"UNTIL THAT SONG IS BORN": AN ETHNOGRAPHIC INVESTIGATION OF TEACHING AND LEARNING AMONG COLLABORATIVE SONGWRITERS IN NASHVILLE

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ABSTRACT

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With the intent of informing the practice of music educators who teach songwriting in K–12 and college/university classrooms, the purpose of this research is to examine how professional songwriters in Nashville, Tennessee—one of songwriting's professional "hubs"—teach and learn from one another in the process of engaging in collaborative songwriting. This study viewed songwriting as a form of "situated learning" (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and "situated practice" (Folkestad, 2012) whose investigation requires consideration of the professional culture that surrounds creative activity in a specific context (i.e., Nashville). The following research questions guided this study: (1) How do collaborative songwriters describe the process of being inducted to, and learning within, the practice of professional songwriting in Nashville, (2) What teaching and learning behaviors can be identified in the collaborative songwriting processes of Nashville songwriters, and (3) Who are the important actors in the process of learning to be a collaborative songwriter in Nashville, and what roles do they play (e.g., gatekeeper, mentor, role model)?

This study combined elements of case study and ethnography. Data sources included observation of co-writing sessions, interviews with songwriters, and participation in and observation of open mic and writers' nights. I transcribed co-writing sessions and interviews and coded all data for emergent themes. Trustworthiness procedures included triangulation through multiple data sources, "member checking" of transcripts by participants, and review of coded documents by two colleagues in the music education research community.

Songwriters located their learning in classrooms and workshops, in the co-writing room, in individual learning pursuits, and in the broader context of the Nashville songwriting community. Songwriters' learning combined both formal and informal modes. Some of their informal practices aligned with those described in previous research on popular musicians' learning, though the "listening and copying" identified by Green (2002) did not "translate" directly, given that "copying" is not as valued when generating original material is the goal.

Co-writer selection was an important factor in songwriters' learning. The learning that occurred in co-writing spaces seemed to reflect Green's (2002) concepts of both "peer-directed learning" and "group learning," but also a form of "peer coaching" through "checks and balances" that seemed distinct from the learning modes that Green described. Pressure was an important factor for some participants: on one hand, the company of co-writers reduces pressure surrounding creative activity; on the other, accountability to one's collaborators increases the pressure to be engaged and thoughtful in the co-writing process. Songwriters also valued a safe and open co-writing environment that supported both creativity and learning.

Participants identified several "important actors" in their Nashville songwriting lives. Professional organizations played an important role, as did certain individuals—managers, veteran writers, open mic and writers' night hosts, and publishers. Some of these actors played important mentor/sponsor roles, whereas others acted as gatekeepers in the environment.

Findings from this study prompt teachers of songwriting and music educators in general to consider how formal and informal *practices* can be combined in formal *situations*. These findings also reveal the potential power of co-writing as a learning tool in songwriting classes, though it should be balanced with other activities. Recommendations for future research in the teaching and learning of songwriting are offered as well.

For my music teachers. Every single one of them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I feel like there are little gaps in the universe—these little moments of absolute

magic, and they're pure. They're kinda falling down, and they come through the

room and, if you don't catch them, they're going to move on to another place and

be born. And I even have a file on my computer—"Songs Born." And whatever

was born that week it was goes in that file…So, the biggest thing I could tell

people is in the room is sacred. Turn your phone off, don't think about other

things. Get in the moment and stay in the moment until that song is born.

—Brooke, individual interview

The email was unexpected, but welcomed upon its arrival: just a few days before the

semester was set to start, the chair of the music education area wrote to me about the

responsibilities I would undertake in the graduate assistantship I was shortly to begin. With my

composition experience, he suggested, perhaps I would like to assist with teaching a songwriting

class offered by one of the music education faculty. I paused, pretended to take a moment's

careful thought, and then quickly replied to accept the offer. I was thrilled.

In one respect, that songwriting class was my saving grace in the midst of a season

marked by transition. I had resigned a teaching position I loved, left the place I embraced as

home, and set off for a new adventure, at a new institution, in a new region of the country,

pursuing a new type of work. Assisting the songwriting class was like bringing along the most

important pieces of home: not only did it afford me an opportunity to exercise my songwriting

and compositional muscle; it also gave me a chance to feel like a teacher—like a *music teacher*—and that kept me upright on many occasions.

The story does not end there, however: assisting that songwriting class did more than comfort and sustain me when I missed my classroom and my students. It challenged the core of my pedagogical foundation. There was no rehearsal to lead in this classroom, nor were there any sightreading melodies, carefully written to target selected skills and precisely scaffolded with preparatory exercises. Fluency in solfège was not a meaningful form of capital in this market. This was a type of music teaching and learning I had never experienced before.

The format of the class was deceptively simple: each day, students took turns playing songs for one another—some complete, some works in progress. After each performance, the class offered feedback to the performer. The professor and I participated, too, joining the feedback conversation and sometimes sharing works of our own. Occasionally, one of the two of us would slide into a more "traditional" teacher role and present a mini-lesson on a related topic—tips and tricks for lyric writing, examining how songwriters manipulate form—but, for the most part, we were just two members of a collaborative community. As professional musicians and music educators, we possessed a certain type of expertise, but this expertise was just one kind among the variety possessed by the class' members.

The brand new doctoral student in me felt excited and enlivened, even as the structure-obsessed middle school choir teacher in me squirmed ferociously in his chair. The assignments were open-ended, the tasks divergent. There were as many styles and experience levels, strengths and weaknesses, as there were students in the room. There was no upcoming ensemble performance to employ as an organizing force for instruction. No two songwriters needed the

same things; no two songwriters sought the same end. The students in the class seemed to grow—but how? They seemed to be learning—but who had taught them?

Having sung in, observed, and led thousands of choral rehearsals to that point, I felt rather secure about that type of music learning: pacing, sequencing, organization, gesture. I enjoyed this songwriting class and sensed that it was going well, but how should I know? How do songwriters learn their craft? How does one teach songwriting and teach it well?

Music Education in the 21st Century

By now, music educators are well familiar with the decades-old call for American "school music" to expand beyond the emphasis on large-ensemble performance that has predominated for more than a century (Kratus, 2007; Regelski, 2007; Williams, 2011; Woody, 2007). Though ensemble-based classes have excelled in meeting the needs of some music students, a more diverse set of school music offerings may better serve students whose musical interests do not align with large-ensemble performance traditions. Kratus (2007), warning that music education faces a crucial "tipping point," asserted that

> The nature of music in the world and the nature of music in school are… quite different things…Not only have in-school music experiences become disassociated from out-of-school music experiences, but tried-and-true music education practices have become unmoored from educational practices used in other disciplines. (p. 45)

Such claims are supported by research findings such as those from Campbell, Connell, and Beegle's (2007) study of students' attitudes toward music education, which highlighted the disconnection between students' musical activities at school and their musical lives outside of school. These investigators conducted a content analysis of 1,157 essays, submitted as a part of a contest sponsored by themusicedge.com and *Teen People* magazine, in which 13–18 year-olds

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articulated "justifications of music's continuing status as a subject for school study" (p. 223). The authors noted that many students…

> long for more provisions for the study of music that is *relevant to their needs, their interests, and their hopes and desires*…Students on the fringe of the school music program who once participated in ensembles but dropped them or who are "desperately seeking relevance" appealed for curricular developments in the study of popular music styles, including rock music ensembles that could be coached by music teachers and professional musicians. (p. 234, emphasis added)

Williams (2011) catalogued a number of reasons to question the dominance of large performing ensembles in American music education. The large size of ensemble classes cuts against established wisdom about the benefits of more intimate learning environments. The tendency of these classes to be director-centered potentially disallows opportunities for individual student creativity and agency. The narrow set of skills acquired in these classes largely fails to prepare students for lifelong musicianship, and the focus on performance may limit opportunities for other modes of musical engagement like listening, composing, and improvising. Regelski (2007) pointed to over-professionalization as a central problem in today's music education. The Western classical canon enjoys pride of place at the expense of most other musics, and the regarding of music study and participation as "serious business" (p. 25) foments a culture of specialization in which music-making is reserved for the capable few. Instead, Regelski proposed, music education should choose "amateuring" as its aim, envisioning a future in which students are prepared for and committed to a life of personal, amateur music-making, focused more on the gratifying, fulfilling nature of musical practice for all, rather than the intense, elite professionalism of the few.

Amidst these calls for change, scholars have suggested two related, but distinct, avenues of reform that might address the shortcomings of these outdated approaches. First, in order to achieve the relevance that music education is "desperately seeking" (Campbell et al., 2007, p. 234), reformers have proposed that the music that students listen to and enjoy outside of school—by and large, popular music of various kinds—find a more central place in school music curricula. Second, in order to allow for the individual student creativity that models focused exclusively on large ensemble performance sometimes constrain, writers have proposed focusing more carefully on music composition activities in the classroom. I will now consider these two "calls to action" in turn.

Popular/Vernacular Music

Given that the music that students make and study at school and the music that students participate in and enjoy outside of school are "quite different things" (Kratus, 2007, p. 45), many scholars have proposed that school music look critically at its anchoring in Western art music and embrace a wider array of styles/genres, including popular music in particular (Allsup, 2003, 2008; 2011; Boespflug, 1999; Cutietta, 1991; Green, 2002, 2004, 2008; Rodriguez, 2004; Tobias, 2015; Woody, 2007). Such recommendations are hardly novel: writing in a special edition of *Music Educators Journal* released on the heels of the Tanglewood Symposium, Fowler (1968) argued for admitting a wider variety of genres and styles into the music education sphere:

> The implications of this new psychology [Maslow's hierarchy and "peak experience"] for teaching music are profound. Musicians cannot be snobbish. The music suitable for providing peak experience is the music that is pragmatically suitable for the individual person. The music that moves adults often does not move children. Music educators would do well to remember what music first provided their own peak experience. They

must intensify the search for the means to open all kinds of music to all kinds of humans for the thrill and exhilaration it can provide. Move the student, win [the student's] heart and mind, and the music educator has accomplished a major goal. [The music educator] has launched a music lover. (p. 70).

More recently, Bowman (2004) listed a number of benefits to "taking popular music seriously," including the ability to "draw into the educational realm many students who are traditionally and currently excluded" (pp. 43–44). In addition merely to bringing more (kinds of) students into the "fold," Bowman suggested that taking popular music seriously could help music classrooms become truly "student-centered," in that the expertise students bring to music learning might be honored, valued, and given a central place:

Many students we currently fail to reach, and many of those we do reach, know a great deal more about music than we recognize. They think and talk about popular music intelligently, use it in all kinds of ways, and are extraordinarily discriminating in their choices. Indeed, they know a great deal of the field of music better than we do—powerful evidence of our neglect. Popular music is a powerful and influential part of the musical world to which we are largely and complacently oblivious. Such a blind spot seriously compromises our understanding of the whole. In turning our backs on popular musics and all that they entail, we deprive students of our insights while depriving ourselves of theirs (p. 46).

An emerging body of research is beginning to catalogue benefits of popular music in a way that strengthens these philosophical assertions. Allsup (2003), in a study of two groups of instrumental music students who convened after school to engage in collaborative composition projects, found that the group who elected to take a "jam band" approach to the project fared

much better than a group who chose to take a more "traditional" approach using instruments from band class. The "jam band" chose to use instrumentation typical of a rock band as well as a "jamming" approach to co-creation focused on loosely-structured collaborative improvisation— both of which seemed to enable the "mutual learning" and "democratic action" of this group. McGillen & McMillan (2005) studied a school-sponsored extracurricular garage band named Jungle Express and found that the learning environment was marked by positive interdependence, power sharing, affirmation of identity, and "sociomusical engagement," a term the authors coined to describe "the profound level of identification the participants had with the processes, products and interactions witnessed over the course of the study" (p. 13). Focusing more on specific skill development, Woody and Lehmann (2010) found that college music majors with substantial vernacular music-making experience required fewer listening repetitions and performance trials to render correctly melodies learned by ear, suggesting that bringing popular/vernacular music into the classroom not only answers the philosophical issues raised by authors above, but also potentially confers unique skill benefits related to ear training.

Despite these encouraging results, overall assessments of the profession's attempts to embrace popular music are sobering. Cutietta (1991) wrote, "I doubt…the writers of the Tanglewood Declaration would find much reason to be happy about the state of pop music [in schools] today" (p. 27). Where pop music has been embraced, it has sometimes been employed as part of a "bait and switch" tactic (Woody, 2007)—a carefully-laid trail of bread crumbs that ultimately leads to the study of Western art music. "Rare is the program," Cutietta (1991) lamented, "that truly looks at pop music as having unique musical qualities to offer. Rarer still are programs or techniques that have been adapted to include pop music in a way that allows it to have musical integrity and authenticity" (p. 28). Williams (2011) noted that, even where

educators have attempted to offer "alternative" courses, these classes too closely resemble large ensemble classes, "with neat rows of students, reading notation, performing the same piece at the same time, while being conducted or led by the teacher" (p. 53).

The main objection that these scholars have raised is that, while popular music has easily found a place among teachers' repertoire selections, the way it is taught fails to honor or reflect the ways in which this music is created and performed (Cutietta, 1991; Green, 2002, 2008; Woody, 2007). As Green (2008) explained, although changes in attitudes toward popular music have…

> …brought in a huge range of music as new curriculum *content*, this new content was largely approached through traditional teaching *methods.* Thus a new gap opened up, particularly in the realm of popular, as well as jazz and 'world' musics. For whilst a huge range of musics have entered the curriculum, the *processes* by which the relevant musical skills and knowledge are passed on and acquired in the world outside the school, have been left behind.…In this sense, popular, jazz and world musics—and indeed other previous curriculum content including folk and traditional musics, and even in some ways classical music itself—have been present in the school more as a simulacrum of the real thing than the real thing itself. (p. 3)

The task for music teachers, then, is not only to include popular music in their instruction, but also to teach it in a way that reflects an understanding and valuing of the musical processes associated with it.

Informal Learning

In response to this misalignment between the musical processes and practices associated with popular music and the way this music is presented in school, scholars have turned their

attention to understanding these processes and considering how they might be applied and/or incorporated in more formal settings (Campbell, 1995; Davis, 2005; Green, 2002, 2008; Jaffurs, 2004; Kastner, 2014). By and large, these writers have used the term "informal learning" (or any of several closely-related variants) to describe the learning processes and practices associated with popular music, and it is important to clarify what exactly is meant by this terminology.

Folkestad (2006), for example, warned that formal and informal learning modes should not be considered a dichotomy, but rather opposite ends of a continuum, as well as two members of a dialectical relationship. Still, by way of a general definition, Folkestad explained that "the *informal* learning situation is not sequenced beforehand; the activity steers the way of working/playing/composing, and the process proceeds by the interaction of the participants in the activity. It is also described as 'self-chosen and voluntary learning'" (p. 141).

