Riff's Official Guide to Songwriting

How to write songs people want to hear twice



Jamie Stanforth with Riff

TUNE FROM YOU

TUNE FROM YOU PRESENTS

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by Jamie Stanforth with Riff

First edition, October 2026. Published by Tune From You (tunefromyou.co.uk).

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All example lyrics in this book are original unless a source is given. Short quotations from published songs are used for criticism and review and are credited in the text or the Notes. The facts about famous songs and songwriters come from the interviews, books, court records and articles listed in the Notes.

The stories from Tune From You come from our own orders. Customers are never named, and details that could identify anyone have been changed or left out.

Nothing in this book is legal advice. If money or a contract depends on a copyright question, ask a lawyer who specialises in music.



Foreword

I picked up a guitar when I was seven and started piano at eleven. In my late teens I was the singer in a couple of pub bands, which mostly meant standing at the front, trying to remember the words and hoping nobody noticed when I didn't. In my early twenties I joined an established semi-pro band as their singer and spent about five years playing up and down the country, with a tour of Germany along the way.

After that came twenty-five years as a DJ: nearly ten at Center Parcs, ten at a place called Bistro L!ve, and about five working the clubs in between. If you want to learn what makes a song work, I can recommend reading a room for a living. I had to know what was going to fill the dancefloor just by checking out the crowd. One wrong song could end up with a bunch of punters joining in with the infamous "sack the DJ", and that was usually a song requested by someone claiming it would get everyone up dancing. Needless to say, they sat down, as I said they would.

These days I run Tune From You. People tell us about someone they love, their mum, their best mate, their dog, the person they're about to propose to, and we write them a song about that person. Riff is my songwriting partner there. We write songs for birthdays and funerals, first dances and retirements, and most things in between, and we've learned a lot doing it, sometimes the hard way.

This book is what we wish someone had handed us at the start. It covers the craft from the ground up: titles, structure, rhyme, melody, chords, and above all the business of making words fit music so they sing themselves. Then it covers the part most songwriting books leave out, which is writing a song for one particular person on one particular day, where every line has to be true.

Everything in here about real songwriters has a source in the Notes at the back. We haven't made up any stories, quotes or numbers. The stories from Tune From You are ours, with the customers taken out. And my own confession, involving a Meat Loaf song, a frilly white shirt and the word "that", is in Chapter 15, because it seemed only fair to own up to at least one of my own disasters.

If you've never finished a song, start at the beginning. If you write for a living, skip whatever you know; we think the chapters on fitting words to music, writing to a brief, and songs that don't mean what people think will give you something new.

Bring a pencil. You'll be marking stresses.

Jamie Stanforth

About the authors

Jamie Stanforth started guitar at seven and piano at eleven, was the singer in his bands, and worked as a DJ for twenty-five years. He founded and runs Tune From You, which writes personalised songs for people across the UK.

Riff is Jamie's songwriting partner and resident know-it-all, which Jamie says is the only reason Riff has kept the job. Riff drafts and checks the lyrics and plans the music, and Jamie listens to the songs and signs them off.

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Part One: The Craft



1. What a song is for

A poem waits for you. You can read it at your own pace, go back a line, frown at a word and look it up. A song gives you none of that. It happens at its own speed, once, and then it's gone. If the listener missed the point in the first verse, the song has no way of stopping to explain.

Nearly every rule in this book comes from that one fact. Songs repeat themselves because the listener can't turn back a page. Choruses are simpler than verses because they have to be caught on the move. Titles get sung several times because the title is the handle people will use to find the song again. The words have to fall where the music puts its weight, because if they don't, the listener hears the wrong word, or no word at all. None of this is snobbery about pop. It's engineering.

One song, one idea

The most common problem with a beginner's song is that it's about four things. There's a verse about missing someone, a verse about a holiday, a chorus about the future and a bridge about the weather. Each idea might be lovely. Together they make a song nobody can summarise, and a song nobody can summarise is a song nobody can remember.

Before you write a line, try to say what the song is about in one sentence, the way you'd say it to a friend in the pub. "It's about how my dad still drives me to the station even though I'm forty." "It's about a dog who eats socks." "It's about how Christmas is different now Mum's gone." If you can't do that, you haven't got a song yet. You've got material, which is a fine thing to have, but it isn't the same.

