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Island  
Songwriters  
Showcase

# Songwriting Tips

BY SUZANNE ERNST

I attended a workshop in October with noted songwriter Steve Seskin at Five Towns College. It was so inspiring that I thought I would pass on some of what I learned.

Steve is one of the most successful writers in Nashville, with many songs recorded by well-known performers, such as Tim McGraw, Peter Frampton and Waylon Jennings. Steve's hit song "Don't Laugh At Me" was a finalist for Country Music Awards' "Song of the Year" in 1999.

Here are some of the things Steve discussed during the workshop:

## Music is punctuation for the lyrics.

Steve spoke of "prosody," the marriage of music and lyrics. He used "Got To Get You Into My Life" as an example of how the Beatles repeated a melody line twice, and did that consecutively with two more melodic lines. The seventh line, with fewer notes per measure, is very different from the previous six and adds a nice change of pace musically. The music enhanced what the lyrics were saying, while giving the melody variation.

## Melody tools

In discussing melody, Steve talked about phrasing, specifically how crowding and elongating notes help create hooks, as does varying the melodic rhythm. As in the Beatles song, some of the melody lines are filled with many notes. Eight beats of music may have 15 notes that are followed with four beats with two notes held out for dramatic effect.

Here are some of his other suggestions for creating melody:

- Vary the range and notes used, especially between verse and bridge.
- Using more chords is not necessarily better. Seven or fewer is common
- Use different chords instead of usual patterns to add flavor and match the feeling of the lyrics.
- Vary what beat the melody comes in on from verse to bridge, or verse to chorus.
- Try something different: Use the beat tracks on an electric keyboard to try different styles.
- Do melody without accompaniment. Be random! ("I can't make you love me" sung by Bonnie Raitt, was originally a country song with a hokey beat, changed to a memorable torch song by elongating the melody's phrasing, changing the arrangement completely).

## Writing your Lyrics

Steve advised us all to write ideas down. Don't trust your memory. Carry a notebook since you never know where an idea for a song is going to come from. He listed books, movies and conversations as possible catalysts for songs. The songs don't have to be about things that happen to *you*. Every song does not have to come from your own experiences.

Tell the story as powerfully as possible. Even though the story may not necessarily be your own experience, and could even be a fantasy, it still has to grab the audience's attention.

Don't get "married" to a lyric, or be attached to where the lyric should go in the song. Move things around. Good lyrics should have imagery and an emotional payoff. It helps to use colloquialisms such as "I pulled in," instead of "I drove a car." Use who, what, where, when, how and why as a literary writer does. When organizing, use the verse for the big picture and the chorus to express emotion.

Other advice:

- Don't analyze the song too soon because if you do, you may not finish it. If you don't finish, file it away for the future.
- Work on the song until it works, meaning when you love every note and word in the song.

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## Next Workshop

January 4 at Five Towns College.

## Borders Open Mic

There will be no show on New Year's Eve, but the open mic resumes February 5, and the first Friday of the month thereafter

## Writer's Choice

Find out what song won on Page 2.

## ISS Turns 20

At the January meeting, we will celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ISS.

## New Editor

With the January issue, ISS Newsletter will have a new editor. Congratulations, Sid Cherry!

## Happy Holidays!

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## **Songwriting tips from Steve Seskin's workshop**

*Continued from page 1*

- Don't use the song to "whine," which I interpreted as doing a laundry list of complaints in your life that may turn off the listener.
- Do a person check. The listener needs to know who is talking, though you don't necessarily have to name the speaker; sometimes content defines who is speaking.
- When rewriting, ask yourself why you need to change a line. What do you want the line to do?

Pay attention to tone and how you can use tone to say it better. Steve explained how his song "Don't Laugh at Me" had been covered by a band that sang it with attitude, changing the tone to "don't mess with me" as opposed to "don't hurt me."

Keep in mind that one changed line can change a whole song, but try flip-flopping lines for better order and for emotional effect.

Steve was both entertaining and informative in the way he illustrated his suggestions and ideas for melodies and lyrics. If you get the chance to see him do this workshop, you will not be disappointed.

### **Writer's Choice: It's a Tie**

For the November workshop, competition once again was fierce, and this time it produced a tie.

The winners:

"One Day Knock Down" by Estelle Henrich

"Dumb Fight" by Sid Cherry

Congratulations to Sid and Estelle for their win.

### **Who Played What**

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

Tim Dillon: Down the Road

Susan Cohen: Way Out Here

Gerry Dantone: I Know What I'm Doing

Steve Leiberman: Obama Rama Yah

Al Verunac: Carolina Morn

David Anthony: Durango

Frank Gambino: Let's Host It

Estelle Henrich: One Day Knock Down

Lois Morton: Don't Get Moled in a Hole

Sid Cherry: Dumb Fight

### **Editor's Note: Passing the Torch**

This is my last ISS Newsletter as editor. I have held the post since January 2002, and it has been a pleasure to work with all writers and ISS members who contributed to this publication through the years. Starting with the January 2010 issue, the newsletter will have a new editor, Sid Cherry. Please welcome Sid to his new role and do all you can to make his tenure as editor as comfortable and productive as possible.

—Pedro Pereira

### **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, visit our web site, [www.islandsongwriters.org](http://www.islandsongwriters.org). To submit items for publication in the newsletter, contact Pedro Pereira at [pedropereira@verizon.net](mailto:pedropereira@verizon.net).