Green (2002), whose seminal work in this area is discussed further below, explained her use of the term "informal music learning" this way:

> By "informal music learning" I mean a variety of approaches to acquiring musical skills and knowledge outside formal educational settings…Informal music learning practices may be both conscious and unconscious. They include encountering unsought learning experiences through enculturation in the musical environment; learning through interaction with others such as peers, family members or other musicians who are not acting as teachers in formal capacities; and developing independent learning methods through self-teaching techniques. (p. 16).

Folkestad (2006) clarified that one must be careful to distinguish whether one is discussing the distinction between formal and informal learning *situations* (i.e., the traditionally formal school setting versus the typically informal modes of learning that take place outside of school) or

between formal and informal *practices* (either of which could take place in a variety of settings). Recognizing this caveat, I use Green's term, "informal music learning practices," to describe the peer-to-peer and self-directed learning that popular musicians largely employ, regardless of whether these behaviors are situated in a typically "informal" environment (such as a rock band's weekly rehearsal) or a more "formal" space (such as a music classroom) where informal practices have been incorporated.

Studies of Popular Musicians' Informal Learning Practices

Several scholars have investigated the informal learning practices that popular musicians employ, often by studying garage/rock bands. Campbell's (1995) ethnographic investigation of two teenage garage bands established important insights that would inform subsequent endeavors. Campbell noted the salience of listening and copying—Campbell uses Bennett's (1980) term "song-getting"—in these bands' learning processes. The process of "song-getting" typically was guided by a kind of leader *pro tempore*, often a guitarist, who knew the song best and could explain/demonstrate chord changes, structural outlines, and so forth. Campbell noted, however, that there was "no sense among the players that the musical leader [was] precisely a teacher, or that a studio-style 'face-to-face pedagogy' was necessary in learning the song" (p. 18). When composing their own material (which was comparatively rare), individuals tended to bring an unfinished work to the group, which the band then collectively "filled in."

Green (2002, 2004, 2008) conducted some of the most important research in the area of informal learning. In her first major project (2002), she interviewed 14 popular musicians about their learning practices and processes, and her analysis yielded a number of overarching themes. First and foremost, Green, like Campbell (1995), found that popular musicians learn largely by listening to and copying recordings of other musicians' work. These musicians employ three

modes of listening: *purposive*, which is "the sort of listening any musician would employ when, for example, learning to play an exact copy or cover of a song"; *attentive*, which "may involve listening with the same level of detail as in purposive listening, but without any specific aim of learning something in order to be able to play, remember, compare or describe it afterwards"; and *distracted*, in which "the music is being attended to on and off, without any aim other than enjoyment and entertainment" (p. 24). Green also noted that, in addition to musicians' individual, self-directed learning, cooperative learning played an important role, both through *peer-directed learning* (specific, intentional tutelage from one musician to another) and *group learning* (which may take place in the course of a band's rehearsal, for example, but does not necessarily involve any explicit teaching act).

Green also paid particular attention to these musicians' attitudes toward their work. They tended to reject the word "disciplined" as a descriptor of their learning, since it carried connotations of external imposition and unpleasantness. They were, however, willing to embrace the term "systematic," reflecting the fact that they did take specific, intentional steps in their efforts to improve. In addition, the related elements of choice and enjoyment played important roles. While some musicians, especially in later stages of their careers, chose more regimented methods/materials (scales, arpeggios, other "exercises") to use in their learning, most of the learning took place in the process of pursuing aural models that they chose for themselves because they enjoyed them—notably different from more formal settings, in which good "teaching pieces" are selected by teachers because of the concepts and skills they reinforce. This commitment to pursuing the music they found most enjoyable, though, did not limit these musicians' tastes and attitudes toward other music. On the contrary, their tastes tended to be quite eclectic, including a widely-shared enthusiasm for and respect for classical music.

Recent studies of rock bands add to these findings. Jaffurs' (2004) study focused on the participant band's collaborative, democratic process, which reflected Green's (2002) conception of "group learning." Despite participants' assertion that no one was in charge, though, Jaffurs found that certain band members took on discernible leadership roles when needed, as was the case in Campbell's (1995) study. Both Davis (2005) and Biasutti (2012) conducted studies of rock bands in which they focused specifically on compositional process within a garage band. Davis (2005) found that "fiddling" and "jamming" were important precursors to group compositional activity. Echoing Campbell (1995), Davis found that band members brought partially-formed song ideas to the band for consideration, which they presented to the band through a form of peer-directed learning (Green, 2002) and then completed with the band's input and assistance.

Informal Learning Practices in Formal Scholastic Settings

Research conducted with musicians outside formal music learning environments has generated important knowledge about the informal learning practices employed by popular/vernacular musicians, and these scholars have all suggested that their findings could inform and influence the practice of music teachers in more formal settings. A more recent study by Green (2008), then, took the critical "next step." Green developed and tested a pilot curriculum for use in schools that applied what she learned in her study of popular musicians' informal learning practices. Her curriculum planning followed five overarching principles garnered from the previous study: (1) that learners have the opportunity to choose what music they study, (2) that copying/learning from recordings would form the core of student activity, (3) that activities would combine self-directed learning with both peer-directed and group learning, (4) that students would attempt to learn entire, intact pieces of music in "haphazard,

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idiosyncratic, and holistic ways" (p. 10) rather than following a tightly-sequenced lesson plan, and (5) that listening, performing, and improvising would be integrated throughout the project.

The curriculum unfolded in several stages. In the first stage, "dropping pupils into the deep end" (p. 27), students formed groups and adjourned to separate practice spaces with a variety of instruments (guitars, bass, keyboards, drums), where they were instructed to choose a song they liked and to learn it together by ear from a CD, with minimal teacher guidance. In the second phase, students learned a pre-selected tune from a CD, which this time contained additional tracks that presented isolated song elements (a broken-down guitar riff, for example) that were intended to help scaffold students' learning processes. In the third stage, students returned to the "deep end" and learned another choice song. Stage four engaged the group in a collaborative composing project, followed by stage five, in which "experts" (either outside professionals or more-experienced peers) discussed and modeled the composing/songwriting process for students. In stages six and seven, students applied the previously-used informal practices to learning classical pieces from recordings.

Although many of the teachers involved in the project struggled with its execution—especially the requirement that they "hang back" and allow the students to explore with minimal structure/guidance—teachers and researchers alike noted a number of positive benefits offered by the project. There was a notable spike in students' motivation—even from students identified as "disaffected"—in response to the opportunity to work on "their" music and to manage their own learning processes. Though they struggled to remain on the sidelines and let students engage in minimally structured discovery, teachers were quite surprised at what students were able to learn without their help. Eventually, students did need and call for teachers' help, but teachers' sharing of expertise was then framed by the curiosity generated by students' efforts to explore

musical material on their own. Perhaps most strikingly, students' efforts to learn "their music" by ear enabled them to "get inside" the music and appreciate its compositional material—a disposition they may be able to carry with them as they explore and study other musical styles, including folk music, classical music, and music from a variety of cultural backgrounds. In the final stages of the project, students' efforts to learn classical music by ear, using the same informal practices used earlier, nudged them beyond their beliefs that classical music was "boring" or "for old people" and into a deeper appreciation of the music's material.

Kastner (2014) conducted a case study of a professional development community (PDC) she convened to support elementary and intermediate music teachers interested in incorporating informal learning practices in their school music classrooms. The group met eight times over the course of an academic year; at each meeting, teachers shared activities they had introduced in their classrooms, read and discussed a research article related to informal learning in school music settings, and then worked together to devise additional strategies and approaches for implementing informal practices in their classrooms. Kastner found that this time allowed teachers to develop "experiments and modifications"—that is, new activities that used informal learning and modifications of previously-taught lessons with informal learning in mind, as well as modifications of activities discussed in research articles, since they typically involved older adolescents and needed to be adapted to suit the needs of these teachers' younger students. Teachers also developed new pedagogical practices as they explored how much to scaffold their instruction and how much control to share with students. Teachers also found themselves valuing the informal music learning activities for they ways they strengthened students' motivation and independent musicianship. Kastner's (2014) work extends Green's (2002, 2008) work, as it

offers an example of how teachers who pursue informal learning activities in their classrooms can support one another.

These studies of informal music learning practices, and especially Green's (2008) work toward their classroom application, forge important new ground for music educators who are committed to including popular music in their classrooms in a way that is cognizant and respectful of the way popular music is created and learned. These findings are mostly restricted, however, to the rock/pop genre from which they come. As Kruse (2014) noted,

> These [pop/rock] musical traditions often have been omitted from American school music classrooms, and explorations in these areas have offered valuable insights; however, greater diversity in this literature would improve efforts toward place-conscious music education. Pop and rock music certainly are relevant for some students in some places, but it should not be assumed that this music will be relevant for all students in all places. (p. 16)

Studying the work of musicians in other styles and genres, then, would build deeper understanding of how informal learning practices are utilized across the musical spectrum. Further, Tobias (2012) noted that this body of research is limited by its emphasis on performance: "Though performance-focused programmes integrating popular music and informal learning practices offer new directions for secondary curricula, additional courses that do not have performance or instruments as a main focus offer additional avenues worthy of exploration" (p. 330). Encouragingly, recent investigations of online learning communities (e.g., Waldron, 2009, 2012, 2013), folk musicians (e.g., Waldron & Veblen, 2009), and hip-hop musicians (e.g., Kruse, 2014; Söderman & Folkestad, 2004) are beginning to situate the

investigation of informal music learning practices in a wider variety of contexts, and more researchers should follow these scholars' lead.

Composition

In addition to calling for a wider variety of musics to be represented in the school music classroom, scholars have called for music education to go further in allowing for and nurturing individual student creativity, including more frequent and rich experience with music composition (Barrett, 2003; Kaschub & Smith, 2013; Williams, 2011). Both recent sets of national standards acknowledge composition as an essential element of comprehensive music study (Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, 1994; National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2014), and the appearance of numerous professional resources to support music teachers' composition pedagogy (e.g., Hickey, 2003; Kaschub & Smith, 2009, 2013; Randles & Stringham, 2013) evinces music teachers' interest in and commitment to according composition its due place within music curricula.

Like the inclusion of popular/vernacular music styles, the expansion of opportunities for students to explore their creative abilities may fulfill needs not always met in traditional performance-/ensemble-oriented models. As Williams (2011) suggested,

the teacher in the large-ensemble model is most likely making practically all the musical and creative decisions. In this educational design, students are most often reduced to technicians, simply carrying out the creative wishes of their music director….While control of creative decision making is important for the large-ensemble director, new models of music education would benefit from allowing students to learn from their own creative decisions. Additionally, students would benefit in models where creative decision making plays a much more important role in the process of learning, where

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composing/arranging/improvising are at least as important as performing and listening. (pp. 53–54)

Kaschub and Smith (2013), arguing for composition to occupy a more central place in school music curricula, identified three important shifts in musical culture that compel teachers to focus on composition in their music teaching. First, the authors acknowledged the rise of "autonomous access" to music, noting that "access to music is instant, all-pervasive, and no longer bound by place or time" and that "this emerging individualized musical independence heralds the need for equally distinctive and personalized educational opportunities" (p. 4). Second, they note that with recent technological developments has come an increasing focus on the individual. While group instruction remains important, they argue, this shift toward individual musical experience requires that music education focus on music as a vehicle for the performance of selfhood. Finally, the authors echo numerous acknowledgements that current music education models serve only a limited subset of the broader student population:

> For the most part, school music offerings draw a very specific, performance-oriented population, while students with interests in other areas of music are left underserved. Though the training of musical performers filled a vital societal need at a time when music could only be experienced if performers were present, this period has long since passed. (pp. 4–5).

Again, the authors acknowledge, the rapid pace of progress in music-related technology empowers teachers now more than ever to give students experiences with a wide variety of modes of musical engagement.

An important epistemological shift must accompany these societal and technological developments. Allsup (2013), pointing to the work of Barthes (1977), argued that even relatively

recent "praxial" philosophies of music education (Elliott, 1995) focus too much on closed

musical forms in a time when music education must focus instead on open musical texts.

Whereas music education typically has focused on (reverence for) musical *works*, which are

"constituted by hierarchy, location, and the categorical divisions of genre, form, and labor"

(Allsup, 2013, p. 62), the notion of *texts* offers "a new aesthetic theory in which diversity-

affirming webs of relationships [replace] the self-contained forms that composers like Stravinsky

sought to control, and performance educators like Elliott sought to replicate" (p. 63). Allsup

explained further:

> For Barthes, the text exists at the moment of production; it is an unfinished field in which
>
> a plurality of signifiers (meanings, enunciations, touches, and discourses) interacts above
>
> and below the level of propositional knowledge. The text does not displace explicit codes
>
> or propositional knowledge—it cannot—but the relative value of an explicit code, (say) a
>
> perfectly tuned octave or properly demonstrated legato tonguing, is determined within
>
> and through its relationship to other signifiers/discourses within the larger field in which
>
> it is being composed. (p. 63)

Embracing the notion of open musical texts, then, results in important consequences:

> New metaphors have emerged that suggest a dramatic change has taken place in the terms
>
> upon which the social contract between composer, performer, and audience is now
>
> drawn….There is never only one way to know a piece of music, never only one way to
>
> interpret it, perform it, use it, or cite it. The social contract upon which the praxial
>
> philosophy of music education was built has now been turned on its head, with the
>
> curiosity-seeker in charge, not the teacher, not the author-composer. (p. 64)

This shift of power, Allsup argued, favors a focus on composition in the music classroom, as it "assumes that all students come to an educational encounter equipped with multiple literacies, and that they wish to employ the largest range of modalities available to them to communicate with others and to create self-reflective musical events" (p. 67).

Research has begun to document the potential benefits of this shift of focus. Hogenes, van Oers, Diekstra, and Sklad (2015) implemented a series of music lessons with fifth and sixth graders in a school where music was not among the regular curricular offerings. Half of the music classes in the study received music instruction that focused on performance, while the other half received music instruction focused on composition. Though questionnaire results suggested that both groups found their music lessons engaging (not surprising, given that school music was novel in this context), they also suggested that the composition-based activities were significantly more engaging than their performance-oriented counterparts.

Hickey's (1997) investigation of compositional process among students in a weekend computer music course focused specifically on two students who, though identified in the "regular" music classroom as less talented or capable, exhibited notable creative capacity in their compositional efforts. Bolton's (2008) investigation of a "distance learning" model for composition instruction, in which the researcher coached individual students' computer-based compositions in an online platform, generated similar results. Like Hickey's (1997) participants, the focal participant in Bolton's (2008) study was hardly identified as a "high-flyer"; the school's principal even described him as "one of the most behaviourally and academically challenging students in the whole school" (p. 46). Despite seeming disengaged from other academic work, Josh (the participant) found immediate enthusiasm for and success with the compositional activities he completed.

While Josh's pleasure was evident in his journey through the project, so was his growing

ability in composition. Josh's pieces were characterised by increasing substance,

structure, and creative musical thinking. It appeared that despite previously limited

musical experience, he was able to demonstrate musical knowledge and imaginative

musical thinking through the use of music software. (pp. 51–52)

Both Hickey's (1997) and Bolton's (2008) results underline Kaschub and Smith's (2013)

arguments about the benefits of composition, especially the notion that increasing composition's

share of the curriculum might assist in meeting the needs of students whose musical desires and

gifts are not addressed or nourished in many current models.

