choose a "style" for BIAB to use, and experiment with different tempos, styles, structures.

From Walt:

The only 'inspiration' I ever get is a single line, some intelligent or thoughtful phrase, and somehow connected to a melody. The song just grows from there but I have no control over this seed. Just thoughts and phrases that I say to myself in reaction to life, that somehow seem 'right' to be grown into a full-fledged song. As to the melodies, most of them are eventually traceable to an existing song, but thankfully mutated to be not totally plagiarized.

The only real advice I have is get into a place of solitude, with no distractions. But how to catch the original seed, I don't have a clue.

From Mike:

I've been struggling recently to come up with some new progressions that didn't bore me. Got my copy of Acoustic Guitar Magazine a couple of days ago and saw this article about "Orkney" Tuning, which I'd never heard of. It's CGDGCD. All affected strings are dropped except for the 2nd C, which is raised.

The sounds that come from this are pretty amazing and I immediately started trying out chords. 3 hours later I had put together a progression for a song that, once I put some lyrics to it, may be the most interesting thing I've ever written. Of course that's every songwriter's mantra. The best song I've ever written is the next one...

Songwriting is (at least the way I approach it) a lonely pursuit. Over time, it's easy to forget that you need constant musical stimulation to keep fresh ideas coming. I sometimes feel like it's cheating, that the ideas have to come completely from me. Of course that's stupid because most ideas you think are original, turn out to be variations of something someone else already did.

From Tom:

The hardest thing for me is lyrics. Some of the things I've tried (none of them work all of the time):

- Open to random pages in a dictionary or encyclopedia to kick off a train of thought or hit upon a word that sounds like something I can work into a song.
- Look through a rhyming dictionary for a pair of words that might lead me to a two-line phrase.
- Imagine I'm someone else and try to say something my imaginary person might say.
- Go to a public place and watch people. Make up stories about them.
- For melodies, I usually start with a chord progression or a guitar lick that I like. They mostly come from experimenting and improvising on the guitar. A few years ago I wrote a program to generate semi-random, rule-based sequences of tones and rhythms; fractals. Most of them didn't sound like anything useful, but I did get one composition out of it.

From Bob:

I don't identify with songwriter's block. When I was writing music every day, I almost never had writer's block. There were times when motivating myself to write a particular kind of music for a client would be hard, but I don't consider that writer's block. That happens all the time when other people control what you write. On my own songs, I don't start them unless I'm motivated. Sometimes I might get stuck or bored with what I'm writing, but that's usually because what I'm working on stinks. It's usually easy to just change gears, and go somewhere else musically. My composer friends say the same thing – don't even start if it's not coming. Sometimes it's just better to clean your drawers. That's why composers often look like slackers. I know some guys who can only write between 2-5 AM. But this isn't dealing with writer's block, just recognizing the best environment, and exploiting it. The other thing is that when you do this for money, just the fact that someone else WANTS you to write their music is enough to motivate. But you might have problems if they don't like what you're doing, and if you get blocked after the 5th rewrite, you might not get paid, and that should be enough to unblock you.

* * * * *

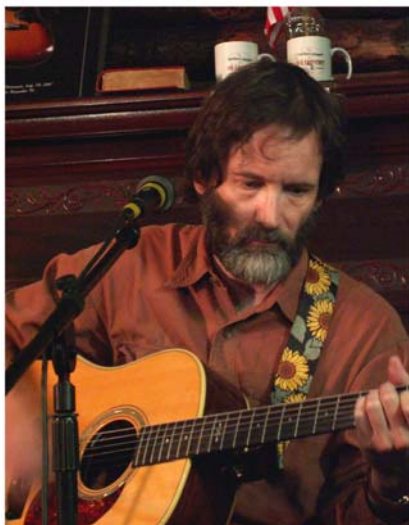
2008 International Songwriting Competition (ISC) Extends Deadline

The International Songwriting Competition (ISC) has extended its submission deadline until December 1, 2008. ISC will continue to take online, mail-in, and MySpace entries until this date. All entries must be postmarked or uploaded online on or before December 1, 2008. So, if you have not already entered ISC and wish to do so, you still have time to enter.

ISC gives away over \$150,000 in cash and prizes to 62 winners in 20 categories. The Overall Grand Prize includes \$25,000 (US) in cash - the largest cash Grand Prize of any songwriting competition in the world. ISC is open to all levels of amateur and professional songwriters throughout the world.

For more information and an entry form, go to www.songwritingcompetition.com.

Photos from October's SVSA Songwriters' Night
at Third Street Coffeehouse *Photos by Leigh Littleton*



Top row: Bill Payne, Josh Jones. Middle row: Marian McConnell, Connie Sellers, Steve Langston. Bottom row: Randy Walker, Mike Pearrell, David Simpkins.

SVSA Performing Songwriters' Upcoming Gigs

Greg Trafidlo:

November 28: Cam's Grill. Glen Ellyn, Ill. with the Red Arrow Ramblers.

Mary Gordon Hall:

November 24, Gravity Lounge, Charlottesville, VA. Opening for Mary McCaslin with Blue O'Connell and Debbie Hunter, 7pm.