The sentence doesn't go in the song. It sits on a sticky note next to you and you check every line against it. Does this line help say that thing? If not, it goes, however clever it is. You can keep it in a file of orphans. Most writers have one, and most of the orphans never get adopted.

Three questions

Once you have the sentence, ask three questions. They take thirty seconds and they prevent most of the songs that go wrong later.

Who is singing? Not the performer, the character. A son, an old man looking back, a dog, a teenager with a grudge. You can sing as yourself, but even "yourself" needs choosing: you at the funeral is not the same voice as you at the stag do.

Who are they singing to? A song sung *to* someone ("you") feels different from one sung *about* them ("she"), and different again from one sung to the room ("we"). Chapter 6 goes into this properly. For now, just decide.

Why now? This is the one most people skip. Something has to make the song start today rather than last week. A death, a birthday, a train leaving, a row, a kettle clicking off in an empty kitchen. The reason doesn't have to be dramatic.

It just has to exist, because without it the song sounds like a list of feelings with no reason to be sung.

Professional writers often do this last one without thinking, because they've absorbed it. Listen to almost any song you love and you'll find the "why now" in the first two lines. When you get stuck on a first verse, it's usually because you don't know what the "why now" is.

A song can start anywhere

You don't have to start with the words, or the title, or the chords. People start with a melody hummed into a phone, a phrase overheard on a bus, a drum pattern, a chord on a borrowed guitar that sounds sad in an interesting way. The order doesn't matter. What matters is that eventually all of it agrees.

Paul McCartney famously woke up with the tune of "Yesterday" in his head. He was so sure he must have heard it somewhere that he spent weeks playing it to people and asking whether they knew it. Nobody did, so he kept it. Until he had proper words, he sang it to a placeholder lyric about scrambled eggs.[1] Two lessons there, and they both come back later. A placeholder is fine; you can sing nonsense while you find the shape. And when a melody arrives fully formed, checking that it isn't somebody else's is just good manners. Chapter 12 explains why it's also good business.

The listener test

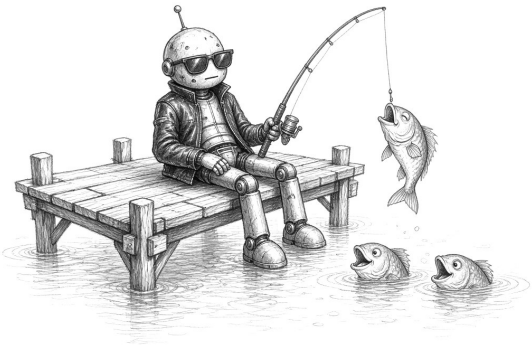
Here's the test we use on every song before anyone hears it. Imagine a person who doesn't know the song, hearing it once, through a phone speaker, in a kitchen, while the kettle boils. When it finishes, could they tell you the title? Could they tell you, roughly, what it was about? Could they hum any of it?

Two out of three is respectable. Three out of three is a song. None out of three means the song only works for the person who wrote it, which is a fine thing for a diary and a terrible thing for a gift.

You'll notice the test says nothing about cleverness. Clever lines are lovely. Clever songs that fail the kitchen test are, sadly, quite common, and their writers tend to blame the audience.

Exercises

1. Take three songs you know well. Write down, for each, the one-sentence version, who is singing, who to, and why now. Notice how quickly you can do it for songs that have lasted, and how hard it is for songs you've forgotten.
2. Write ten one-sentence song ideas from your own life in ten minutes. Don't judge them. Tomorrow, pick the one you'd most like to hear on the radio, and the one you'd most like to give to a single person. They're often different.



2. Titles and hooks

The title is the name people use when they want to hear the song again. If they can't remember it, they search for a line they half remember, get it wrong, and end up listening to something else. A good title saves your song from that fate.

What makes a good title

The strongest titles are phrases people already say. When we studied songs people choose for funerals, nearly all the titles turned out to be everyday phrases: things like "see you again", "how do I say goodbye", "you raise me up".[2] Nobody had to learn them. They were sitting in the language waiting to be set to music.