Bolton (2008) also noted the benefits of compositional activity for Josh's self-concept as

a musician, a connection that has been documented by multiple scholars. Randles (2010)

investigated the relationship between music composition experience and musical self-concept, as

reflected in scores on the Self-Esteem of Musical Ability measure (Schmitt, 1979). Randles

administered SEMA before and after implementing computer-based composition assignments

within the context of a high school band class. In both pre- and post-tests, music composition

experience proved one of the strongest predictors of students' musical self-concept, suggesting

that experience with composition is a key ingredient in helping students construct strong

identities as musicians. Albert's (in press) qualitative study of high school students who

participated in a composition competition yielded similar findings, in that the affirmation of

being admitted to the competition strengthened their self-concepts as musicians, which may in

turn strengthen their commitment to continue engaging in compositional activity.

These findings regarding composition as a boon to musical self-concept are especially

important in light of the fact that students' creative abilities often are underestimated—and

therefore under-addressed and under-nourished in the classroom. Both Hickey's (1997) and Bolton's (2008) studies show the way that composition was able to "bring out" of certain students a musical and creative potential not previously identified or realized. Menard (2015) implemented a series of composition activities in two different school settings, one a traditional high school band program and the other an accelerated general music program for students identified as gifted. Although the general music program afforded its students more experience with music composition, pieces composed by students in the traditional band program received some of the highest scores when compositions were rated. As with Hickey's (1997) and Bolton's (2008) participants, it may be that these students' creative abilities go unrecognized in more traditional music learning settings.

Other benefits of composition instruction have emerged. In Menard's (2015) study, despite the traditional band teacher's hesitancy about devoting so much time to composition activities when performance pressures loomed large, participants' comments suggested that they made direct connections between what they learned from the composition unit and their performance activities as an ensemble. Stauffer (2001) found, in a study of an elementary-aged composer named Meg, that participation in weekly composition sessions using a computer platform called *Making Music* enhanced this student's ability to "think in sound":

> Her purposeful use of specific timbres and gestures, as well as her descriptions of which ones she used and why, indicated that she had internalized them and was making conscious choices related to how specific qualities of sound affected her pieces. (p. 15)

Far from being a narrow, rare skill set, composition is a musical practice that has broad benefits. Note that, although Allsup (2013) suggested that "a musical pedagogy of open texts is one that places composing at the center of all activities" (p. 67), this hardly banishes

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performance and other musical activities from the classroom. Rather, this perspective—strengthened by the research findings discussed above—welcomes composition as a core, fundamental component of educating the whole musician. Here, though, I will echo the call made by Kruse (2014), Tobias (2012), and others regarding the study of popular music. Just as "popular" (or "vernacular") music manifests itself in many styles and traditions, so does the act of composition. Scholars risk unduly limiting the study of composition if they ground it exclusively in a Western conception of musical creation, in which musical works are created by lone composers in notation-based environments. Like the study of popular music, the study of composition must reach as far as it can, into as many genres and styles as possible, in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of how various musics are created and how these creative processes might find informed reflection in music teacher' classroom practice.

Songwriting

Among the forms of musical activity that deserve scholarly and pedagogical attention is popular songwriting, a practice that only recently has begun to find footing in music classrooms. Songwriting lives at the intersection of the major calls for reform cited above: it is both a form of popular music making and a type of music composition. Kratus (2013), who has championed songwriting as a candidate for inclusion among school music curricula, asserted that "the song may be humanity's most ubiquitous and enduring form of music" (p. 267). Kratus further emphasized that songs, which "have served to express the depth and breadth of human experience, imagination, and feeling" (pp. 267–268), are central to the musical lives of adolescents—that is, the musical lives of those who appear in our music classrooms daily. Kratus explained,

From the lullaby to the requiem, songs are and always have been the "people's music":

easily performed on the instrument we all possess [the voice] and readily reverberating

through our memories. It is not surprising, then, that songs play a predominant role in the

musical lives of today's young people, and all people for that matter. The mp3 players

that so many adolescents possess are loaded with songs, and, in fact, the memory size of

these devices is measured in terms of the number of songs they can hold. For most young

people the words "music" and "songs" are synonymous. The musical world of

adolescents is a landscape of songs. (p. 268)

Despite the numerous qualities that recommend the song—its ubiquity, its accessibility, its

immediacy of expressive power, its relevance—Kratus noted that "songs" and "songwriting"

often enjoy only second-rate status in elite musical environments, such as college and university

departments, schools, and colleges of music. "Singing and playing your own songs can get you

thrown out of a practice room" (p. 268), he quipped.

Not surprisingly, then, songwriting has enjoyed little attention in the music education

research literature. Despite a wealth of research on compositional process in a variety of settings

(Allsup, 2003; Bennett, 1976; Biasutti, 2012; Burland & Davidson, 2001; Campbell, 1995;

Colley, Banton, Down, & Pither, 1992; Collins, 2005; Collins & Dunn, 2011; Davidson &

Welsh, 1988; Folkestad, Hargreaves, & Lindström, 1998; Hewitt, 2008; Hopkins, 2015;

Kennedy, 1999, 2002; Kratus, 1989, 1994, 2001; Miell & MacDonald, 2000; Stollery, 2013;

Whistlecroft, 2013; Wiggins, 1994; Wilson & Wales, 1995; Younker, 2000; Younker & Smith,

1996), only a few studies have investigated the songwriting process as such (Bennett, 2014;

deVries, 2005; McIntyre, 2011). Within the research that does exist, songwriting studies (like

other composition investigations) have documented its benefits for self-esteem (Draves, 2008),

personal development (Riley, 2012), and development of musical identity (Tobias, 2012). Music

therapists have studied the use of songwriting in their practice relatively extensively (Baker, 2013; Baker & Krout, 2012; Baker, Wigram, Stott, & McFerran, 2008, 2009; Dalton & Krout, 2006), and songwriting's therapeutic benefits certainly have meaningful correspondence with some of music education's intended outcomes, especially enhancing and refining students' powers of personal expression. Understanding the personal and musical benefits of songwriting is important; however, music teachers who wish to include songwriting in their curricula would benefit from a more thorough understanding of the songwriting process and how it is learned.

Need For the Study

For music teachers who wish to heed calls to embrace popular music and to focus more on composition in their classrooms, songwriting is an ideal musical activity to pursue. As is the case with other forms of popular music making, however, teachers must guard against including songwriting as part of their curricula without being informed by and grounded in the ways songwriting is learned by those engaged in the "real world" of professional songwriting. Otherwise, teachers run the risk of creating songwriting experiences in school that have no relationship to the experience of creative professionals in this domain (Green, 2008). For a popular musical form whose pedagogical foundations are just being laid, the time is ripe for a study that investigates the informal teaching and learning practices of songwriting's professional practitioners.

Purpose and Problems

With the intent of informing the practice of music educators who teach songwriting in K–12 and college/university classrooms, the purpose of this research is to examine how professional songwriters in Nashville, Tennessee—one of songwriting's professional "hubs"—teach and learn from one another in the process of engaging in collaborative songwriting. This study viewed

songwriting as a form of "situated learning" (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and "situated practice" (Folkestad, 2012) whose investigation required consideration of the professional culture that surrounds creative activity in a specific context (i.e., Nashville). The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do collaborative songwriters describe the process of being inducted to, and learning within, the practice of professional songwriting in Nashville?

2. What teaching and learning behaviors can be identified in the collaborative songwriting processes of Nashville songwriters?

3. Who are the important actors in the process of learning to be a collaborative songwriter in Nashville, and what roles do they play (e.g., gatekeeper, mentor, role model)?

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH

Songwriting has received relatively little attention in the research literature. A few studies have examined the creative process of songwriting itself, but others have focused more on the personal and musical benefits of songwriting teaching and learning environments. Because this study grounds the learning of songwriting in the creative processes employed by professional songwriters, it is informed by previous studies of the compositional process in a variety of domains, though they do not necessarily focus specifically on songwriting. Therefore, this review of research will focus on these two bodies of literature. First, I will discuss how compositional process has been examined in the music education literature, followed by an examination of the emerging literature regarding songwriting, including the studies that are beginning to probe the creative process within the domain of songwriting.

Compositional Process Research

Composition takes place in a variety of settings, and composers come in a variety of ages, experience levels, professional statuses, and so forth. Some have investigated individual composers' processes by speaking with professional composers, by comparing processes utilized by novices and experts, and by investigating the processes of student composers engaged in compositional tasks. Scholars also have attended to particular dynamics of group compositional processes as well, both in traditional school settings and in vernacular ensembles. I will now review important findings from research conducted with each of these populations.

Professional Composers

Those individuals who compose daily and for a living form an obvious population of interest for music education researchers. The body of experience that these individuals possess allows them to have a perspective on composition as a repeated, regular practice, rather than as

an anomalous, one-off experience. Bennett (1976) interviewed eight professional composers about their compositional histories and processes. From these interviews, Bennett was able to articulate a series of steps that seemed to underlie the outlines of all eight composers' processes. All seemed first to develop a "germinal idea," then sketch that idea, then create a first draft of a piece, work to elaborate and refine it, copy a final draft, and then make further revisions after the work's first performance. Although not fully generalizable, such a rough process outline might help teachers consider the stages through which students might need to proceed as they develop their own compositions.

Collins (2005) engaged in an extended case study of a professional composer over the course of three years. As the composer worked on his home computer, Collins observed him, asked him to "think aloud" by describing his actions and decisions, and captured various versions of compositions as they progressed by asking the composer to use the "Save-As" function at regular intervals. From analysis of the data, Collins was able to develop his own model (refined and clarified in Collins & Dunn, 2011) of stages in this composer's process of solving compositional problems: postulating broad aims, developing themes/motifs, making small-scale revisions, and seeing the broader picture/generating solutions.

Professional composers also have written scholarly reflections on compositional process, interrogating their own habits and procedures as composers. Stollery (2013) provided a retrospective journey through his 30 years as an electronic/acousmatic composer, describing how his working style has developed alongside evolutions in audio technology and the dawn of digital music. He emphasized the important role of listening in his work, as well as the importance of using unedited, recorded sounds as signifiers of place.

Whistlecroft (2013), also an electronic composer, interrogated her own experience as a composer whose work focuses on "found" sounds. For Whistlecroft, conversations regarding compositional method or process necessarily bring along the baggage of "intent," which seems ill-fitted to her self-described "beachcomber-bowerbird" approach. Her process, like Stollery's (2013), places a great deal of emphasis on listening and on allowing the sounds that she finds to be the primary determinants of her process, rather than following a pre-determined, authorial plan. Certainly, Stollery's (2013) and Whistlecroft's (2013) reflections provide valuable insight into the particular compositional world of electronic music, which operates with different materials and within different parameters from those employed in other types of music composition.

Although these interviews and self-studies offer helpful lenses into professional composers' thinking about composing, they are filtered by the composers' recollections and reflections and may miss some specific details related to process. Another option for examining experts' compositional processes, then, is to engage in studies that compare expert composition with novice composition.

Expert/Novice Comparisons

Comparing the compositional processes of experts and novices can help clarify how each group approaches a given task, but also can give a sense of what kinds of learning take place on the way to becoming an expert. Davidson and Welsh (1988) compared the compositional processes of two groups of conservatory students: a "beginner" group, composed of freshmen who had just begun conservatory study, and an "experienced" group of juniors who had completed two years of study at the conservatory. Researchers presented students with a pre-determined rhythmic pattern and asked them to devise a melody for it, with the stipulation that

the melody must begin in C major, modulate to F-sharp major, and then return to the original

key. The authors observed these composers at work, asking them to "think aloud" about their

musical decisions along the way. They audio-recorded and transcribed these composing sessions

for analysis and also examined copies of students' written work. Both groups seemed to follow a

relatively linear process, working from "left to right," but the experienced students seemed to

work in larger chunks and make clearer efforts to connect melodic figures with each other

motivically. The first-year students, on the other hand, tended to work note-by-note and to

engage in a significant amount of "sensorimotor" exploration at the keyboard, trying out series of

pitches in order to find a suitable next note in their melodies. The scholars suggested that the two

years of conservatory training that the experienced students enjoyed, including studies of theory

and harmony, may have equipped them to think more successfully "in sound."

Colley, Banton, Down and Pither (1992) studied the work of three novices (first-semester

undergraduate students) and one expert (a member of the composition faculty at the given

institution) as they completed a partially-harmonized Bach chorale tune. Only the expert was

able to complete the task in the time allotted. Consonant with the findings of Davidson and

Welsh (1988), the authors found that the expert was able to think about the problem in larger

"chunks," whereas the novices took a more "atomistic approach" to the task. The researchers tied

this finding to previous research indicating that one element of expertise is the ability to turn "ill-

structured" problems into "well-structured" problems by organizing large tasks into component

parts.

Younker and Smith (1996) worked with four participants: a high school novice, a high

school expert, an adult novice, and an adult expert. The study's design resembled the approach

employed by Davidson and Welsh (1988), in that participants were assigned to write a melody

that modulated to a second key and then returned to the original. Unlike Davidson and Welsh, Younker and Smith did not specify the rhythm for the entire melody; rather, they presented each composer with a "bank" of rhythmic figures to use in their compositions. Their findings echoed those of earlier studies, in that novice composers tended to work note-by-note, from start to finish. The expert composers, on the other hand, spent some time improvising freely before committing to any compositional decisions.

Kennedy (1999) compared the processes of a high school composer and a graduate composition major, both of whom worked to create a setting of a Robert Frost poem for voice and piano. Though both relied on a fair amount of "doodling" (free improvisation) in their processes, the younger composer used it throughout her process, whereas the older composer used it only to generate initial ideas. In interviews, both composers accounted for the role of conscious and unconscious processes in development of their pieces. Kennedy suggested that the two composers' processes actually were quite similar, though they applied various techniques with different levels of skill and/or sophistication.

These comparison studies of novices and experts help to clarify differences between the approaches that less- and more-experienced composers take when they face a compositional problem. In general, it appears that the experts are more able to organize the larger task into "chunks," which allows them to compose more efficiently. Reviewing these expert versus novice studies can help teachers guide students to more sophisticated ways of engaging with compositional process; however, further work with students alone might help teachers to more deeply understand how students approach compositional tasks.

Individual Student Composers

Many researchers have investigated how student composers, across a spectrum of age groups/ranges, have approached various compositional tasks. Kratus (1989, 1994, 2001) conducted an important group of time-analysis studies that investigated the way children apportioned their time as they completed a short composition assignment. In the first study (Kratus, 1989), 7-, 9-, and 11-year-olds were asked to spend ten minutes composing a new melody at a small electronic keyboard. At the end of the ten-minute period, to assess whether students were able to replicate their creations, Kratus asked them to perform their melodies twice. Kratus audio-recorded the composing sessions and the performances. Then, with the assistance of additional judges, he coded each five-second segment of each student's composing session as one of four compositional behaviors: exploration, development, repetition, or silence. He and his research assistants also scored each composer's performances on a three-point rating scale, according to how well that performer was able to replicate her/his composition. The younger children (7 years old) spent substantially more time engaged in exploration, whereas older students (9 and 11 years old) seemed more focused on the processes of development and repetition. Kratus also found, not surprisingly, that students who engaged in more repetition during the composing period were more able to replicate their melodies in performance.

