

Music in the Social and Behavioral Sciences: An Encyclopedia

Songwriting as Profession

Contributors: Nico Thom

Editors: William Forde Thompson

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452283012.n360> *Luebeck University of Music*

The writing of popular songs in Western traditions—short, catchy pieces of music to be sung with an instrumental accompaniment—has lost much of its original romantic attraction. Compared with the composer of classical music, a songwriter in the tradition of popular music has to work under different circumstances. Their work is no longer about writing authentic artificial masterpieces. First and foremost, it is about reaching as many people as possible. It is now rare for a pop singer to perform meaningful, expressive songs that they have written themselves, to their own accompaniment on the guitar or piano, and to great acclaim. In the course of the 20th century, songwriting has developed into an independent profession, parallel to the development of the recording companies, radio, and television stations. Today, professional songwriting is at the heart of a globally operating music industry, and is hence subject to the strict rules of division of labor. It differs from semiprofessional, hobby-style songwriting, divided into a chain of production consisting of many small parts in which the songwriter is only one among many. Only rarely is the creator of a song also its performer.

The more usual process is for contemporary songs to be written exclusively for established artists, which means that they are written for their voice, image, style of music, and target group. These music stars or music representatives are **[p. 1040 ↓]** marketed by the major labels or their subsidiaries via large-scale advertising campaigns as entertainment products. In order to raise the efficiency of these entertainment products, the production of their various musical parts is outsourced. Thus, it is in line with the logic of the international music market that famous contemporary pop singers such as Beyoncé, Britney Spears, Lady Gaga, Justin Bieber, Justin Timberlake, and Usher almost exclusively perform songs that they have not written themselves. It also happens that pop stars are not even the voices singing the songs in a recording studio that they then present at playback performances (a well-known example is the Duo Milli Vanilli). It is much more important for pop stars to be good-looking and to dance well than to be musical.

The format of the song that a songwriter employs is determined by its appeal to the masses. The song is the central medium of popular music. It usually consists of verses, a recurring refrain and bridge that breaks up the relatively rigid musical pattern. A song lasts for between three and five minutes, so that it remains radio or video compatible. Together with the structure and length of a song, its loudness is also made to suit the

market conditions, irrespective of whether the item in question is a ballad, a medium-tempo song, or a fast piece of music.

Songwriter/artists gather at the Ugly Mug Cafe in Orange, California, during National Association of Music Merchants' (NAMM) Week's Songwriter Series Songwriters Round, sponsored by NAMM, January 22, 2014. The songwriters also performed at the venue. Singer/songwriters tend to be among the lower earners in the music business and can therefore rarely afford expert support such as booking managers, photographers, and stage technicians. Along with composing, writing lyrics, and practicing, they must also tour often.



The unofficial rule is, the one who sings loudest will be heard most or sell best (loudness war). Any contemporary song, if it is to be commercially successful, has to conform to the format specifications of the mass media, which have been internalized by the majority of those receiving or hearing the song. Deviations from that

structure (e.g., tracks without a refrain), length (e.g., 10-minute rock items) or loudness (insufficient compression) [p. 1041 ↓] reduce the probability of achieving high placings in the charts and regular airtime. Experts in the fields of composition, text creation, interpretation, recording, and mastering are involved in international song production. A professional songwriter principally takes on the task of composition. Sometimes, he or she can also be responsible for several elements of the production.

The importance or rate of success of a professional songwriter is primarily measured in quantitative terms, such as the number of songs composed, the sales figures for the songs, the height of the contractually agreed fee or bonus, and the number of awards that have been won. The artistic quality of the song that she or he has written is secondary. Solid knowledge of the theoretical and practical aspects of music is expected of a professional songwriter, but more essential is experience with the laws of the pop music business (e.g., contacts with the music industry, marketability of the songs, and on time delivery). Typically, career entrants pass through songwriting courses or participate in songwriting competitions that are organized by the music industry in order to recruit new talent.

Historical Outline: The Old Singer/ Songwriter

In order to make reasonable sense of the separation of the parts of professional song production over the course of time, it is helpful to look at the original form of a contemporary songwriting expert, namely the singing songwriter. There were times when the creations of such artistes were described as lyrics for guitars, everyday lyrics, folklore of the present, author's song, chanson, poetry in song, or poet's song. The core was the originally very close relationship between text and music, which has survived in certain regions or musical subcultures to the present.

The history of the traditional singer/songwriter or balladeer can be traced back to the French troubadours of the 11th century (e.g., William IX, Duke of Aquitaine). Written evidence of the singers of earlier times no longer exists because the melodies and texts up to that point were passed on orally. In the first half of the 20th century, as a result of

political, worldview, and specific youth movements, workers' songs, resistance songs, and hiking songs came into fashion, as did simple religious songs for church services. The acoustic guitar begins to dominate as the accompanying instrument, replacing the piano because it is less expensive, more manageable, and easier to carry around (hiking or campfire guitar). For these reasons, the guitar is used by the songsters, the early American country, blues, and folk singers such as Woody Guthrie.

In the 1950s, these old brakemen, cowboys, and hobos undergo a revival, whereby educated young Americans (mostly students) picked up on that (as they thought) pure, unadulterated singing tradition in order to escape the progressively widespread commercialization of the music business (e.g., Pete Seeger). In doing so, they often reverted for their accompaniment to old-fashioned instruments from roots music, such as the banjo, the fiddle, or the mouth organ. Increasingly, in the 1960s, political content was sung by the singer-songwriters (in the United States, such as Joan Baez); *chansonniers* (in France, such as Serge Gainsbourg); *cantautori* (in Italy, such as Francesco Guccini); bards (in Russia, such as Wladimir Wyssokii); or *liedermacher* (in Germany, such as Wolf Biermann), which stemmed from the international protest movements of those times. Through major festivals such as Woodstock and the distinct media interest, on occasions they gained worldwide publicity. Many of the singers dedicated their texts to the generation conflict, racial discrimination, the oppression of women, taking drugs and espousing free love. However, political topics such as capitalism, socialism, or the Cold War were also popular.

