A Songwriting Workshop Handbook
By Tom Cabaniss

Preface

“I think everybody has a song in their heart ... a story to tell.” —David Broxton, Participating Songwriter and Valley Lodge Resident, 2010

In 2009–2010, Carnegie Hall’s Weill Music Institute conducted a six-month creative songwriting workshop at Valley Lodge Homeless Shelter in New York City, a residence for seniors ages 50 and up with a range of developmental disabilities. Seven residents participated in the workshop, which met weekly and culminated in a collaborative performance by a professional jazz ensemble and the songwriters themselves. This handbook and an accompanying video were developed to document the workshop process and provide a template for others who may wish to replicate this work.

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I. Assessment and getting to know the people and the place

When first imagining a songwriting workshop in a community setting, I have found it useful to ask some basic questions:

- Who are the people we’ll be writing songs with?
- What kinds of life experience do they have?
- What is their environment like and how does it factor into their present experience?
  - Where are they living?
  - Do the participants need to travel to get to the workshop?
  - What do they spend their days doing?
  - Is their environment generally supportive or hostile?
- What songs do they like? What songs do they dislike?
- What kind of musical experience and training do already they have?
- How can I learn more about them and this setting without being invasive or inappropriate?

If you have worked in countless shelters, senior centers, hospitals, or prisons, perhaps you do not need to do the kind of detailed observational work that I have done when encountering new community settings. Even so, I would not recommend starting cold. Every environment is different and quirky and rich with possibility, and the observations almost always repay themselves down the line. And while it’s quite possible that you could walk in on the first day and begin working magic with your fledgling songwriters, your work will be more organic and more fluid if they know you and are predisposed to trust you, even based only on the knowledge that you have shown interest in them and in the place where they find themselves at this point in their lives.

If there are informal ways to observe, participate, or experience the community setting, those are almost always the best. Going to an existing class or workshop often provides a window into the way the participants interact with others, but it’s also possible to learn a great deal from involving yourself in some of the daily patterns of the venue—perhaps you spend a few hours in the lobby one day observing the activity or volunteer to come in and serve a meal if the venue has a daily or weekly meal service. Use your instincts to sniff out the richest and most revealing opportunities to learn about the place you are going to work. I especially love this phase, even if it is quite brief, because it almost always gives me ideas about how our work might most profitably start.

Staff members at shelters are invaluable guides to the inner workings of any facility. You can observe them giving workshops, helping clients (as the social workers might refer to them), or in meetings with other staff. They can become advocates for the work you do, and they can help you anticipate challenges and find solutions to problems.

Sometimes, however, you will not have the luxury of observing: In some settings, either because of security or scheduling or other extenuating circumstances, you have no choice but to start cold. What do you do then? In those instances, you will need to build this initial information-gathering phase into your work. You’ll need to spend time learning about the place and listening to the participants who are there. If possible, ask for a tour or let your hosts show you around. Discover as much as you can as efficiently as you can, and then plunge in. Look for opportunities to observe and learn about the place you’re working in as you go.
II. Creating expectations and planning a performance

A songwriting workshop needs a goal. It needs the promise of a performance. That performance can be modest and process-oriented, or it can be ambitious and flashy, but in my experience, if you set the bar high, your participants will respond in kind.

You can start with a date and a venue and performers, or—if you don’t have your resources lined up—you can be vague and say, “we’re planning some kind of time to listen to the songs with one another, without the pressure of an outside audience.” Regardless of how specific or vague you are, you will want to commit to making sure the songs are heard. I always like to start with a secret “big bet” or two. I might not tell anybody what I am thinking, but it’s important for me to imagine what that performance might be like. Perhaps it will be one great singer and a guitar. Perhaps it will be an ensemble of musicians, or perhaps (and I have done this, too!) it will be a fabulous symphony orchestra and chorus. I might know the performing forces from the outset, or I might have the flexibility to change my mind as we go. It’s important to me that the songs sound good. Whether I imagine it as a big or small event, a low-pressure sharing or a high-stakes public concert, I like to have the possibilities percolating in my mind even as the songwriters begin scratching at their first raw lyrics or melodies.

Imagine the songwriting workshop’s performance as the most inspiring night of music making in your life. You have to start somewhere, and it might as well be imagining sheer magic.