In a follow-up study using a similar design, Kratus (1994) investigated whether there might be a relationship between students' audiation ability, as measured by the Intermediate Measures of Music Audiation (Gordon, 1982), and their compositional processes and products. This time, Kratus worked only with 9-year-old participants. In general, Kratus found that students with higher audiation scores were less likely to use exploration, and more likely to use

development and silence. Because these students were able to represent sounds in their minds, they may have relied less on audible representations (i.e., exploration) of new ideas.

In the final study in this series, Kratus (2001) used xylophones with various combinations of bars in order to assess whether the number of pitches available, or the tonality of the given pitch set, affected students' use of the four compositional processes. Xylophone bars were rearranged to reflect one of two pitch range conditions (5 bars or 10 bars) and one of two tonality conditions (pentatonic or harmonic minor), resulting in four treatment groups: 5-bar pentatonic, 5-bar harmonic minor, 10-bar pentatonic, 10-bar harmonic minor. A group of outside judges also rated the final products. Kratus found that students in both 10-bar conditions spent more time in exploration and that students in both harmonic minor conditions were more likely to end their compositions on the implied tonic pitch.

Henry (2002) used Kratus' procedure for analyzing compositional processes and products among fourth-grade students who were divided into four treatment groups. One group received regular tonal and rhythmic pattern instruction. Another received repeated opportunities to compose at small electronic keyboards. A third group received both pattern instruction and repeated keyboard composition practice, and a fourth group, which served as the control, received neither. Like Kratus (1994), Henry also measured students' musical aptitude using the IMMA; unlike Kratus, Henry found no significant difference between high- and low-aptitude students' compositional processes. The strongest compositional products emerged from the group that received both pattern instruction and repeated opportunities to compose at keyboards. While repeated exposure to the keyboards themselves might help students to acclimate to the instrument's mechanics, Henry's findings suggest that the musical vocabulary students develop through pattern instruction is critical in developing their compositional skills.

As in Kratus' and Henry's studies, Wilson and Wales (1995) observed elementary-aged children (ages 7 and 9) as they completed a short, ten-minute compositional task. Rather than use xylophones or keyboards, however, they used computer software with a relatively simple interface that allowed students to create melodies, regardless of their level of musical ability or training. The researchers analyzed students' completed melodies for their rhythmic and tonal cohesiveness and also observed qualitative features of students' processes as they worked. Students who used sequential, left-to-right approach tended to receive higher scores of rhythmic and tonal cohesiveness, suggesting that these students had a stronger understanding of music's temporal and tonal aspects. The authors also found that students with higher-rated compositions used the eraser feature (to make edits) more often, whereas they used the playback feature less often. Perhaps these participants had stronger mental representations of their melodies. They may have relied on the playback mechanism less because their inner hearing was strong, and they may have used the editing feature more because they were able to detect discrepancies between their internal representations of their compositions and their realizations in the computer program.

Kratus' (1989, 1994, 2001), Wilson and Wales' (1995), and Henry's (2002) studies focused on short, laboratory-style tasks with children. Others have focused on more extended and/or more open-ended approaches to investigating composition. Younker (2000) observed 8-, 11-, and 14-year-old students over the course of several computer composing sessions. She also asked the students to "think aloud" as they composed and interviewed them intermittently. From her analysis, she was able to identify five processes that students tended to use during their composing: exploring, recording, evaluating, practicing, and editing. As in research that compared experts and novices, Younker found that older students were more likely to connect

sections thoughtfully, whereas younger students composed in an "atomistic," note-by-note fashion. Echoing Younker & Smith (1996), Younker (2000) also found that the older students tended to engage in a time of purposeful improvisation/exploration before making any firm compositional decisions.

Folkestad, Hargreaves, and Lindström (1998) also worked with students as they completed open-ended, computer-based composition tasks during weekly after-school sessions without teacher instruction. The researchers used the previously-described "save-as method" to capture successive iterations of students' compositions and also interviewed students occasionally about the their processes and products. These authors classified students' working processes into two overarching groups: vertical and horizontal. Vertical composers completed all portions of a given compositional fragment or section—melody, rhythm, harmony, instrumentation, other arrangement details—before moving on to the next section. Horizontal composers tended to compose the framework for the entire piece—at the piano, for example—before going back and filling in details of harmony, arrangement, and so forth. The authors also highlighted the diversity of students' compositional processes, reminding readers that no single, ideal compositional process exists. Teachers, then, should be prepared to attend to individual differences in compositional approach.

Kennedy (2002) studied four high school students' processes as they completed two different composition tasks: an open-ended task at a computer, and another task in which they were assigned to set a given text to music. Students audio-recorded their working sessions (these tapes were referred to as "audio journals") and engaged in interviews with the researcher. Through her analysis, Kennedy found that several time issues were important factors in these students' processes: time use, "thinking time," and preferred working time. In terms of time use,

these students tended to procrastinate on tasks, but also to work quickly when they were composing. They tended to generate "first drafts" rapidly and consider them complete without revision. Students also seemed to need a fair amount of "thinking time" away from direct work on the task, allowing their compositions to unfold in their minds, reflecting the "incubation" portion of the creative process identified by Wallas (1926) and Webster (1987). Lastly, students mentioned needing quiet time in order to be able to compose—so they often preferred to work at night, when others were not awake to disturb them as they composed.

These studies of individual compositional processes among students can be an important aid to teachers' understanding of the compositional process. Although Folkestad et al.'s (1998) reminder that a diversity of processes should be embraced is apt, some compositional process behaviors may be more productive/successful than others, and teachers may wish to coach students in certain directions as they compose. Organizing a larger task into manageable "steps" or "chunks" seems to be an identified behavior of both adult expert and experienced student composers, so teachers of composition may need to help students develop this ability. Free exploration plays an important role as well—although Kratus (1989, 1994, 2001) associated more time spent in exploration with younger, less experienced composers, Younker (2000) found that older students tended to engage in purposeful improvisation before committing to specific compositional decisions. Students may need guidance in how to use intentional exploration/improvisation in their compositional processes. The preceding studies, however, focus on individual compositional processes, and may not adequately describe how composition unfolds in pairs and groups. In the next section, I turn to studies that have specifically examined these collaborative processes.

Composing in Groups

Although much can be learned from compositional processes of individual composers, the process of composing in a group may have its own distinct features and deserves its own attention. Scholars have studied this phenomenon both in traditional "school music" settings and in more "vernacular" settings. Wiggins (1994) observed elementary students as they engaged in group composition projects, specifically focusing on the work of two "target" students whom she identified as rich cases through which to view the phenomenon. In general, she found that these fifth-grade students followed a whole-part-whole process, in which they first established the broad aims of a given project, then worked on individual contributions to the piece, then came back together to synthesize/unify the finished product. Wiggins pointed out that, unlike Kratus' (1989) findings, the role of so-called "random" exploration did not play a major role, since any individual explorations were guided by the broad aims established by the group.

Miell & MacDonald (2000) observed pairs of 11- and 12-year-old students as they worked together for fifteen minutes to compose melodies. Half of the pairs were identified friends and half of the pairs were not. The researchers coded the types of communication that occurred between members of each pair, paying particular attention to the distinction between transactive versus non-transactive communication (Kruger, 1992) that took place. Transactive communication, which is thought to be a marker of true collaboration, occurs when an individual interacts with an idea previously raised by one's partner or oneself—by extending it, elaborating on it, or otherwise working on it. The researchers found that friend pairs engaged in more transactive talk, more musical dialogue (playing/singing as opposed to talking), and fewer simple agreements or unelaborated disagreements. When outside judges rated the compositions, friends groups' compositions fared better, and a correlation emerged between amount of transactive talk

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and the rating of the composition. This suggests that transactive talk not only improves the quality of the interaction, but also results in a higher-quality final product. Hewitt (2008) observed 10- and 11-year old students as they co-composed melodies at a computer and also focused on transactive versus non-transactive communication in these pairs. Unlike Miell and MacDonald (2000), his findings revealed no significant differences between friendship and non-friendship pairs in terms of transactive communication. There was some evidence to suggest that whichever partner was designated the "lead" partner (that is, the partner that teachers identified as most likely to lead/guide the pair's work) engaged in more transactive communication than his/her non-"lead" counterpart.

Burland and Davidson (2001) also investigated how pairings affected compositional process. Students from two different elementary schools were placed into one of five types of groups: friendship, non-friendship, matched-intelligence, mixed-intelligence, and control (random assignment). These groups completed ten 15-minute composition exercises, which the researchers videotaped and analyzed. Groups' interactions were rated according to a checklist of research-based indicators of quality interaction, and groups' final compositions were assessed using a rating scale. In general, friendship groups achieved the highest interaction scores, with stronger interaction scores also found in single-gender groups. Unlike Miell & MacDonald, the authors found no relationship between grouping type and rating of compositional product.

Hopkins (2015) observed the work of high school orchestra students who divided into chamber groups and engaged in a collaborative composition task. Before students began working, Hopkins administered a survey designed to capture information about students' levels of experience with music performance and composition; from this survey, he was able to calculate a Musical Performance and Composing Experience (MPCE) score for each individual

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student. As he observed video of each group's recording session, he determined the amount of time spent in task-directed talk (TDT), task-directed playing (TDP), off-task talk (OTT), and off-task playing (OTP). Using these data, Hopkins calculated an overall productivity score using the formula (TDT + TDP) – (OTT + OTP). He also tabulated each individual group member's number of contributions, which allowed him to generate a "collaboration score" for each group. This score reflected whether group members contributed equally or if certain personalities tended to dominated. Hopkins found a correlation between MPCE score and productivity score, suggesting that students with more musical experience were able to focus better on the compositional task. Strikingly, though, the MPCE score did not correlate meaningfully with the final ratings of groups' compositions. Groups with more balanced collaboration tended to achieve higher ratings of their final composition, and mixed-gender groups were more likely to engage in balanced cooperation overall.

While these studies focus less on the individual musical decisions and outcomes that students make as they compose, they are able to illuminate how powerful social dynamics can be in shaping students' compositional processes (and perhaps the resulting products). Kruger's (1992) distinction between transactive and non-transactive communication types holds particular promise for further study in collaborative composing settings, as it allows a window into which types of interaction are mostly likely to result in a successful compositional process for students who work in pairs or groups. Findings regarding the positive effect that friendship grouping has on compositional process (Burland & Davidson, 2001; Miell & MacDonald, 2000) not only can guide teachers as they consider how to pair/group students, but also underlie the notion— probably long-established in teachers' intuition—that personal ties and strong communities underlie satisfying music-making. These studies build important knowledge around group

composing in school settings with relatively traditional "school music" material; however, they leave relatively untouched the world of composition as it exists inside rock bands and other vernacular ensembles. Research situated in these "less-traditional" settings gives music educators an opportunity to view music composition from yet another angle.

Composition in Vernacular Ensembles

Rock bands and other vernacular ensembles provide another rich setting for the investigation of compositional process. As music educators answer the call for school music to develop deeper ties with the music that students listen to, make, and enjoy outside of school (Kratus, 2007; Williams, 2011; Woody, 2007), investigating these ensembles and their compositional practices can help school music teachers develop classroom activities in an informed way. Campbell (1995) conducted an ethnographic study of two rock bands in the Seattle area, looking specifically at how they "picked up" tunes, used various rehearsal strategies, and composed original material. Although these groups tended to be more focused on producing covers/arrangements of pre-existing material, some compositional activity did take place. Campbell found that those band members who engaged in songwriting tended to come to rehearsal with "rough drafts" of songs, which they shared with the group and opened up for elaboration, refinement, and so forth. Campbell noted that these songwriters tended not to assert direct authority over the finishing of these works-in-progress; rather, they allowed their colleagues to take a significant role in helping them "fill in the blanks" of the incomplete material.

Allsup (2003) completed an ethnographic study of high school instrumental music students who worked in groups to co-compose original music. One group immediately chose to eschew their "band instruments" and form a rock band. The second group initially rejected this

garage-band model, opting to stick with their band instruments and to co-compose a classical piece. They found this to be difficult, though, perhaps because the trappings of their classical musical experiences, in which performers generally "recreate" pieces composed by a single composer, made it difficult to create a truly cooperative and collaborative composing environment. They had a much easier time when they pivoted away from the constraints of "classical" music and decided to create a jazz piece together—a process that more easily lent itself to trading and "riffing on" each others' ideas. Teachers might take note of how contextual factors can influence students' conceptions of a composition task and the compositional processes that result.

Abramo (2011) examined the interactions of five extracurricular rock bands (three single-gender and two mixed-gender) at the school where the he taught, with the specific intention of understanding how gender influenced the processes by which these groups created and rehearsed original material. The author found that boys tended to communicate primarily through musical gesture, with some verbal interjections uttered either immediately following or while playing a musical idea. The girls' process, on the other hand, was marked by more discrete episodes of talking and music-making. In the mixed-gender groups, there was conflict between the girls' tendency toward verbal interaction and the boys' tendency to "just play." Abramo encouraged teachers and researchers to account for the intricacies of gender in their efforts to understand and incorporate "vernacular" musics and processes in their scholarship and teaching.

Biasutti (2012) observed video footage of an adult rock band with a particular eye toward their co-composition of original material. She highlighted the group's anchoring in mostly aural techniques: even as they developed new material together, they wrote down only an occasional chord pattern or a broad outline of a particular song. As in other studies, Biasutti identified in her

analysis five central processes/activities that seemed to constitute the band's compositional approach: context definition, experimenting, constructing, playing, and evaluating. When she used these categories to code her transcripts, she found that constructing and playing were the dominant processes in this group's approach.

These studies can help educators and researchers understand how a particular stylistic or genre context might influence the compositional process. Given that rock bands, for example, have their own performance practices and stylistic traits, it should not be surprising that they may develop some compositional practices that are particular to their musical setting. More research in rock bands and in other ensemble types will help illuminate these subtle, contextual differences in compositional process.

Summary of Compositional Process Research

As the preceding review demonstrates, scholars have conducted research on the compositional process in a variety of settings, with a variety of participants, and using a variety of research methods. Some studies have focused exclusively on composers' thinking about composition, gathered either through interviews (Bennett, 1976) or reflective pieces written by the composers themselves (Stollery, 2013; Whistlecroft, 2013). These windows into composers' thinking are helpful, but without other elements such as observation or analysis of written work, they lack opportunities for comparison or verification of composers' reflections.