Since the mid-1960s, Bob Dylan has poetically and musically set the pace, and he can be considered the most influential singer/songwriter still alive. His moves toward the electric guitar and rock music, the arts, literature, and Christianity represent the opportunities for shifting one's position afforded by this musical genre. The professionalization, internationalization, and de-politicization of the actors make it increasingly difficult to distinguish cleanly between this and other areas of popular music. In the meantime, in connection with rock, pop, R&B, and other styles of music, people also speak of singer/songwriters. The original, traditional fields of music in which the majority are performing singer/songwriters are folk, blues, country, and alternative (hard) rock.

[p. 1042 ↓]

Performing Singer/Songwriter

Depending on the degree of popularity of a performing singer/songwriter, certain nonmusic-related activities will be handled by external service providers (e.g., booking managers, record companies, graphic and Web designers, photographers, filmmakers, stage technicians, guest musicians, specialist lawyers, and tax advisors). Usually, however, singer/songwriters deal with most of these tasks themselves because they tend to be among the lower earners in the music business, and can therefore rarely afford expert support. One of the most time-consuming activities they have to engage in, apart from composing, writing lyrics, and practicing, is traveling from one performance location to the next—touring. Although singer/songwriters mainly perform in a particular region (e.g., the American west coast or east Germany), they are on the road much of the time, either in order to save on accommodation costs or because they have to fill in free days between performances with work elsewhere (e.g., rehearsing with guest musicians, studio recordings, or interviews for radio and TV).

Many traditional singer/songwriters also work as authors or journalists, while others produce films, theater productions, or art, or compose or write lyrics for other musicians. Political events are a further important field of activity. Singer/songwriters normally have close ties with a particular political grouping, and are actively involved with them. As a result of their linguistic skills and media presence, they are welcome guests on political talk shows (e.g., on the radio or television), where they are asked to comment on current affairs. Consequently, they are expected to have a good grasp of contemporary issues and historical background. Much time is also spent on setting up new performance dates, which represent the core of their earnings. Performing singer/songwriters can only cover the production costs of their recordings, if that, through sales of long playing (LP) records, compact discs (CDs), or downloads. The main sources of income are small-stage performances in pubs, cafés, and jazz cellars, or medium-sized shows at open-air events and festivals.

Other Types of Songwriters

Staff songwriters may be hired by music publishers, record companies, producers, and other production or recording groups. The staff writer's services are exclusively reserved for this employer. Most staff writers receive a weekly salary, which may be treated as a recoupable advance on the writer's future royalty earnings. They may be contracted to write "work-for-hire" pieces that are owned and copyrighted by the employer. Early in a career, a writer may have no option other than a "work-for-hire" position, but may look for the opportunity to move to a more attractive long-term strategy to earning a living as a writer. Competition for staff songwriter positions is tough.

Freelance writers may work independently or under a part-time contract with various companies, securing single-song agreements either under a "work-for-hire" contract or a songwriter agreement.

Jingle writers are songwriters/composers/lyricists who specialize in writing music for radio and television commercials. They are responsible for musically representing their client, as directed. They must be skilled in all styles, be strong arrangers, and be able to compose well for a very short form.

Producers in the field of popular music develop their own material from start to finish. They produce the material, develop a concept for how they would like it arranged and recorded, hire musicians and engineers, and oversee the recording and production of the material. They have the final say on the development of their material. Often, producers are musician, sound engineer, and marketing expert in personal union. They work for themselves and clients.

Composers/arrangers are classically trained musicians who create or arrange instrumental pieces, either to stand alone or combined with lyrics. They may compose for a specific situation, such as film/TV composers who score/compose music to enhance videos or films, or they may compose for live performance and/or recording situations.

Individuals who are talented in expressing themselves with words can develop careers writing words to songs. A pure lyricist would create only the words, and may work as a team with a music composer, or may create lyrics for a previously written piece of music.

The film producer hires the music supervisor. He or she may act as an artist and repertoire [p. 1043 ↓] (A&R) scout to find and license popular songs for inclusion as theme or background music within the film (called source music) and/or select songs for the soundtrack. Sometimes, the music supervisor may be in charge of only the songs for the soundtrack, and other times he or she may be in charge of all the music involved in a film, including hiring and supervising the film composer for dramatic scoring.

Song pluggers, also known as contact men or boomers, go between songwriters, song producers, and song multipliers. They tout individual songs or albums or canvass for artists, publishers, and recording companies who want to release the songs. Song pluggers push songs to other persons or institutions who also have roles in the music industry.

Conclusion

Contemporary songwriting in the field of popular music is less a form of art than a craft or business. Today, the market is international and highly competitive. Just a few major labels are dominating it, working with mostly unknown songwriters who are writing songs for their well-known singers. With this view, songwriting as profession can be described mainly as ghostwriting for others.

NicoThom, *Luebeck University of Music*

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See Also:

- [Advertising](#)
- [Authorship](#)
- [Composition](#)
- [Film Music](#)

- [Licensing](#)
- [Marketing](#)
- [Recording Industry](#)
- [Royalties](#)
- [Song](#)
- [Television](#)

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