



BREAK OUT OF YOUR

BOX

25 Ways to Expand Your Songwriting Creativity

By Alex Forbes

Do you ever get stuck in a songwriting rut? Hit the wall? Want to throw your guitar, piano and/or collaborator out the window? Me too.

Here's a handy list of proven techniques that can bust you out of your habitual patterns and spice up your writing life. Experiment with any or all of them to keep your songwriting fresh.

- 1 Write a song on an instrument you don't ordinarily play.** We often get into predictable, familiar patterns on our own instruments. Our fingers just naturally "go there." Or alternately, try writing with no instrument at all, just a tape recorder. You'll be amazed at what comes out.
- 2 Whichever aspect of a song comes first, do it last instead.** If you usually write from a lyric, try starting with a drumbeat, a chord pattern, or a melodic hook. Likewise, if you usually start from the musical end, shake it up and contemplate a blank sheet of paper. Or do both simultaneously.
- 3 Try collaborating, or if you already co-write, seek out new partners.** It's great to collaborate with people whose strengths supplement your weaknesses, but you can learn something new working with anyone. Abandon your preconceived notions about who's "right," and just write!
- 4 Invest in home recording gear.** These days, it's really inexpensive to build a rudimentary home studio, and you'll exponentially magnify your possibilities as a songwriter. Don't worry that you're not a brilliant engineer (yet). You can always bring a song elsewhere when it's ready for a final demo.
- 5 Expand your support system, starting with your address book.** You probably know dozens of people connected to music, it's just that you never considered them as part of your team. Declare out loud that you're committed to being a songwriter, you'll start to attract others like a magnet.

6 Create lots of deadlines. Sign up for open mics, book a gig, make a date to co-write with someone. There's nothing better than the threat of public humiliation to provide motivation!

7 Put your old songs in cold storage. Give yourself a fresh start by burying those dinosaurs and writing what's true for you NOW. New songs provide a jolt of energy and are far more open to rewrites.

8 Write through whatever's blocking you. When you're up against a brick wall, write about that experience instead of faking it. The best songs emerge from being "in the moment," and if what you're in is deep frustration, go with it. Vent freely and fully, and eventually the block will melt away.

9 Put yourself in a strong character's shoes. Find a great book, film or play and write from someone else's perspective. This is excellent practice in writing for other artists, or in expanding your vision of yourself as an artist.

10 Go to a museum, explore Nature, visit a different culture. Fall madly in love, or mourn its loss. We all need to "fill the well" so that we have a broad palette of meaningful experiences to write about. Open yourself up emotionally to new things. Explore the unknown and get re-inspired.

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11 **Buy *Billboard* or go online and research artists who don't write their own songs.** Or imagine that any artist you enjoy is looking for their next big hit. (They probably are!) As you write, picture your song coming out of their mouth. What universal truth can you imagine them expressing for you?

12 **Set a timer for 10 minutes and write with no holds barred.** Write your absolute truth RIGHT NOW, no editing, no crossing out, no stopping, never taking your pen off the page. You can go back afterwards and engage your left brain — your critical mind — later on. Get used to fearlessly unleashing “the real you.”

13 **Interview a co-writer, performer, friend or family member.** Ask them about something that's truly important to them, then listen hard and write down what they say verbatim. Go back and extract the essence of what they said, and any great lines. Powerful, unusual songs can come out of this exercise.

14 **Try a brainstorming technique.** One method is to write a word, subject, phrase or title that holds meaning for you in the center of a page. Then circle it. Now free-associate anything, no matter how crazy or seemingly random, that is sparked by that idea. Write each idea in its own circle, expanding out in an array of interconnected shapes. This breaks you out of “linear thinking.” Go back and note any rhymes, images, sounds or connections that might spark a song in you.

15 **Carry a notebook and/or tape recorder at all times.** You might be inspired by the rhythm of a train, a scrap of overheard conversation, the way the moon looks through the trees, or a headline in the newspaper. It's all good. If inspiration strikes and you're empty-handed, call that brilliant idea into your answering machine.

16 **Participate in music, to the hilt.** Take a class, go to music biz events, start your own songwriting support group, find a mentor. Get lots of practice giving and receiving constructive criticism on your work. It forces you to grow, and loosens your attachment to any one song.

17 **Read a lot!** Novels, poetry, lyrics, music business instructional books. Start to really appreciate the incredible possibilities of language. Notice how other writers create drama, capture detail, and manufacture whole environments using only words. Learn the proper terminology for literary devices and techniques, and have them available at your fingertips.

18 **Listen a lot!** To all kinds of music. You can glean knowledge and inspiration from material you would never

write yourself. We are bathed in music, from the radio to the supermarket to the Internet to our own collections. We just have to pay attention to what it's teaching us.

19 **Ask yourself, “Why is this particular song a hit?”** It may not be to your taste, but there is almost always a reason (besides money and power) why a certain song is chosen as a single. What elements of its melody, lyric, arrangement, production and/or performance make it stand out above others in its genre?

20 **Less can be more.** Can you pare down your song and get your message across with fewer lyrics, fewer melody notes, fewer chords, or more sonic “space”? Some of the greatest songs are also the simplest. Let the listener's imagination fill in the blanks.

21 **Delve into the scariest, deepest recesses of your soul.** Our raw, vulnerable emotional “hot spots” can enrich our songwriting with the most compelling human truths. What moves you, in your heart of hearts? If you're brave enough to go there, you're probably speaking for many others who wish they could.

22 **Go easy on yourself.** Writing is risky. Have compassion for yourself when you “hit the wall” in your writing process. Even the greatest talents don't hit a home run every time they go to bat. Rest assured that your muse will reappear in good time. In the meantime, take a nap, have a great conversation, eat... live!

23 **Dare to suck.** In other words, allow yourself to fail miserably, privately and in public. Just go for it. No one was ever flogged to death for writing a bad song, at least not lately. What's the worst that can happen — sheer humiliation, right? You'll live. Make what you have to express more important than how it's received.

24 **Think of each song as a steppingstone.** Don't make any single song the “be all and end all” of your songwriting career. Let each song, each creative process, stand on the shoulders of the ones that came before it. Even when a “song start” is abandoned along the way, some part of it might be salvaged for a future effort. Or maybe not. As they say, “Don't worry, we'll make more!”

25 **Finally, appreciate the process more than the result.** In this business, it can be years before you get paid for a particular song, if ever. Meanwhile, your life is lived in the now. Might as well enjoy the ride!

Hit songwriter Alex Forbes helps aspiring songwriters find their muse. To unleash the full potential of your creativity through the powerful medium of song, and receive other free articles, visit

www.CreativeSongwriter.com

Phone: (845) 220-7543 • Email: alex@creativesongwriter.com

Snail Mail: P.O. Box 764, Wingdale NY 12594