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A New Chapter

Director's Log: What Should We Change?

BY WALTER SARGENT

As the ISS begins a new chapter, my thoughts have been about direction and change. What wants to change? What wants to stay the same? What's working? What's not working?

The simple answer is that the ISS is basically working and "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." But is it working as well as it could be? Is there room for improvement? Just as one might take a song apart to see what makes it tick, one can also take the workshop apart and see what makes the workshop tick.

Consider:

- Songwriting skills – What can really be taught and learned in a workshop?
- Critique and competition – What makes these positive or negative experiences?
- Creativity – What blocks it? What fuels it?

Improving one's songwriting skills would be the natural goal of any songwriting workshop, but what can really be taught and how to teach it is not so obvious. In "The Craft of Lyric Writing," author Sheila Davis writes, "The craft and technique of lyric writing most assuredly can be taught." The more we use the language of objective songwriting principles in our critiques, the less need there is for value judgments. Value judgments, even well-intended ones, are less valuable than skillful assessments.

At their best, critiques and competitions not only inform us, but they also inspire and motivate us. Although they may be vicarious, inspiration and motivation can be just as beneficial as skill development. The downside is that critiques and competitions can be discouraging, draining – even damaging. I see the Writer's Choice award, for instance, as a mixed bag. I am sure it has inspired a lot of healthy competition, but the truth is – as fair and positive as I've tried to make it – the award ignores many more achievements than it recognizes. How can there not be room for improvement?

The creative process might seem to be a highly subjective, solitary, or even mysterious business. Yet, as with songwriting, specific concepts can be taught and learned. For example, how does perfectionism block the creative process? Julia Cameron, author of "The Artist's Way," says, "Perfectionism is not a quest for the best. It is a pursuit of the worst in ourselves, the part that tells us that nothing we do will ever be good enough – that we should try again." The ISS workshop is not a workshop on creativity, but understanding the creative process can create a safer environment, increase our artistic options and encourage risk-taking.

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Next Workshop
October 5 at Five
Towns College.

Borders Open Mic

The next show is
Friday, October 2.
Hosted by Vincent
Crici.

Writer's Choice

Find out what song
won on Page 2.

ISS

Director and Webmaster

Walter Sargent

Assistant Director

Sonny Meadows

Writing Coach

Mel Glazer

Advisor

Sonny Speed

Newsletter

Editor

Pedro Pereira

Contributors

Dave Cook

Gerry Dantone

Suzanne Ernst

Frank Gambino

Sonny Meadows

Steve Robinson

Walter Sargent

Hank Stone

Mike Svezia

Tony Tedeschi

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Sonny Speed had a policy of keeping discussions about ISS "business" to a minimum. The goal was not to exclude members from the process, but to keep the workshop focused on the music, and delivering the benefit of peer review. This is an excellent policy. I intend to keep to it, but a little group discussion could go a long way. Although I see some common threads, everyone's experience is a little different and we can all benefit from your comments and suggestions.

Writer's Choice: 'Winter's Spring Fever' by Mark Hussey

BY WALTER SARGENT

No one who was at the August workshop can deny this killer ballad had it all. Topically, it was meaningful and moving. Musically, it was inventive and rich. Lyrically artful, its execution was exquisite thanks in part to the vocal artistry of ISS member Suzanne Ernst. Am I over the top? No. You had to be there. Here's what other members had to say: "Great lyrics! Melody fits like a glove. A++... It has everything... Sweet... Your best tune yet. "

The runner-up was a close one. We had record attendance. We heard 21 songs and several ballots were split, but I'm calling it for "Roger's Wine" by Tim Huss. This song was superbly conceived, constructed and executed, members had little to say except "loved it... lots of good songs ... tough choice."

But wait, there are still more votes and praise to go around:

"Cowboy Blues" (Sonny Speed): "All good elements - melody, lyrics... just a great feeling."

"Inside the Rain" (Tim Dillon): "Very moving, straight from the heart... Beautifully delivered."

"George Costanza" (Denise Romas): "Beautiful and funny at the same time."

"Diet Is Cast" (Lois Morton): "Perfect, hilarious... a gem."

Who Played What

Here is a list of the performers and songs from last month's workshop:

Steve Lieberman: "I Wish I Was Hot;" David Anthony: "I Am Alone;" Denise Romas: "George Costanza;" Gerry Dantone: "Honesty;" Vince Gangi: "You Take Me There;" Mark Hussey: "Winter's Spring Fever;" Jim Baron: "Someone;" David Bailey: "Gates of Graceland;" Tim Huss: "Roger's Wine;" Estelle Hendrich: "The Night that I called 911;" Suzanne Ernst: "Oh So Many Years;" Bobby Catrano: "The Return of Mr. Green Genes;" Steve Robinson: "Little Rock and Roller;" Frank Gambino: "Pavement;" Lois Morton: "the Diet is Cast;" Andrew Kirshner: "Thank you for the Dream;" Ken Krumenacker: "Time With You;" John Finerty: "Malcontent;" Tim Dillon: "Inside the Rain;" Sonny Meadows: "Tolerance"

Monthly Workshop

Test out your songs in front of a crowd by playing them for fellow musicians who will provide constructive feedback with the goal of helping you improve as a songwriter. The ISS workshop takes place the first Monday of every month, except if it falls on a holiday, at Five Towns College, off Burrs Lane in Dix Hills. Run by ISS Director Sonny Speed, the workshop starts at 7:30 p.m. Bring a guitar if you wish to perform your song live, or you may bring a recording on CD or tape. A piano is available for those who write their songs at the keys. Be sure to bring 25 copies of your lyric sheets so the other workshop attendees can follow along while listening to your song. It is much easier to provide constructive criticism when people can read the lyrics. The ISS workshop is at the center of the organization's mission to help songwriters perfect their craft. Many performers on Long Island got their start at ISS.

General Information

For general information about ISS or how to join the organization, contact ISS Director Walter Sargent at waltersargent@optonline.net. To submit items for publication in the newsletter, contact Pedro Pereira at pedropereira@verizon.net. Visit our web site at www.islandsongwriters.org.