Not every good title is a stock phrase, of course. Roughly, the ones that work fall into a handful of families.

A **phrase people say**, used straight. These are sayable, singable and easy to search for.

A **phrase with a twist**, where a common saying is bent slightly. These are harder to write and very satisfying when they land.

An **image**, a thing you can see: "Waterloo Sunset", "Yellow". An image title promises a picture and the song has to deliver it.

A **name**: "Jolene", "Eleanor Rigby", "Hey Jude". A name title promises a character. For personalised songs, the name of the person is often the best title you'll find.

A **question**. Questions are naturally unresolved, which makes them good for songs about longing, doubt and proposals. They need an answer somewhere, or a very good reason not to give one.

Titles aren't protected by copyright in the UK, so nothing legally stops you calling your song "Yesterday".[3] Something should stop you, though: nobody will ever find it. A title already owned by a famous song is a title you've borrowed and will never get back.

Hooks

A hook is whatever grabs the ear and won't let go. The title is usually a hook, but there are others: a melodic phrase, a riff, a rhythmic stab, a backing vocal, a shout. The best songs have several and stack them in the chorus.

Hooks have a way of arriving when nobody's trying. Keith Richards has written that he recorded the riff of "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" on a cassette player by his bed, half asleep, and found it in the morning: a couple of minutes of guitar, then about forty minutes of himself snoring.[4] The intro of "Sweet Child o' Mine" started as Slash messing about with a string-skipping exercise during a warm-up; another band member asked him to play it again, and the song grew out of that.[5] We mention these not to suggest you nap with a guitar, though by all means try, but because both men recognised a hook when they heard one. That's the real skill. Most of us produce hooks by accident all the time and then talk over them.

So keep a recorder going when you play. Listen back. You're listening for the bit you'd want to hear again.

Where the title goes

The title should sit where the song puts its weight. In a chorus that usually means the first line, the last line, or both. It should land on a strong beat, on its stressed syllable, and ideally on an open vowel the singer can hold: "day", "home", "you", "more", "light". Chapter 4 explains why. For now, take it on trust that a title sung on a weak beat, or tucked into the middle of a busy line, will be missed by most listeners however many times you repeat it.

Two professional tricks are worth knowing. Jimmy Webb recommended pre-echoing the title: let a word or two of it appear in the verse, so that when the chorus arrives, the ear feels it has been there before.[6] And Pat Pattison, who taught lyric writing at Berklee for decades, insists that the last line before the chorus (he calls it the trigger line) must lead into the chorus grammatically, so that the title feels like the end of a sentence the verse started.[7] Both tricks make a chorus feel inevitable, which is the highest compliment a chorus can get.

When the title means something else

A title is a promise, and people choose songs by the promise. This is the reason Chapter 15 exists. A title that sounds like a love song can carry lyrics about a break-up, and plenty of couples have walked down the aisle to one.

It can even happen to the writer. The song released as "...Baby One More Time" was written by Max Martin, produced with Rami Yacoub, in Stockholm. According to John Seabrook's history of the hit factory behind it, they believed "hit me" was current American teen slang for "call me". To native English speakers it sounded like something else entirely, and the record company quietly dropped the words "Hit Me" from the title.[8] So say your title out loud to someone who wasn't in the room when you wrote it, and watch their face.

Pitfalls

The cliché title. If you can think of three famous songs with the same title, so can your listener, and your song will be the fourth one they think of.

The title that never appears. Some great songs have titles that aren't sung. They are mostly by established artists whose fans will find them anyway. You are not yet those artists, and neither, sadly, are we.

The title that's too long to sing. If it doesn't fit comfortably in one breath on a few long notes, it's a sentence, not a title.

Exercises

1. Carry a notebook, or your phone, for a day. Write down every phrase you hear that could be a title. Aim for twenty. The ones that make you smile are the keepers.
2. Take five of them. For each, write the one-sentence song idea it suggests. Then try bending each phrase one word away from the original, and see whether the bent version is the better song.