Many of the other studies reviewed used some element of observation (either in real-time or via recording technology), which allowed scholars to view or hear the process as it took place, rather than relying on retrospective reflections. Combining observation elements with retrospective interviews further increases the richness of the inquiry, as it allows the opportunity to compare composers' reflections on their processes with what investigators witnessed in the

observations. "Think-aloud" protocols, which combine the benefits of both observation and interview, have equipped many of these researchers with a powerful tool for investigating composers' thinking in real-time as they work. A design that combines these three elements—observation by a researcher or research assistant, in-time reflection via think-aloud protocol, and retrospective reflection via interview—seems to be the richest way to investigate compositional process. Relying only on interviews has obvious limitations, of course, since composers will vary in how accurately and insightfully they reflect on their own processes. Relying only on observation is equally limiting, however, since outside observers bring their own biases and lenses to the act of observation. Allowing these two perspectives to check and interrogate each other is important. A similar balance should be achieved between the real-time reflections offered by think-aloud protocols and the retrospective reflection offered by interviews. Although the immediacy and potential accuracy of think-aloud protocols is appealing, the opportunity to reflect on compositional process while not actively engaged in it may allow a composer to surface understandings about her process that she would not have otherwise.

Many of the studies reviewed have relied on computer-based composition tasks. This is not surprising, given that technology plays an ever-growing role in music composition (through notation software, multi-track recording programs, sequencing applications, and so forth). These technological tools also help researchers tremendously, since techniques like the previously-described "Save-As method" can allow for the analysis of successive versions of a compositional task/product. Some scholars, such as Moore, Moore, Pearse, and Stansbie (2013) are working to develop software that captures these successive versions automatically, eliminating the need for composers to stop working intermittently throughout the process. As powerful as these technological tools are, though, researchers should heed Folkestad et al.'s (1998) reminder that

the presence of the technology itself likely influences the processes people use as they compose, and that composers might work differently were they using "lower-tech" tools to create. Scholars should continue to investigate compositional processes in a variety of settings, with a variety of technological tools, including those that make relatively little use of recent digital technology.

Finally, there is the contrast that emerges between studies that have used rather narrowly-defined, closed tasks for study, and those that have focused on more extended and open-ended compositional events/tasks. Some composers have been asked to compose in narrow time frames (e.g., Kratus, 1989, 1994, 2001) or with very specific parameters regarding rhythmic figures, modulation decisions, and so forth (e.g., Colley et al., 1992; Davidson & Welsh, 1988; Younker & Smith, 1996). While these isolated tasks may prove useful in understanding one specific dimension of the compositional process, as in Kratus' time analysis studies, these "laboratory-style" tasks likely bear little resemblance to the "real world" of compositional work. Of course, more open-ended tasks run the risk of being so divergent and diverse in nature that meaningful comparison proves difficult. Scholars should continue to pursue a balanced program of research that takes advantages of both these approaches, recognizing their potential to inform and, where necessary, attenuate each other's findings.

Research on Songwriting

As mentioned previously, the body of literature on songwriting has only begun to emerge and remains quite small. Still, the research that has been conducted can inform and guide the work yet to come. Much of the research on songwriting comes from the literature in music therapy, where it has been widely explored as a therapeutic tool (Baker, 2013; Baker & Krout, 2012; Baker, Wigram, Stott, & McFerran, 2008, 2009; Dalton & Krout, 2006). Though these investigations view songwriting through a lens different from that used in research with an

educational focus, there are clear parallels and implications for music educators and music education researchers. Some scholars have begun to explore songwriting in K–12 classrooms (Tobias 2012) and university courses (Draves, 2008; Riley, 2012). Finally, a few studies have begun to examine the creative processes of professional songwriters (Bennett, 2015; deVries, 2005; McIntyre, 2011), though none of these is as extensive as Green's (2002) work with popular musicians.

Songwriting in Music Therapy

Music therapy scholarship offers one of the richest sources of literature on songwriting. Although these studies focus on songwriting as a therapeutic technique, their findings and implications can inform the practice of music educators as well, as the ways music therapists facilitate songwriting groups may closely mirror procedures employed by music educators in songwriting classes. Further, though it might be tempting to distinguish between classroom settings in which songwriting is developed as a skill *per se* and therapeutic settings in which songwriting is used as a *vehicle* for personal healing and growth, the aims of music educators and music therapists, with regard to helping individuals harness music's expressive and self-actualizing power, may overlap substantially.

Baker, Wigram, Stott, and McFerran (2008, 2009), using a large-scale survey instrument designed to capture information about the practice of songwriting in music therapy, presented broad findings about the "state of the art." In their first report (Baker et al., 2008), the authors analyzed the responses of 477 music therapists from 29 countries in an effort to understand who in the music therapy community uses songwriting, which kinds of clients (facing which kinds of difficulties) receive this experience, and what goals informed the therapists' decision to use songwriting. The authors identified the following as the primary goals that therapists using

songwriting had for their clients: "experiencing mastery, develop self-confidence, enhance self esteem;" "choice and decision making;" "develop a sense of self;" "externalising thoughts, fantasies, and emotions;" "telling the client's story;" and "gaining insight or clarifying thoughts and feelings" (p.115). One might note that many of the goals music therapists hold for their clients correspond directly to goals that teachers of songwriting might have for their students.

In a second report, (Baker et al., 2009), the authors analyzed responses from 419 music therapists about how they approached the songwriting process in their practice, as the literature offers many reports of the use of songwriting in therapeutic settings, but rather little detail about how songs are actually created in these contexts. The authors found that, in most settings, lyrics are written first. This is unsurprising, given that the verbal processing of one's thoughts and feelings likely constitutes one of the core aims of the practice. They also examined how the creative responsibility was shared between therapist and client in various settings: in aged care, for example, the therapist was much more likely to have a strong role in the creative process. Although songwriting teachers in music education likely aim for their students to have complete creative control, these findings shed light on what acts of "scaffolding" from a therapist or teacher may help clients or students "make the leap" toward becoming songwriters.

Dalton and Krout (2006) worked to develop and implement a "Grief Song-Writing Process" to use with bereaved adolescents in a group-songwriting setting. After analyzing the songs ($N = 123$) of bereaved adolescents engaged in songwriting as music therapy, the authors determined that song lyrics correlated with five stages of grief: understanding, feeling, remembering, integrating, growing. One researcher then designed a seven-session grief songwriting process protocol patterned after these stages of grief and using researcher-composed musical prompts to stimulate discussion and creativity within the group.

Baker (2013) interviewed 45 music therapists and music therapy researchers about the role of group dynamics in therapeutic songwriting settings. (In these settings, members of a group work to compose a single song together.) Group composition, group size, group conflicts, and group cohesion emerged as the four main factors impacting the therapeutic songwriting process. A variety of experience levels among members seems to contribute some value, as more experienced members can help guide and inspire those with less experience (though care must be taken that strong personalities not monopolize the process). Groups with too few members may leave individuals feeling too exposed and therefore less willing to contribute, whereas groups with too many members may limit the leader's ability to attend to each individual and may allow some group members to "hide." Group conflict can constrain the creative process and, in turn, limit the therapeutic benefit of songwriting exercises; competing visions among participants require group facilitators to help build consensus or employ democratic decision-making strategies. Group cohesion is important as well, since communities in which trust and intimacy are established are more likely to make participants feel comfortable opening up and contributing.

Baker and Krout (2012), both of whom teach prospective music therapists in post-secondary settings, assigned students a collaborative peer songwriting project that was used as a reflection on students' clinical experiences that semester. Students, who were placed in small groups, co-composed one song at the beginning of the semester and one song at term's end, followed by a written piece in which individual students responded to the songwriting project by answering pre-determined questions. After analyzing students' song lyrics and written reflections, researchers identified four main themes: that peer-collaborative songwriting is an effective tool for reflecting on music therapy training, that it contributes to personal growth, that

it contributes to knowledge about therapeutic songwriting, and that it contributes to professional development. Notably, the authors discuss how this songwriting experience led these music-therapists-in-training to consider how they would facilitate songwriting experiences for their future clients, and they suggest that this has important implications not only for music therapy, but also for music education:

> The learning activity improved their knowledge about the factors that can affect the therapy process, such as communication and personality traits. These learning outcomes may be beneficial for tertiary music education students too. For example, they may become more aware of how musical creativity is connected to the expression of real emotions and experiences. In educating their primary or secondary classroom students (including those with special needs), they may consider means to encourage songwriting that is connected with students' real life experiences. (p. 144)

The act of expressing oneself in song is intimate and requires vulnerability, whether this takes place in a therapeutic setting or an educational one. Teachers of songwriting can learn much from colleagues in music therapy about guiding and encouraging songwriters as they explore this powerful and personal means of expression.

Songwriting in Educational Settings

While some findings from the music therapy research literature may transfer to the practice of teaching songwriting, scholars also have begun giving specific attention to songwriting within educational environments. Tobias (2012) interviewed and observed students in a high school Songwriting and Technology Course (STC) that is offered as part of a larger program of courses designed to prepare students for the music industry and engage them in a broad range of activities related to performing, composing, and sound engineering/production.

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During Tobias' study, students worked to complete a culminating project in which they created and recorded an original song. Tobias found that, in order to complete this project successfully, students had to navigate, share, and move between multiple roles, such as songwriter, performer, engineer, and producer. Tobias' emphasis on the importance of these multiple roles and the overlap between them should prompt music educators to be careful about ascribing to unduly narrow definitions of songwriting and vernacular music making. Rather, Tobias suggested that school music classrooms should be "hybrid spaces" in which students can explore their roles "hyphenated musicians" (e.g., songwriter-performer, performer-producer).

Draves (2008) focused on the experiences of non-music majors (*N = 20*) in a collegiate songwriting course. The author measured students' music aptitude using the Advanced Measures of Music Audiation (AMMA), their self-esteem in music using Self-Esteem of Musical Ability (SEMA), and their music achievement by employing outside judges who rated recorded songs using a researcher-designed rating scale. Draves found many significant correlations between AMMA scores, SEMA scores, and ratings of songs, but she cautioned that the small sample size limits the generalizability of her results. Using the subscales of SEMA (Personal Desire/Interest, Support/Recognition from Others, and Perceived Music Ability) as *a priori* codes, the author analyzed students' reflective journals in the interest of gaining a richer view of their self-esteem in music. Support/Recognition from Others, as embodied in the supportive community offered by the songwriting class, played an important role in student's self-esteem, and students' high Personal Desire/Interest revealed itself in their writing about their passion for songwriting. For Draves, these findings suggested that the kind of collaborative community offered in this songwriting course differed from students' experiences in other musical contexts (such as large

ensembles), in which the social dimension sometimes gets lost and students miss opportunities for support and recognition of their individual musical contributions.

Riley (2012) studied a freshman seminar course, called "Exploring Songwriting," for which the author was also the instructor. Riley focused specifically on understanding how the songwriting course contributed to freshman students' personal development. After analyzing students' final reflection papers, as well as lyrics from songs they composed in the class, the author found that themes of emotional stability, therapy, self-expression, self-discovery, and overcoming challenges emerged as predominant. Riley's recommendations for songwriting pedagogy included encouraging students to take risks in writing and sharing their songs, the importance of reflective journaling in learning about songwriting, and the importance of collaboration.

These studies have yielded helpful knowledge about songwriting teaching and learning environments, but they have focused more on the general nature of these environments rather than on specific teaching and learning behaviors. In order for teachers of songwriting to make maximally sound pedagogical choices, more needs to be known about the craft of songwriting itself, including how it is learned. Professional songwriters who are "out there" in the "real world" of songwriting may be some of the best "informants" to consult in this regard.

Studies of Professional Songwriters

Studies of songwriters who are pursuing professional success can help teachers understand how those "in the business" approach the creative process. Just as Green's (2002) work with popular musicians (mostly members of pop/rock bands) went "straight to the source" in order to understand the learning processes employed by professionals, similar work specific to the songwriting domain could generate knowledge about how the songwriting craft is learned,

informing and strengthening classroom practices in turn. Though little scholarship of this particular kind exists, some scholars have begun to conduct work with professional songwriters.

DeVries (2005) conducted an ethnographic study of a new songwriting partnership between a 38-year-old seasoned musician and a 22-year-old amateur. Themes that emerged in the analysis of observations and interviews were (a) the belief that a complete song consists of melody, harmony, and lyrics; (b) that songwriting partners complement each other's strengths and weaknesses; (c) that both writers valued originality; and (d) that songwriters acknowledge a certain mystical element in their work, in that songs sometimes seem to materialize from nothing. These subthemes cohered in a core theme of common goals and values that sustained the songwriting partnership while it lasted, although inequity of status seemed to breed the conflict that ultimately led to the partnership's demise.

In a larger ethnographic investigation, McIntyre (2011) interviewed and observed 83 participants (71 songwriters and 12 music industry professionals) to see whether these musicians' creative processes aligned with the systems model of creativity articulated by Csikszentmihalyi (1999). This model proposes that creativity results as an interaction between three components: the field (all the individuals engaged in the activity in question), the domain (the aggregate knowledge—including norms and habits—possessed by the individuals who comprise the field), and the individual. McIntyre (2011) found that this model aptly described the work of the songwriters he studied, in that their "ability to make choices and therefore be creative was circumscribed and facilitated by their knowledge of the domain of contemporary western popular music and their access to, and knowledge of, the field that holds this knowledge" (p. 87). This conclusion, McIntyre asserts, argues against the romantic notion of the

artist as enigmatic genius and opens up the notion that anyone can learn to operate within this systems model as they pursue creative work.

Bennett (2014) has conducted one of the most thorough investigations of the songwriting process, in this case focused specifically on *collaborative* songwriting. Bennett, who is also a professional songwriter, engaged in co-writing sessions and conducted interviews with participants, corroborating the evidence from this data with previously-published journalistic interviews of songwriters from sources such as Zollo's (2003) *Songwriters on Songwriting*. From the analysis of the data, Bennett generated a "stimulus processing model" to describe the collaborative songwriting process. In the model, a stimulus (i.e., an idea proposed by one collaborator) faces potential outcomes of adaptation, approval, negotiation, or veto. Only veto leads to outright rejection of the idea, whereas the other three lead ultimately to some form of consensus between collaborators. The author also focused heavily on the social underpinnings of the collaborative songwriting process, including the critical role of "get-to-know-you" phases in the development of a partnership. As Bennett noted,

> Biscuits are important. Most co-writes are pre-arranged sessions, whereby the songwriters have agreed to meet at a specific time and place to write a song. It follows that there is usually a 'greeting' period during which the songwriters acclimatise socially to each other. This appears to be present regardless of whether the songwriters have met before. During the greeting period the conversation typically begins with general social chit-chat over tea (and the aforementioned biscuits) and moves, often via songwriting-related anecdotes—e.g. recent gigs attended, music industry discussion, songs experienced, instruments played—to discussion of the business of the day. (pp. 231–232)

Bennett's study focuses primarily with the creative process itself, rather than teaching and learning, but insights like these relate to how songwriting is taught and learned as well. The same social processes that "set the stage" for co-writing songs may also be crucial in preparing a space for teaching and learning among collaborators. His findings, along with the findings of other studies of professional songwriters, can yield valuable insight for teachers. Although the creative activities of these professionals occur outside of school settings, these artists are certainly engaged in a process of learning, and understanding how they teach and learn from one another may help teachers think about how to structure songwriting learning experiences in more formal educational contexts.