III. Starting the workshop

Once you have learned what you can about the setting and the people you’ll be working with, and you have decided how you will handle the promise of a performance, you are ready to begin the songwriting workshop.

Some composers I know can work with groups to create a collaborative song in a single one-hour session. For some instances and situations, that will be enough, and this work can also serve as a source of inspiration for the duration of a series of workshops.

But as you might have guessed already, it’s not usually the way I work.

I tend to favor a slower, more deliberate style that affords me the opportunity to learn about the participants and what they might want to create. I also like to sing songs and make things up in the first session, because a modest success at the beginning of a process can lead to even bigger successes later on. In a first session, you might do an exercise of finding song ideas from newspaper headlines and writing the chorus of one of those songs together. Or perhaps you would engage participants in a letter writing exercise, and so on—all of these games are designed to get ideas and the process flowing.

In the workshop at Valley Lodge in 2009–2010, I had a small group of older adults who had a lot of rich and complicated life experiences. Though they were living in a transitional housing shelter, they were literate, smart, and inquisitive, so one of the things I did was give them homework. I wrote and distributed an eight-page document entitled “What is a Song?” and asked them to read it. We played and sang two sample songs (“Imagine” and “Stormy Weather”), and analyzed them. (See Appendix.)

One of our most valuable exercises was a brainstorming session in which we tried to name what we thought made great songs great. Our “qualities of a great song” list was an invaluable resource during our time together. We talked not only about how the bridge of a song gives contrast to the form, but also how the bridge can be approached—is it an organic segue or a jump-cut? This led us to talking about movies, plays, and paintings, too. Talking to each other as artists and lovers of art was an important bonding experience for us all.

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In the first session, in addition to the reading, I also gave them a creative assignment: to bring in at least two lines of a possible song. The following week they all came in with complete songs—words, music, and a million ideas about instrumentation, too. So much for my careful calibrations and gentle scaffolding! The genie was out of the bottle, and there were new songs created each and every week after that for a five-month span.
IV. Listening, documenting, and encouraging first attempts

There are a million ways to go about writing a song. Participants may be intimidated, mystified, or confused about how to start, and if they are, they will need your help in finding strategies that will work for them. If you rely on your own methods and entry points, offering them as models, participants will quickly gravitate to the methods that appeal most to them.

Songs have subjects; they are about something. Even when they strive to be about nothing, they are about something. Those who are coming to songwriting for the first time may experience the disorientation of the “blank canvas” that all artists experience. They may need help in getting started, in realizing that the things that matter to them may also matter to others. It’s important to foster an open environment where ideas are encouraged and experiences are both valued and mined for their artistic potential. Like any collective where art making is going on, creativity must be nurtured and tended to constantly. A welcoming stance, including the acceptance of new ideas and asking open-ended questions will go a long way to setting the framework for a group’s creative work. Genuine interest in the participants’ lives and ideas is essential, and it can activate an ongoing dialogue throughout the workshop.

Many poets, lyricists, and writers have techniques for generating ideas in writing workshops. I find Kenneth Koch’s 1970 classic Wishes, Lies and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry (Harper Paperbacks, 2000) is a useful resource in thinking about how to jumpstart inspiration. Depending on the group you are leading, you might want to draw on one or more of the following approaches:

- **Freewriting:** An associative approach where participants write about the day’s events or whatever they have been thinking about.
- **Completion:** You give participants the beginning of a line—“I wish,” “I hope,” and so on—and they complete it.
- **Dialogue:** An interactive approach where participants write lines to each other, based on a topic they choose together.
- **Letter writing:** The writer chooses a person to write to and then creates a letter that expresses something of personal importance or urgency.
- **Storytelling:** One person tells a story with personal relevance, and a partner is charged with helping to convert the story into a song lyric. The process is repeated for the partner.

Those are just a few of the techniques that are possible. In addition, you will want to consider ideas that emerge from the group.

Once participants are ready to set their lyrics to music, they may need help in figuring out how to start creating the music. Here are some ways that composers and musicians help new songwriters get started:

- Have participants sing their words improvisationally; record and notate for further development.
- Play a set of chord changes and have participants sing their words over them.
- Have participants use a musical instrument to experiment with their melodic ideas.
- Have participants use drawn or invented notation to reflect their ideas visually.