December 5, Stone Soup in Waynesboro, VA, 7-10pm, Mary Gordon Hall and TBA

Barbara Martin:

Friday, November 21, 8-11 pm, Barbara Martin Trio, Downtown 56, 56 W. Gay St., Harrisonburg, VA 540-438-5600 downtown56harrisonburg.com

Tuesday, December 2, 4:30 pm, Family Concert, Rust Library, 34D Catocin Cir., Leesburg, VA 703-777-0690s

Saturday, December 6, 8 pm, doors open at 7:30, Barbara Martin and Mac Walter, Barking Cherry House Concert Series, Charlottesville, VA. The suggested donation at the door is \$10. Reservations are accepted by e-mail at sngwrtr525@hotmail.com or at 434-974-6702 before 9 p.m.

David Simpkins:

Friday, November 14, Coffee Buy The Book, 6:30-9:00 p.m. Solo performance; Admission is FREE; donations appreciated. 10 W. Main St, downtown Pulaski, Virginia 24301. (540) 980-4424; <http://www.coffeebuythebook.net>

Saturday, December 6, Winterfest, 2:00-2:55 p.m. Solo performance; Admission is FREE. Jacksonville Center For The Arts, 220 Parkway Lane South, Floyd Virginia 24091. On Rte 8, a half mile south of the stoplight in downtownFloyd. (540) 745-2784; <http://jacksonvillecenter.org>

Friday, December 12, Coffee Buy The Book, 6:30-9:00 p.m. Solo performance; Admission is

FREE; donations appreciated. 10 W. Main St, downtown Pulaski, Virginia 24301. (540) 980-4424; <http://www.coffeebuythebook.net>

Friday, January 30, Third Street Coffeehouse, Roanoke, Virginia

Marc Baskind:

Every Tuesday 7-10:30 (with exceptions): J&J Social Hall, Burnt Chimney, Va. Country/bluegrass, \$5 at the door, eat free, \$1 for drinks (alcohol free/smoke free environment), sit in a couple if you wish!

Every Wednesday 6-9 (with exceptions): Del Sol, Main Street, Lewisburg, W.V., Jazz/Variety w/Walter Scott, snazzy jazzy (Greenbriar) pianist extraordinaire, duo or trio

Nov. 7 Annie Moore's w/ The Source 8-11

Nov. 14 Annie Moore's w/Caravan 8-11

Nov. 21 Annie Moore's w/ The Source 8-11

Nov. 26 Annie Moore's w/Caravan 8-11

Dec. 26 Annie Moore's w/Caravan 8-11

Dec. 27 Annie Moore's w/ The Source 8-11

Jan. 9 Annie Moore's w/ The Source 8-11

Jan. 16 Annie Moore's w/Caravan 8-11

Jan. 23 Annie Moore's w/ The Source 8-11

Jan. 30 Annie Moore's w/Caravan 8-11

Feb. 6 Annie Moore's w/ The Source 8-11

Feb. 20 Annie Moore's w/ The Source 8-11

Feb. 27 Annie Moore's w/Caravan 8-11

* * * * *

Third Street Coffeehouse Schedule

- Nov 14 Dan & Marian
- Nov 21 Rob & Mike
- Nov 28 Closed for Thanksgiving
- Dec 5 Britt Mistele
- Dec 12 Roanoke Valley Bluegrass Pickers
- Dec 19 Wyatt Law
- Dec 26 Closed for Christmas
- Jan 2 Steve Langston - LaLaLand
- Jan 9 Commonplace
- Jan 16 Paul Kupfer
- Jan 23 Trent Wagler & the Steel Wheels
- Jan 30 David Simpkins
- Feb 6 Justin Duncan
- Feb 13 Grounded Granite
- Feb 20 TBA
- Feb 27 Sherwood (Robyn Dobyns & Marian McConnell)
- Mar 6 John Powell
- Mar 13 The "How to Be" Band

Third Street Coffeehouse is a non-profit coffeehouse established in 1987. The coffeehouse is open every Friday night; doors open at 7 p.m. for Open Mic; featured performer plays until 10 p.m. A smoke-free, alcohol-free, no-cover-charge venue! We "pass the hat" for donations to the featured performers. For more information contact Marian McConnell at (540) 309-4707 or email threecavrs@aol.com.

* * * * *

SVSA DISCLAIMER: The ideas and opinions contained in this newsletter are intended to be helpful to songwriters. The companies and organizations mentioned are believed to be legitimate; however, SVSA does not endorse any products or services and offers no guaranteed success based on the content.

We are always looking for articles about SVSA members and articles of interest to the songwriting community. Send articles and information to the Editor, Kathy Acosta, at 125 Polk St., Radford, VA 24141, or svsa@davidsimpkins.com. SVSA is a non-profit organization.

SVSA Board Members: Charlie Divers – President; David Simpkins - Vice President; Greg Trafidlo – Secretary; Connie Sellers – Treasurer; Kathy Acosta - Newsletter Editor

SVSA, P.O. Box 698, Salem, VA 24153

REMINDER: the next SVSA meeting will be **Wed., November 19**
7:30 p.m., Third Street Coffeehouse, Third St. and Mountain Ave., Roanoke, Virginia