Summary of Research Related to Songwriting

Songwriting remains an under-examined subject in the music education literature. Certainly, the role of songwriting in music therapy settings can provide important guidance, but the ends of therapeutic interventions and educational activities, though they may overlap, are not identical. Studies situated in educational contexts have begun to complement the findings from the music therapy literature, but they have largely focused on the general attributes and benefits of songwriting classes, rather than specific behaviors of teaching and learning within them. Undoubtedly, professional songwriters have had (and continue to have) important learning experiences related to the craft of songwriting on the way to finding membership and success in the professional community, so these professional practitioners form an obvious population of interest for researchers interested in the teaching and learning of songwriting. Though some researchers have begun to investigate the creative processes of professional songwriters, none of them as yet has taken up teaching and learning as a primary interest. Songwriting has only recently become a phenomenon of serious interest for music educators and researchers, and the

development of "best practices" in this emerging pedagogical domain could benefit from

thorough investigation of how professional songwriters learn, following in the example of

Green's (2002) investigation of learning practices among popular musicians.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The study of compositional processes like songwriting calls for more than decontextualized, laboratory-style research, since the context surrounding the compositional act demands as much attention as the compositional procedure itself. Folkestad (2012) articulated the need for a theoretical perspective, in composition research, that "emphasize[s] the *situatedness* and the *cultural-historical dimension* brought into the situation by the participants themselves and the tools they [use] for composition" (p. 195, emphases original). Folkestad's perspective finds resonance here with the systems model of creativity proposed by Csiskzentmihalyi (1999) and applied to popular songwriting by McIntyre (2011): creative activity extends beyond the realm of the creator herself, emerging from the interaction between, and mutual influence of, the individual, the field (all individuals engaged in a particular creative activity), and the domain (the knowledge and norms around the creative activity developed and possessed by the field). Understanding the compositional process through the lens of this model of creativity calls for a research approach that examines not only the details of the compositional process itself, but also how that process functions within and is influenced by the culture and context that surround it. This study, then, required a naturalistic, *in situ* approach to understanding the phenomenon of collaborative songwriting, situated in the natural environment where this creative process occurs. Further, for scholars interested not only in creative process but also in teaching and learning, such an approach may yield valuable pedagogical understanding. As Folkestad (2012) wrote,

> In music-making, activity and learning can be considered as integrated. In previous
>
> literature, learning and the application of knowledge were often viewed as separate
>
> processes….In the present perspective, however, learning, practice and execution are not

seen as separable entities, but as inseparable facets of a unified whole, since practice

involves performance and vice versa….*to create music also involves learning how to*

create music. (p. 195, emphasis original)

Naturalistic investigation of songwriting process, then, not only produces valuable understanding

of process itself, but also how that process is learned and refined. Paraphrasing Folkestad, then,

for the current study, to study people writing songs is to study people learning how to write

songs.

Theoretical Lens

For this study, I employed Lave & Wenger's (1991) conceptions of "situated learning,"

"legitimate peripheral participation," and "communities of practice" as the lens(es) through

which I viewed teaching and learning among collaborative songwriters in Nashville. Consonant

with Folkestad's (2012) notion of "situated practice" in music composition, Lave & Wenger

emphasized the "indivisible character of learning and work practices" (p. 61). Whereas, in

traditional didactic relationships, "teacher" and "student" roles are rigidly defined and teaching

and learning occur through a linear process of "transmission," "newcomers" to a professional

practice learn—and come to full membership in a "community of practice"—through the process

of "legitimate peripheral participation." "Rather than learning by replicating the performances of

others or by acquiring knowledge transmitted in instruction," the authors articulated, "we suggest

that learning occurs through centripetal participation in the learning curriculum of the ambient

community" (p. 100).

Though songwriting courses like the one I teach exist in educational institutions, and

though more formalized instruction is available through professional organizations such as the

Nashville Songwriters Association International (www.nashvillesongwriters.com, n.d.), one can

reasonably hypothesize that songwriters engage in the same kinds of informal learning practices utilized by participants in Green's (2002, 2008) work. Further, given that Nashville is an identifiable center for collaborative songwriting with its own distinctive style (Bennett, 2014), it is appropriate to understand songwriters' learning as a process of induction to a particular community of practice, and to view the process of growing in the songwriting craft as a form of "legitimate peripheral participation" in an effort to move toward the center of that community.

Design

The design of this study was emergent and flexible, guided by certain methodological approaches but malleable enough to accommodate unforeseen challenges and opportunities. Saldaña (2011) used the term "genres" to describe the various approaches (phenomenology, grounded theory, etc.) of qualitative research, further noting that "genres are not discrete; a few can be combined into one study" (p. 4). In that sense, this study combined elements of case study and ethnography.

As Hammersley and Gomm (2000) noted, "in one sense all research is case study" (p. 2), since some sort of bounded, defining unit (i.e., a "case") organizes all research inquiries. For these authors, the key distinction that defines a true "case study" is the relatively small number of cases involved (sometimes just one), which allows for deeper and more thorough exploration of each individual case. For Merriam (2014), the "single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study, the case"—the case being a "bounded system" that could be "a single person who is a case example of some phenomenon, a program, a group, an institution, a community, or a specific policy" (p. 40). In this case, the bounded system under investigation was collaborative songwriters in Nashville, who write according to what Bennett (2011) has named the "Nashville" approach to co-writing: "a 'pen and paper' approach

typically featuring two writers, who usually do not have demarcated roles" (para. 15). The case was further bounded by my interest in the teaching/learning behaviors that occur between participants in co-writing sessions and other collaborative songwriting activities.

Studying a phenomenon like collaborative songwriting in Nashville required me to be part ethnomusicologist, with data collection techniques that draw upon the tradition of ethnography. As Creswell (2007) noted, "ethnography involves extended observations of the group, most often through *participant observation,* in which the researcher is *immersed* in the day-to-day lives of the people and observes and interviews the group participants" (p. 68). In order to understand as richly as possible the teaching and learning that take place among collaborative songwriting pairs, it was important to spend embedded time "inside" the lives of these musicians—not only in proper co-writing sessions, but also in open mic nights and other performances. Taking an ethnographic approach allowed me to capture as much as possible of the context that surrounds this "situated practice" (Folkestad, 2012) and "situated learning" (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Participant Selection

I began the participant recruitment process by consulting a friend from my undergraduate years who is pursuing songwriting professionally in Nashville. She does very little co-writing and did not qualify for participation in this study; however, she had personal and professional associations with several colleagues who engage in co-writing frequently. She put me in touch with a handful of these individuals, and I engaged them in exploratory conversations. In addition, I reached out to a few songwriters I had met briefly during my years in Nashville to ask for their participation as well as their recommendations for participants. Participant recruitment continued throughout the data collection period, as I asked recruited participants to place me in touch with

colleagues and met writers at open mic nights and writers' rounds that I attended either as a participant or an audience member. I secured one participant by posting in a Facebook group called "Young Entertainment Professionals (YEP) – Nashville Network," which I did at the recommendation of one participant who is active in this online community.

This approach combined criterion sampling and within-culture sampling (Creswell, 2007). The main criterion that guided my selection was that the participants be engaged professionally in the Nashville songwriting market. I intend the breadth permitted by the phrase "engaged professionally," as it allowed for a variety of experience levels: some of the participants are multi-decade veterans of the Nashville "scene" and are under contract with publishing houses, whereas other participants have only spent a few years in town and are actively pursuing commercial success by performing at writers' rounds, taking co-writing appointments, pitching songs to publishers, recording demos, and so forth.

Most of the songwriter participants are full-time residents of Nashville, with a few exceptions. One participant, Shane, recently moved away from Nashville after more than a decade living there full-time, but continues to make occasional trips to Nashville for co-writing appointments and performance engagements. Another participant, Jim, commutes to Nashville regularly—making trips of a week to ten days in length roughly every six weeks—and saturates his calendar with co-writing sessions and other related appointments during these trips. One participant, Rachel, is the largest "exception" to the sampling strategy because her only connection to the Nashville "scene" is through her sister, Zoe, who lives in Nashville full-time. Rachel lives in Iceland and visits with Zoe occasionally and has co-written with her sister during these visits. Because these songs, in which Rachel receives an equal share of the writing credit, are part of Zoe's participation in the market (including appearing on her demos), I decided to

include Rachel among the participants, even though she is the furthest away from the Nashville "scene."

I learned, from my exploratory conversations as well as my interactions with eventual participants, that the co-writing room is not a space into which many writers feel comfortable welcoming an outside observer. Having learned this, I chose to re-focus the study on a small number of co-writing sessions—four sessions total, involving nine unique writer participants— and a larger number of interviews, both with writers from the co-writing sessions and with nine additional songwriters who were not involved in the co-writing sessions I observed. Brief biographical descriptions of each participant are included in the Appendix.

Data Collection

Following successful approval of my dissertation proposal as well as securing approval of the university's Human Research Protection Program, data collection took place from October 2015 through June 2016. I made seven trips to Nashville between October and March, during which I observed co-writing sessions, attended (and played in) open mic nights and writers' rounds, and interviewed some participants in person. I also conducted "distance" interviews via telephone and videoconferencing software, most of which were completed by May, with one follow-up in June. A few words about each type of data collected follow below.

Observation of Co-Writing Sessions

The primary motivation for this study was an interest in understanding the teaching and learning that occur between collaborative songwriters in their co-writing sessions. I observed four co-writing sessions, which ranged from two-and-a-half hours to four hours in length. Although I considered capturing video of these sessions, I decided to use only audio for two reasons. First, audio recording allowed me to travel without cumbersome equipment, since I

recorded these sessions using my iPhone. Second, audio recording seemed less intrusive than video recording because (a) the phone used to record the audio was small and easy to ignore, and (b) songwriters themselves often record partial or entire sessions as a record of their work and a memory aid. I transcribed this audio for each session. In addition, while observing, I kept "jottings" in a small notebook, which I used both to inform subsequent interviews (see below) and to write longer narrative fieldnotes.

Observation of Open Mic and Writers' Nights

Although my primary interest was in the teaching and learning that occur within the context of a co-writing session, the ethnographic bent of this study called for placing these sessions in broader cultural context by "zooming out" to include open mic events, "in-the-round" sessions, and other performances. As Lave & Wenger (1991) explained, "Any given attempt to analyze a form of learning through legitimate peripheral participation must involve analysis of the political and social organization of that form, its historical development, and the effects of both of these on sustained possibilities for learning" (p. 64). I attended many open mic nights and writers' rounds, often with the sole purpose of "scouting out" potential participants, but I also made "jottings" in my notebook about these environments and wrote fieldnotes based on these experiences. I also participated in several of the open mic nights as a performer, both in an effort to seem trustworthy and relatable to potential participants and to gain insight into how these events contribute to the "social organization" of the Nashville songwriting "scene."

Interviews

Interviewing the songwriters whose co-writing sessions I observed enabled me to probe their thinking about the teaching and learning processes that occured in their collaborative endeavors and to ask questions about the procedure of co-writing in general and the business of

being a songwriter in Nashville. These interviews took place either in person, via telephone, or with the use of videoconferencing software, with the exception of two writers who preferred to answer questions via email. I lost touch with one of the songwriters whose session I observed and never received interview responses from her; however, the other two writers in that session did reply.

As a matter of trustworthiness, interviewing these songwriters after observing them allowed me to check the "analytical hunches" that came through in my fieldnotes against the participants' perspectives on and understandings of what takes place in the co-writing sessions themselves. I used excerpts from the transcribed co-writing sessions as a form of stimulated recall (Lyle, 2003) to prompt writers' reflections on the sessions I observed. As mentioned above, I also conducted interviews with nine songwriters separate from those whose co-writing sessions I observed. This allowed me to compare the general reflections of songwriters not involved in the observations with the specific subject matter that emerged in my conversations with the songwriters I observed. Further, these interviews allowed me to probe songwriters' thinking about elements of their learning and growth as songwriters that exist outside the co-writing environment—participation in professional organizations, private instruction, individual routines and practices, and so forth. I conducted these interviews either in person or via videoconferencing platforms. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

As is often the case in qualitative research, data collection and data analysis proceeded simultaneously. "Analyzing as I went" enabled me to remain close to the data and, given the emergent design of the study, to adapt my data collection to what I learned from interviews and observations. I coded all transcripts and fieldnotes for emergent codes, following an "eclectic"

coding method (Saldaña, 2013) that combined both descriptive and in vivo codes. After this initial coding, I reexamined the codes in order to determine how they collapsed into categories and themes.

In qualitative study such as this one, the researcher is the primary data collection instrument, and this necessarily opens the investigation and its findings to some level of subjectivity. As Merriam (2009) noted, "One of the assumptions underlying qualitative research is that reality is holistic, multidimensional, and ever-changing; it is not a single, fixed, objective phenomenon waiting to be discovered, observed, and measured" (p. 213). Still, qualitative researchers must employ methods to ensure that their findings are reasonable, fair, logical, and trustworthy. Creswell (2007) acknowledged, "There are no 'right' stories, only multiple stories"; nevertheless, "we seek to have our account resonate with participants, to be an accurate reflection of what they said" (pp. 44–45). In addition to ensuring that a study is rigorously and carefully designed, the main trustworthiness procedures Creswell recommends are triangulation, review/member-checking by participants, and peer review.

I used all three of Creswell's recommended trustworthiness procedures. The multiple sources of data employed—interview transcripts, field notes, audio recordings—allowed for the process of data source triangulation. Participants also were given the opportunity to review and, if necessary, revise interview transcripts in order to ensure that their ideas were represented accurately and fairly. I also sought the assistance of outside peer reviewers, who aided me by reading transcripts and reviewing my coding scheme.

Researcher Lens

When I began teaching songwriting at Michigan State, I found this territory both strange and familiar: songwriting had long formed a core component of my musical identity, but my

training and experience as a teacher focused almost exclusively on leading traditional choral ensembles. Assisting this course—and, later, having the opportunity to teach it on my own— ignited in me an urgent pedagogical curiosity, as the divergent nature of both writing songs and teaching/learning the songwriting craft differed significantly from the comparatively convergent task of rehearsing a performance-based ensemble.

To this study, I brought my expertise and experience as a classically-trained musician, a licensed professional music educator, an avocational songwriter, a published choral composer, and a novice songwriting teacher. As a songwriter and composer, I brought experience with and sensitivity to the compositional process and its challenges, which afforded me a kinship with the participants who allowed me this opportunity to witness and study their creative activities. As a music educator—and specifically, as a new songwriting teacher—I brought a level of expertise about teaching and learning, but also an awareness of the care that must be taken in designing formal classroom structures around a craft honed largely through informal learning techniques.

Limitations

This study, with its focus on one particular enterprise within the larger world of popular music making, adds to the body of knowledge about how vernacular musicians of various types teach and learn from one another. Writing about case study research, Stake (2000) asserted that such investigations yield "useful understanding in a full and thorough knowledge of the particular, recognizing it also in new and foreign contexts," and that this knowledge is "not scientific induction but *naturalistic generalization*, arrived at by recognizing the similarities of objects and issues in and out of context and by sensing the natural covariations of happenings" (p. 22).