I used a laptop to record and then used Finale to notate and create lead sheets and scores. Using simple tools that everyone could learn to operate got us in the habit of documenting every step of our work, with the special fun of hearing it immediately. (Other programs that could be employed include Logic, Reason, ProTools, Ableton Live, Audacity, and Sibelius.) To play back our improvisations and musical ideas, we used Garageband software on my laptop.

Participants may be tempted to depend on or defer to professional musicians to create the music for their song. This is possible, of course, and you may even decide that this makes sense for your situation. But if you want your songwriters to have the experience of inventing their own melodic lines or their own music,
you’ll want to build in time for musical exploration. Everybody can sing; everybody can invent. People just
 go about the creative act differently. Some are most comfortable choosing notes for each syllable at a piano
 or keyboard; others are able to sing their melodic ideas. Still others are more comfortable making melodic
 choices that are demonstrated by another singer. If one method doesn’t work, you can keep offering
 alternatives until you find one that does.

V. Collaborating on editing and arranging

Once songwriters have lyrics and a melody (or melodic ideas, at least), the next step is to create a
harmonization or arrangement. If the songwriters have the skills to undertake this, they should. If they
need help or a critical friend to give them feedback on the choices they make, you can offer to listen and
respond. If, as is more often the case, songwriters don’t possess any knowledge of harmony, form, or
notation, then you will need to become a collaborator, mentor, and/or scribe. This is a delicate dance in
which you will alternate between supplying and soliciting the musical choices. You won’t be able to avoid
bringing your musical self to the equation (and to my mind, that’s a good thing). Writing or finishing the
song becomes a musical collaboration, usually a rich and beautiful one. You will always want to be asking
the “Goldilocks” questions: Am I asking them to make too many musical decisions? Too few? Or is it just
the right balance?

Even songwriters without a lot of technical musical knowledge will have opinions about chord choices,
chord change choices, accompaniments, transitions, beginnings, endings, and so on. As long as they are
interested and working intuitively, instinctively, I try to let them stay in the world of being an artist for as
long as they want (or even for as long as they will tolerate it.) Be ready to step in when they give you clues
that they have had enough: They might say, for example, “Why don’t you see what you can do with it,” or
words to that effect.

VI. Collaborating with performers

Once you have gotten to the lead-sheet stage—in other words, your songwriters have the lyrics, melody,
and harmonies or chords set out—you will be ready to work with singers and instrumentalists. This can be
as simple as one person singing a cappella or as complex as an orchestra with soloists and chorus. But if
you are able to take a relatively simple route and use a small number of musicians, you create an intimate
space for collaboration between the musicians and the songwriters.

When communicating with the performers, it is important to let them know that this will be a different
kind of creative session or rehearsal. They will be putting themselves at the service of others, and in many
cases those others will be non-musicians. They will need to be patient and prepared to ask many different
kinds of questions in order to help the songwriters arrive at what they want from the instrumentation and
from the arrangement. Here are a few sample questions:

• What feeling are you looking for here?

• If I play it three different ways, can you tell me which you prefer?

• There’s a transition here; should it be a smooth segue or do you want something more abrupt?

Musicians may be worried that they are influencing things too much. Reassure them that the songwriters
are just as interested in them as they are in the songwriters. If it turns out to be a mutually beneficial
 colaboration, so much the better for everyone involved.

In 2010, when we invited musicians from Jo Lawry’s quintet to collaborate with songwriters from Valley
Lodge, the instrumentalists were astounded by the quality and variety of the work. I don’t think anybody
walked away from the project feeling they were influencing or being influenced too much. (See feedback on
next page.)
VII. Rehearsing and keeping creativity vibrant

How do you keep the creative process alive during rehearsal? For me, this is like any new music project. If you are doing it right, you are respectful of the fact that no matter how long you have been working on it, you now have a whole new set of collaborators. You have to make room for their input, their interpretations, and their reactions to the work. The songwriters need to be there, adding their reactions and feedback as you go. If you can manage it, composing and arranging can continue in the editing phase almost right up to the premiere.

VIII. Performing the songs

You have helped your songwriters envision their ideas, write lyrics, improvise and notate tunes, add harmonies, and create arrangements. You have rehearsed the songs, and now you are ready to share them with others. What is important in creating and staging this moment?