3. Structure

Structure is the order things happen in, and each part of a song has a job. When a song feels long, flat or confusing, it's almost always because one of the sections is doing another one's job, or no job at all.

The sections and their jobs

The verse tells the story. It carries information: who, where, what happened. Verses are conversational, with more words and shorter notes, and each one should move us on. Verse two isn't verse one reworded. If you can swap the verses round and nothing changes, one of them isn't needed.

The pre-chorus, if you use one, is the run-up. It builds tension, often with shorter lines or a rising melody, and its last line hands over to the chorus.

The chorus is the point. It's the one-sentence idea from Chapter 1 in singable form, and it usually holds the title. Choruses tend to have fewer words than verses, longer notes, simpler lines and more repetition, because the chorus is what the listener will sing back.

The bridge is the change of view. After two verses and two choruses the listener needs something new: a different angle, a confession, a memory, a decision. Musically it often drops back or moves to new chords. Then the final chorus comes back, and if the bridge has done its job, the same words mean more than they did the first time.

Intros and outros are doors. Keep the intro short; nobody has ever complained that a song got to the singing too quickly. The outro is where the song is allowed to sound like it's ending. That sounds obvious. It isn't, as you'll see in a moment.

Common shapes

The commonest modern shape is verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus, sometimes with pre-choruses before each chorus. It's common because it works: it gives you story, point, more story, point, new angle, point with feeling.

Older songs often use **AABA**, where A is a section that ends on the title and B is a contrasting middle. Many Tin Pan Alley standards are built like this, and so are plenty of early Beatles songs. It's compact and elegant, and it suits songs with one big line.

Folk songs often use a **strophic** shape: verse after verse to the same tune, sometimes with a refrain line at the end of each. It's ideal for story songs where the story is the point and the tune is the vehicle.

None of these shapes is a rule. "Hey Jude" runs over seven minutes, and about half of that is a coda of "na-na-na" that has been sung by wedding parties and people who've had three pints ever since. It breaks every length guideline because the coda is the point. If you're going to break a shape, make sure you can say what you gained.

Contrast is the whole trick

The listener knows a new section has started because something changes. You need at least two changes between verse and chorus to make the shift feel deliberate. You can change:

the **line length** (chorus lines shorter); the **note length** (chorus notes longer, fewer words); the **starting point** (verses can start just after the beat, choruses on it); the **rhyme** (save your neatest rhyme for the chorus); the **vowels** (open, ringing vowels in the chorus); the **pitch** (chorus higher, or at least wider).

Pattison makes the point that a chorus should mean more each time it comes back, because the verse before it has set it up differently.[7] If the first verse is about meeting someone and the second is about losing them, the same chorus line sounds happy the first time and devastating the second. That's a structure doing the emotional work for you, which is the best kind of laziness.

The false ending

Here's a trap that's very easy to fall into. Picture a cheerful leaving song for a much-loved school caretaker, written for the staff-room do. Its first chorus finishes on the last line of the whole song, and the singer is told to hold the final word. When the music comes back, it does exactly what a band does when the singer holds the last line of a song: it winds down. The song sounds finished after the first chorus, and anyone hearing it would reasonably think it had been cut off.

The fix is simple once you've seen it. Only the very end of a song should sound like an ending. A chorus that comes back later needs to keep moving: a guitar that strums straight into the next verse, a drum fill, a line that leaves the door open. Live bands know this in their bones. Anyone arranging on a computer, or prompting a machine to arrange for them, has to say it out loud.

How long?

For a song meant as a gift, two and a half to three and a half minutes is usually right. That's long enough for two verses, a bridge and three choruses, and short enough that the person it's for can listen to it again straight away, which they will. Get to the first chorus within about a minute if you can. For a song meant for an event, like a first dance or a walk down the aisle, ask how long the moment actually lasts and write to that.

Exercises

1. Pick a song you love and draw its map: the order of sections, with a timing for each. Then, for each section, write one line saying what job it does. If you can't name a job for a section, ask yourself why the writer kept it.
2. Take a song idea and write only the chorus and a one-line summary of each verse. If the verse summaries could be swapped, the song doesn't move yet. Fix the summaries before you write a single verse line.