The relatively compact timeframe limited this study, as I was traveling back and forth to Nashville to complete the on-site fieldwork. A fuller, lengthier ethnography of induction into the professional songwriting practice in Nashville would allow for deeper understanding of its associated teaching and learning processes. This study, however, establishes an exploratory foundation on which to build further scholarly work around these questions.

How the Data Are Presented

The findings chapters are laid out in what I think of as "concentric circles." In the next four chapters, I present each of the co-writing sessions I observed, using each case to illustrate and illuminate certain salient phenomena that occurred in these sessions. These chapters draw on both the transcripts of the co-writing sessions and supporting data from interviews and fieldnotes. In Chapter 8, I "zoom out" to consider the practice of co-writing holistically. In Chapter 9, I "zoom out" yet again to consider the broader contextual factors that surround and influence the practice of co-writing. In Chapter 10, I review and discuss the findings from Chapters 4–10, consider implications for practice, and make recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 4: CORINNE AND PAYTON

On an unseasonably warm December afternoon, Corinne[1] welcomed me into her home

and offered me a cappuccino. I accepted—and it was clear, watching her make it, that Corinne

has made many a cappuccino in her day. We made small talk while we awaited the arrival of

Payton, Corinne's co-writer. Payton, a young writer and artist in the area, had been working with

Corinne on a new song that captures the angst of some recent heartbreak that Payton had

endured. While we waited, Corinne explained that the day's session would be an effort to get the

song finished—they made some progress in their first session, but had some difficulty getting

this one to move forward. She also told me that Payton, though young, prefers songs that are in a

more "classic" style. Knowing this, Corinne wanted to make sure that Payton got to express what

she wanted to express without missing out on the currency that will give her song a life in the

market. Payton arrived and made small talk with Corinne and me. She declined the offer of a

cappuccino—she is not a coffee drinker—but gladly accepted a glass of water, and then joined us

in the studio/writing room.

Corinne's studio is small and cozy. It stands just off the kitchen in her South Nashville

home, and an inviting pastel yellow covers the four walls. No square foot is wasted. There is a

large computer desk and hutch whose shelves are lined with demos and worktapes; in addition to

Corinne's laptop, the desk hosts some recording equipment, including a beautiful condenser

microphone on a spring-loaded swing arm, with several quarter-inch audio cables hanging on the

side. Next to the desk, under a small window and adjacent to a glass door that clearly never gets

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[1] Throughout the document, pseudonyms replace the real names of participants. The names of other individuals are generally redacted, though the real names of public figures (such as famous recording artists) are retained unless revealing them would threaten the privacy of a participant or another individual. The names of other public entities (e.g., organizations and locations) are redacted only where necessary to protect the privacy of participants and other individuals.

used, stands an electronic keyboard—full size, weighted keys, the "whole nine yards." In a small corner, next to the keyboard and the non-functioning back door, stands a bookshelf crowded with piano method books, a few tomes on songwriting, including *Shortcuts to HIT Songwriting* and *Shortcuts to Songwriting for Film and TV*, along with a bright purple volume whose spine reads *Unleash the Power of the Female Brain*. Three guitars on stands fill the space between the keyboard and the bookshelf—and this is why the back door is not so functional. Next to the bookshelf, opposite the computer desk, is a futon draped in blankets. There were several guitars on the futon when I arrived, but Corinne moved them to make room. A small coffee table separates the futon from the computer desk—and the size is right, since there is no chance that a larger table could ever fit. An acoustic upright piano stands against the smaller wall perpendicular to the futon/bookshelf wall. The music rack is strewn with scores—a set of art songs Corinne has written, it appears—and birthday and holiday cards. A copy of Carl Jung's *The Red Book* sits atop the piano; on the wall above, a frame features the cover of an album by an artist with whom Corinne has worked, along with small discs displaying each song's title and writing credits. I sat in between the upright piano and the computer desk in an upholstered chair, with my laptop resting on a cajón that, I must admit, I initially mistook for an end table.

After entering the room, Payton began to unpack her things: a beautiful Martin guitar (even though, she explains, she's endorsed by Taylor), a Hewlett-Packard laptop, a small Audio-Technica condenser microphone that she connected to her computer via USB. The two writers spent a little time dealing with paperwork, so they could each document their contributions for business purposes. The transition from small-talk/set-up time to working time was quite sudden: one minute, the two were discussing the weather and other goings on, and then one of them started singing a song fragment and, in an instant, work had begun.

The writing work began with a little bit of remembering what the song sounded like. Both writers played and sang a bit, and a little bit of last time's recording was played as well. Corinne sat at the computer desk and played the nearby electronic keyboard; Payton sat on the couch and played guitar and sang. A brief discussion of chords followed:

C: It goes down, too, on…yeah.

P: What is it?

C: *[plays I–V6 progression on piano]* No—to an E minor over B. *[plays and sings]* So then it goes to A—it's an A minor 7.

P: Alright. *[unclear]* I gotta write this down. 'Cause I remember playing it on piano; I don't, I never picked up the guitar. So, what is it? So, it goes to C, E minor…

C: E minor over B.

P: Over B. Okay. *[sings] "Heartbeat…"*

C: *[playing around with piano chords]* We could save that E minor if we wanted; it's a little sadder, but we're also using it in the chorus in a different way.

P: Okay.

C: So, it could be the E minor over B or it could be the G over B. What we—

P: *[cutting in]* I kind of like the E minor.

C: I do too, and that's what we did, so don't write—

P: *[laughingly]* Okay.

C: So *[playing chords as she goes],* A minor 7.

P: Okay.

C: Back to, uh, E minor over B.

P: Okay.

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C: And then we did that again. *[Corinne continues playing/singing/humming; Payton joins]* And then that's A minor.

P: Yeah. That's right. Wait—what? A minor? Yeah? Okay. (session transcript)

These initial reminders having been made, the writers spent the rest of the co-writing session reworking some structural elements (the pre-chorus was deemed disproportionately long), fine-tuning the lyrics of the pre-existing material (a first verse and part of a chorus), and developing the remaining material (a second verse, a bridge, and the remainder of the chorus). At the end of the three-and-a-half-hour session, the song was mostly complete, though Payton indicated her interest in taking the song home with her, looking over the additions and edits made during the session, and doing a little bit of revision on her own. Corinne and Payton's co-writing session illustrates a common arrangement in the Nashville "scene": an older, seasoned writer co-writing with, and what I have come to call "coaching," a younger writer (who is often a recording artist). In this chapter, using Corrine and Payton's work as an illustrative case, I examine the teaching-learning dynamic of such co-writing arrangements.

Co-Writing with Young Artist-Writers

I came into contact with Corinne in part because I knew that teaching songwriting constituted a substantial portion of her professional life in Nashville—meaning not only that she could offer a distinctive perspective on the teaching and learning of songwriting, but also that she could be helpful in introducing me to former students of hers who were now participating in the Nashville writing "scene." I learned, as the co-writing session began, that Payton was one such student, making it practically inevitable that I would observe the session through the lens of Corinne's and Payton's teacher-student relationship, especially given that pairing young artist-

writers with seasoned veteran writers is a fairly commonplace practice—as noted here by Liam, one of the songwriters I interviewed:

> When I came to town, most people were, you know, we were all trying to feed the artists like Tim McGraw, who didn't write their own songs, and then it became very clear, from a business perspective, that artists wanted to be involved in the writing…They want to be involved in the process, and they kind of had to. The pie, the business pie got smaller, and they want a piece of [it]. So now, you've got a city full of artists who are also trying to write, so, what I've really started, I started doing around 2008 or 2009, was pretty much exclusively writing with artists. (individual interview)

In addition to artists' motivations for seeking a piece of the co-writing "pie," there are also benefits for non-artist songwriters, as explained here by veteran songwriter Dale, who has written several songs with one particular household-name artist, though he never actively sought to collaborate directly with artists:

> I think a lot of the people want to write with the artist. I mean, that's a pretty obvious connection. You write with the artist, you have a much better chance of that artist recording your song, because they have a vested interest in it. And, you know, I wrote with [Artist] long before [Artist] was [Artist]. You know, we were two guys that didn't know beans about anything… We wrote a couple of really good ones, and we wrote a couple that I don't know if they're anything special or not. But I never actively pursued that approach. (individual interview)

Though pairing younger artist-writers with veteran writers is, in many ways, a "business decision," this arrangement also offers important insight into how co-writing spaces play host to acts of teaching and learning. From the analysis of my interviews with songwriters about this

phenomenon, as well as my observation of Corinne and Payton's co-writing session, four themes emerged regarding writing with younger artist-writers: (a) veteran writers working with younger artist-writers work to "help them be who they are"; (b) in their co-writes, veteran writers sometimes "coach" younger writers about the principles of the songwriting craft; (c) veteran writers sometimes experience difficulty writing with some young artist-writers; and (d) younger artist-writers are sometimes in the position of "teaching" veteran writers as well.

"Help them be who they are"

The session I observed between Corinne and Payton was a "finish-up" session, so I was not physically present when the song first came to life. Payton, however, described that first writing session as a "Corinne therapy session" in which Payton opened up to Corinne about the heartbreak that would become the song's subject matter:

We sat down and [Corinne] sort of wanted to know a little bit about my personal, like, what goes on in my head, my personal life, different things that had been hard that I had gone through, and so we started talking about that, and, if she heard something she liked, she had me elaborate on it. And I think the first session ended up really being this sort of Corinne therapy session, to be completely honest. Like, I cried, and it was, it was wonderful…I read her stuff from my journal *[laughs],* so this was just this very personal session…So, the song really, really sprung from this personal hard time I had gone through and it was hard for me to remember a lot of it, because it had been so long ago, and I had pushed it out for so long, that when she brought it up, I just broke down and it was great, but it was terrifying, because I tend to sort of push all that stuff aside and just not deal with it. So, writing with Corinne was definitely different than writing with anybody else, because I don't tend to write that, those kind of songs. It's usually more of

these contemporary, up-tempo, what-you-would-hear-on-the-radio kind of things. So,

writing something slow and very emotional like that was very different for me.

(individual interview)

Payton clarified further how this approach of Corinne's seemed distinctive:

I think that one of the biggest things was what you mentioned earlier about her really

trying to take my words and use them, and sort of basically reflect exactly what I said.

And, when I write with other people, it's not usually like that. It's more of—that's a good

idea, and this is how I would tweak it, and then I'll go back and say, This is how I would

tweak it, and all this stuff, and you go back and forth about it, or, or maybe it has nothing

really to, to do with me…I think that the, the biggest difference would be how much of

what I said she wanted to incorporate into the song and how true and honest she wanted

to be with my song. (individual interview)

Though Payton viewed this approach of Corinne's as a distinctive quality, several songwriters

expressed that "interviewing" young co-writers about their life experiences in order to help them

develop material was a common approach. As songwriter and songwriting teacher Margaret

noted, "If I'm writing with an artist, I really want them to bring in the idea or bring in—I wanna

start with something they bring, because I want to *help them be who they are"* (individual

interview, emphasis added). Andy, another veteran songwriter, described his approach this way:

Especially if it's an artist, I'm going to be asking them about their life from the very

beginning. Oh, where you from? What do you like to do up there? You got a boy, you got

a girl? And while I am taking genuine interest in them, I'm also interviewing them for

song ideas immediately. Not necessarily even song ideas, but, say… I'm narrowing my

focus with every question I ask them. If I'm talking to a guy, and he's an artist and he's

from Wyoming, I'm probably not gonna throw up any ideas about dirt roads, or Mason jars… I'm not gonna do Southern references. (individual interview)

Even in the co-writing session I observed, although the song idea had already been established, Corinne continued to refer to her notes from the "therapy session" as she and Payton worked to refine existing lyrics and generate new ones. In my fieldnotes, I recorded this reflection:

Since the inspiration for the song is part autobiographical on Payton's part, it appears that Corinne's primary motivation is to help Payton tell the story in a way that reflects her experience while also connecting with an audience. Corinne makes a lot of statements that seem intended to guide the process and help the pair be thoughtful in generating material to complete the song. "Can we just talk about that for a moment?" she asks, basically inviting Payton to join her in conversation about a particular concept so the two can clarify how best to convey that part in the song. Many of Corinne's behaviors seem like those of a ghostwriter helping an individual to pen an autobiography. She almost seems to be interviewing Payton in the interest of developing lyric material for the song. Corinne is especially interested in distilling the song down to the bare essentials of Payton's heartbreak experience and focusing the song on that unifying conceptual base.

This transcript excerpt presents an example of such exchanges:

C: And I really like—let's go over some of these awesome things that you said, like "It was one of the best nights of my, I ever had in my life." You know? Like, to…

P: I don't even remember that—okay. *[laughing]*

C: Yeah—let's go over some of these amazing things that you said. Because that's a big part of it. It's like, you think you're having, like, the best moment of your life, and then it turns out—

P: And then it's just like, yeah, totally—let me find my notes…

C: You know? It's painful. Um…and, so…*[5-second pause]* You know, said it felt like forever, old and new at the same time. "I didn't know I wanted it so bad until I had it" is pretty amazing. As a concept.

P: I'm deep! *[laughs]*

C: There's lots of, yeah. "It was so good, and then it was so bad." *[laughs]* "Feel, uh, more alone, I feel more alone after you came." "All the good things are gone, every good memory leads to a bad one." Which is all awesome. That's second verse stuff like crazy.

P: Yeah.

C: "Finally got a taste of togetherness that wasn't lonely; now I'm so alone."

P: We should just shovel all this stuff up and just, like, put it into something.

C: It's all right here, so, you know—

P: I know! It's like…

C: It's like, what is the, what, how do we want to just centralize it, you know?

P: Right, yeah.

C: Okay, here's some other stuff you said. "I would've liked a goodbye," you know? "I cry, still cry."

P: That's a bridge thing.

C: Yeah. Actually, those two kind of go together. I cry, I still cry. Would've liked a goodbye. This is awesome. We probably won't be able to fit this in, but it's so amazing— "the way babies cry because they don't have the words."

P: I remember saying that.

C: Sad.

P: I read that in an article somewhere, where children cry…

C: Mhm.

P: …because they can't physically say things.

C: Mm.

P: Part of me doesn't think it's true, though, because I still cry, and I have the words, but sometimes I get it, because it's like you still can't find them.

C: Yeah—but the deepest comes from no, a place with no words. You know? Deepest sadness and grief comes from a place with no words, so…*[5-sec pause]*

P: I like that. (session transcript)

Later, as Corinne continued to "interview" Payton, she prompted Payton to identify the most important, most salient part of her heartbreak experience.

C: Like, out of all these things that we've said, if you had to say one thing is the most painful, and the most true, like, out of all this, the biggest more important point for you…*[pause]*

P: Not knowing why.

C: *[sotto voce]* Not knowing why. Yeah. That's it, right?

P: That's it!