- Find the right audience and venue: Your songwriters probably have a certain audience in mind for their songs—a combination of friends, family, and acquaintances. You should respect those wishes but might also wish to expand that circle of invitations to include others you think are important—staff at the venue, funders, your colleagues and peers, other musicians doing this kind of work, and so on. Make sure that the performance venue is appropriate for the audience and is one in which the music will sound its best.

- Give credit where credit is due: Anyone and everyone who has contributed to the process needs to be acknowledged either in a printed program (if there is one), in remarks at the event, or perhaps in an organizational newsletter (if there is one).

- Present the process: Sometimes it is difficult for people to imagine how songwriters with no formal musical training are able to get their ideas into such polished form. At our workshop’s concert in April 2010, we created a little exhibit to showcase the process. We included lyrics and music in their early handwritten stages, as well as finished lead sheets engraved in music-notation software. We described the process from the stage and invited our audience to have a look before and after they listened to the music.

Feedback

“We had teaching artist Daniel Levy, singer Jo Lowry, and percussionist James Shipp, and they all began to bring themselves to the work in a variety of ways. They had ideas for arranging, but they were also really good listeners, listening to what the songwriters wanted the arrangement to sound like, and what was important to them about the song. I think that was one of our big challenges—getting the participants to feel comfortable enough to tell us what they wanted ... at first it was like, ‘You’re the professional. Do whatever you think is right,’ [but] we wanted more engagement from them, and it took them some time to realize—or to feel comfortable with—telling us and giving us feedback.” —Tom Cabaniss

“What I liked about it was that there was always constructive criticism. Not really criticism, but constructive advice, that they would come out with. And they gave you a chance to say “yes” or “no” to it. In other words, ‘Do you want to use this? What do you think?’” —David Broxton, a songwriting participant in the workshop
IX. Reflecting on the songs and the creative process

When you are running a songwriting workshop in a community setting, you are in an interesting netherworld: You are not in a traditional educational setting, but your participants are still learners. You’ll constantly be in the position of deciding how “teacherly” to be. Ultimately, you’ll want to ask yourself what your goals are. If you just want to write songs, reflecting on the process may be secondary. If you want to build capacity in the participants, you will probably be better served by encouraging reflection and an understanding of the process.

Personally, I like to build reflection into everything we do. Right from the beginning, we set goals and revisit them often. When we make a discovery or have a success, we talk about how we did it. When we hit a bump or have a problem, we try to talk it out. Talking and writing about the creative process is of great interest to me, and so I encourage it in every way I can throughout the songwriting workshops. It keeps the avenues of creativity and communication open.

It is important to document the work from the beginning, both for the sake of the participants and for institutional use. Forms of documentation include, but are not limited to the following:

- Interviews with participants and musicians
- Written materials
- Drawings, artwork, invented notation
- Audio recordings
- Video

I used a little Flip video camera to record bits of our work, I used my laptop’s built-in-microphone and playback capabilities, and we used a copying machine in the shelter to make sure that we kept records of our process.

X. Planning for future work

If you have made it to the end of this handbook, then you probably appreciate the value I place on both process and product. I’m interested in the songs. I’m interested in making sure they are good songs, beautifully performed. But I’m equally interested in the process of creating them. (Sometimes I wish I could stay in the workshop room forever!)

At the end of any process, it’s important to talk about what will happen next. Perhaps the project is ending and will not continue. If that’s the case, it’s important to acknowledge and discuss. Songwriters will need to say their proper goodbyes to an intense experience. If there will be a next phase, songwriters will naturally want to contribute ideas, suggestions, and feedback. I always try to be sensitive to endings and to transitions. But sometimes you don’t know what will happen next—funding is uncertain, commitments are unsure—and then you will want to acknowledge that you don’t know what will happen next, but you’ll keep in touch and communicate as best you can.

With our Valley Lodge group in 2010, once we completed a portfolio of about 21 songs, we did a performance of 15 of them for the shelter residents and friends at a local church. But we did not stop there. We reprised songs for a group of New York City shelter staff members, and we also performed for other artists at a professional development session. As of this writing, in July 2010, we also have plans to perform at other shelters and community sites where songwriting workshops will begin. We created a little show, and we are taking it on the road!

A songwriting workshop is akin to a show in the theater or a tour with a group of musicians. It’s intense and ear-opening. It almost always teaches you more than you can offer it. I cannot think of any better kind of artistic collaboration, and when it happens in a nurturing community environment, magic can truly occur.