C: *[sotto voce]* That's it for everybody. (session transcript)

In these exchanges, Corinne appeared to be coaching Payton not only to think through her reflections in an open, "brainstorming" way (divergent), but also to distill these reflections down to the essence of what the song should communicate (convergent). For Corinne, though, her responsibility as a co-writer goes beyond just helping young artist-writers to shape their lyrical content carefully.

> My job is to help others express themselves, you know? Is to help people figure out what they want to say and help them say it, you know—add something to what it is that they have to say. And help shape the direction. I mean, I help shape the direction for a lot of music for a lot of young artists, and it's like, I definitely have an influence, but a huge consideration when I'm thinking of music for somebody else is what's going to work for their voice, what's going to work for their style…what's going to be most commercial and still be interesting, you know, for this person. Like, with Payton, I was, that was definitely a pressing issue for me while we were thinking about that song, because I realized that she made it clear in our first write that she wanted to do really classic songs—which I think is awesome. I think that's a really a cool thing, and yet…while we were writing it, I was thinking, is there a market for this? How can I make this, is this song gonna survive, you know? Is it gonna survive the scrutiny that all her songs are gonna come under when she's trying to release something? Is it going to sound modern enough and cool enough, you know? And so, musically, she really went that kind of more classic place. And so, I thought, well, what we gotta really try to do is really capture that strong, youthful emotion, if there's gonna be a way for us to let, for this thing to hang in there. (individual interview)

Shane, a writer who has also worked with young artists, expressed the same matter this way:

If it's an artist, then I'm gonna be like, Well, why don't you play me some tracks from what you, so I can see—Alright, the guy's already got three songs about trucks and getting drunk *[SH laughs]* and drinking longnecks. That's not that fresh. And he needs to go somewhere else, or, you know, this girl's already written three songs about her boyfriend. Maybe we should have a song about her childhood friend that, you know, kinda keeps her going when she's on the road, or just some kind—I try to, if it's an artist, I try to figure out where they are in their career—for me, that's gonna be the beginning…So, then I would be like, Well, where does this artist need to go now? (individual interview)

Liam echoed these sentiments, pointing out that some young artists arrive to Nashville knowing only that they want to be famous and need help charting their artistic paths.

You know, they're trying to figure out—'cause I mean, I feel for them, because they're all trying to figure out where they fit in to the musical world, and they know that there's glut of entertainment and—you know? How to do it, how to actually get into that. You know, how to figure out what their thing is, because I think a lot of times, a lot of the artists that come here, they come here with the idea that they want to be famous, but, you know, as far as what they do and what their actual vision is, what sets them aside, they, they might not have that. So, that's been kind of my job, more than anything else. (individual interview)

Raven, a young artist-writer I interviewed, recognized the need to be open to veteran writers' guidance in this way:

What I think is relevant or interesting to me, a topic or title or idea might be completely different to someone 50 years old or 60 years old who I'm writing with. So I had already

a great respect and understanding that I went in as a student, not as, like, "This is my idea, we need do this today," you know? I wanted to learn just as much as I wanted to, you know, come out with something great. I wasn't pushing anything.

In this way, the veteran writers in these partnerships serve in a kind of "coach" or "consultant" role. The younger artist-writer's vision, voice, and success are the central concern, and the veteran writers "help them be who they are" by showing them how to tap into their own experiences and how to chart their artistic paths in a productive manner.

Coaching/Teaching the Principles of Song Craft

At one moment in Corinne and Payton's co-writing session, the writers engaged in the following discussion about leading into the song's chorus:

C: So what is it you think you want to say, before you get to the chorus? *[4-second pause]*

P: Well, I feel like, in the chorus, we sort of…it's, we almost make him… it's like a pleading, in a way, where it's just like, How could you be such a person, and how could you rip somebody apart like this…

C: Yeah.

P: …and not know?

C: Yeah.

P: Like, I think that's the sort of the chorus aspect.

C: Mhm.

P: So, I feel like we have to get there in the verse. And we're not there yet.

C: Mhm. Okay, I'm going to give you an opposite perspective of that…

P: Okay.

C: …just to think about. So the chorus is the place where you release, right?

P: Mhm.

C: And if you actually—they're already gonna know that it's, like, desperately. Like, we've already projected that this is not gonna work out. Okay?

P: Right.

C: But if we give away how it didn't work out, and, like, what has happened since this break-up…

P: Okay.

C: …before we get to the chorus, we're actually going to cancel out the tension and the release of the chorus.

P: Okay.

C: Okay, so, our mission is actually not to tell them what happened before we get there.

P: Okay.

C: It's to let it burst forth on the first line of the chorus.

P: Okay, yeah.

C: Okay? So, like, it's not like everybody's not going to know that this, like, a tragic break up song.

P: Well, I kinda get that.

C: Cause we're—

P: It's in a minor…

C: Yeah.

P: …key, and we're, like, sad. Like, it's already—

C: *[cutting in]* Yeah, so we're telegraphing it, but, like, this is something just really important to remember for all of your songwriting—you don't want to release before you get to the chorus.

P: Right.

C: You know, and especially the first chorus. By the second chorus, you've already opened the door.

P: You've already established it. Right.

C: You've already established it, but right there, you want to keep the energy high, really push it right to the last minute, so…as we change these lines, I think we probably what we want to consider is, like, how to keep it amazing. (session transcript)

In this example, Corinne shifted from simply helping Payton "be who she is" to explicitly teaching about the principles of crafting an effective song. At another point, Corinne affirmed one of Payton's lyric suggestions, but also encourages her to think of a less predictable, more novel option.

Even though I really like the "lie I've ever sold" thing, you know, I'm not, even though I'm not totally sure that belongs at the end of the chorus, but I really like that as an idea. I think it sounds super, super cool. But, you know, in a lot of these songs, it's a pretty common way to go—like, you just lied to me. Right? I think what you just said is a little fresher—like, you revealed as much to me as I revealed to you, so how could you disappear like that? That's a more unusual take, you know? That's a different way to think of it, and I really like it. (session transcript)

In my field notes, I reflected on such instances this way:

Corinne also seems to be in the position of teaching some of the mechanics of songwriting. The opening line of the chorus is "How can you touch me/so deeply/and leave me like I'm nothing to ya," and it's set to a soaring melody with large leaps that beautifully convey the raw emotions the speaker is feeling. When Payton mentions that she wants to make sure the pre-chorus sets up this moment well, Corinne explains to her that she shouldn't set it up too well—otherwise, the chorus won't hit as hard as it should. …Elsewhere, Corinne says, "we'll have to shorten it somehow"—referring, I think, to the prechorus that the two writers began to generate last time (she seems to be concerned that it's too long to be effective). When Payton suggests a pretty quick transition from the chorus back into the second verse, Corinne says, "Oh no, we need more space, I think." Corinne is effectively teaching Payton about song structure….Corinne seems to teach about other details, too—at one point, she says "You'll have to be careful about that 'b'," referring to how Payton sings the word "believe" in a certain spot. (fieldnote excerpt)

Margaret, another writer who collaborates with young artist-writers, offered this reflection on helping younger artist-writers refine their skills.

I think I come up with great lines and I think I'm really good at editing melodies. It's like, No, you're hittin' that note too many times, go to a different note. What about if we do this, like, I can write melodies, I can write lyrics…and it may be just who I write with,…because I write with a lot of young artists. They just don't have that skill yet…And a lot of times, after they write with me for a certain amount of time, they get it and we're all, you know, we're all headin' the same direction. (individual interview)

Sam, an older writer who is relatively new on the Nashville scene but has been writing songs since his youth, related this anecdote:

Um, I had a co-write yesterday with this young gal—I love her to death; she's a

sweetheart. She's only, like, 22. She's got amazing amount of talent, great singer, she's

written some wonderful songs, but her audience is, like, teenage girls and such…The

song is—"If I Write You A Song" was her hook. That's what she wanted to write to. She

said, "If I write you a song," uh, something like, "it'll be a beautiful melody." And I said,

and my line was, I think what she needed to do, was "If I write you a song," um, "you can

fly away on the wings of the melody." Because if I write you a song that's a beautiful

melody, well, you're singing song about writing a song, so I think the song that you're

singing about has to be magical, it has to be what a normal song won't bring to the table.

…To me, it was really important, because it was going to be the difference between

having a song that had an ethereal reach to it, as opposed to being a lyric that sounded

okay but didn't say anything. And so, it was the depth, the meaning of the lyric…and I'm

saying, This is your song, I'm writing for you, because she's an artist. I'm writing for

you, but I want you to understand where I'm coming from. And she got it. (individual

interview)

It bears mention that both Margaret and Corinne function as songwriting teachers in other venues

of their lives, which may predispose them to more explicit "teaching" behaviors in co-writing

environments, though Sam is an exception in this regard. It may be that, when one writer is

substantially more experienced than the other, there is greater room for "direct instruction" in the

craft of songwriting.

Challenges of Working With Young Artists

Corinne, in our interview, shared these comments about working with some young artist-

writers:

What's really hard about young people—not all of them, I mean, I work with a ton of young people, and I rarely come across somebody like her, but I have to say that the couple that I've come across in the last year are girls about her age. Not to say that just girls do—because I'm thinking about a guy, a similar situation, but—anyway, it's like girls that, or, young people that have good voices, and they're super excited…sometimes, in these situations, what all these girls know how to do is say "yes" or "no." They don't know how to contribute yet, you know? And so, if they offer something, a lot of times they don't know yet why something may or may not work, and they don't offer very much, you know? (individual interview)

In my fieldnotes, I expressed a similar observation, writing that, "From my perspective, it seems that Corinne puts a lot of 'draft' ideas to Payton for an up/down vote. Occasionally, Payton contributes a new lyric or melodic idea, but she seems to occupy the space of 'editor' more often." One such example from the transcript follows:

C: I haven't figured out, maybe, this last line yet, maybe none of this works yet, but—

P: *[calling from other room]* I'm—hold on!

C: *[piano playing and humming continue]* Not a last line yet—maybe some of this would work, maybe not. But…*[sings] "Best night of my life/I was high on falling/For your smile, for your breath/Scared to death, but you got me/When I said I was all that you wanted/I wasn't dreaming/You were real, I could feel/Like da-na-na"*—you know?

P: Alright. I like everything except the first half of the first line.

C: "Best night of my life?"

P: Just don't like that.

C: Okay.

P: Everything else is great.

C: You wanna talk about why?

P: I just, I feel like it, just, kinda doesn't do anything, if that makes sense. Like, I feel like it, there's some—I like the idea, but I don't like the words.

C: Okay. That's fine. But, it came from your, like, it was one of the best nights I ever had in my life, you know?

At another point, Corinne asked Payton specifically about how she might like to rework some lines she had "voted down," but Corinne ended up making the revisions herself.

C: What did you think about things you want to substitute in those spots?

P: I don't know, let's see. *[hums verse melody]*

C: I mean, if you want to call these things out as being lies, you could say "for your smile, for your lies/scared to death, but you got me/when you said all that I, all that you wanted, when I said I was all that you wanted/I wasn't dreaming"

P: Can you say that again?

C: You know, it was that "for your smile, for your breath/scared to death, but you got me"—"for your smile, for your lies/scared to death, but you got me"—I was falling for your smile, for your lies, scared to death, but you got me when you said I was all that you wanted, I wasn't dreaming.

P: Oh, oh—I got it. Yeah, I like that.

Some of Corinne's comments reveal the tension that might exist between being a coach/teacher figure on one hand and an equal contributor to the song on the other.

You're writing this song, but my name is gonna be on it. You know? And so, I can't let you go out into the world with something that I don't think is at least, even if it's not a

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big hit, it's gotta be well put together. It has to have some art in it, it has to have some

stuff in that respect, and it can't have any big mistake. …What was hard with her is

that… she's that person that'll be like, "Yeah, we can beat that," you know, "I think we

can beat that." It's like, well, give me a line, then. Tell me what you want there, you

know? If you'll tell me what you want, I can help you figure out how to say it. (individual

interview)

Corinne was quick to point out, though, that not every collaboration with a young artist proceeds
this way.

The young people that I write with that are awesome are so polite, generally. You know?

They're very polite, they're very appreciative…You know, they try; they throw stuff out

there, and then you can say—if somebody throws something out there, and it's not quite

the right idea, maybe, but then you can go, Okay, well, yeah, I get that…I think that

might not work because of this, but if that's something you want to say, what if we tried

this? You know? And then you have an interaction, and it's going back and forth, and it's

not just one person doing all the work and the other person saying "no." (individual

interview)

Raven, the aforementioned young artist-writer, offered this recognition of her expected
contribution:

And that means that these people, they're writers, most of them for a publishing

company, and they write with other artists, so, on their part, they have to be pretty

flexible to adapt to whoever they're writing with, whereas, on my part, I don't really have

to do that. I have to come in and know who I am directly and say, "This what I want to

write today, and here are some boundaries"—you know, we can get lost inside of it, but I

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don't really want to talk about these topics, let's stay to this type of groove, this type of phrasing. I'm the one who has to be specific, whereas they should be a little bit more flexible. (individual interview)

Although Raven's comments can be read in a way that deeds most creative authority to the young artist-writer in the pair, they also reflect Raven's understanding that she, as the artist-writer, is bound to come to co-writes with a sense of what she wants and an ability to contribute. There is still room for the veteran writer to fulfill a teaching/coaching role, but this teaching and learning is embedded within a collaborative creative act, which requires the genuine sense of "interaction" and "back and forth" that Corinne described, even when one writer is the more experienced party.

As a help to these challenges, Corinne suggested the possibility of bringing in another veteran writer to assist when collaborating with young artist-writers.

The best situation for somebody that age, for the most part, is to have three writers, and—two professionals and the novice. You know? That way, you've got two people who know what's going on who can try, who can bounce ideas back and forth, who can build consensus in the room, and it's not just, it's not just one adult, you know, uh, "against" one teenager.

Having this third writer in the room may reduce some of the pressure that exists for veteran writers who must fulfill the "coach/teacher" role by themselves.

Learning from Younger Artist-Writers

Although, in these "veteran-rookie" pairs, the veteran writer may be seen in a teaching/coaching role, it is also important to recognize the ways in which seasoned veterans can

learn from the younger artist-writers with whom they collaborate. Payton, for example, shared this additional reflection about her "therapy session" with Corinne:

Being able to work with somebody like Corinne is very great for me, just because I don't get to do that so very often, having to open up like that, which is very great. So I think that, like, she said in a session—I'm not sure if it was the one with you or the one before that—but it's been so long since she's been in my shoes that it was just nice for her to hear something like that, because she has almost forgotten what it felt like. And, and it brought back memories for her, and that was interesting to me, because it, it made me realize that I'm not the only one who goes through this stuff. And, yeah, I already knew that, but it was just nice to hear from her. (individual interview)

For Payton, then, Corinne's interviewing not only helped Payton to "be who she is," but also helped Corinne to tap into a set of experiences and emotions that someone of her age no longer experiences in the same way. Liam offered a similar reflection about tapping into the emotional experiences of his young collaborators:

I've learned so much from, writing with people who are younger, because they are tuned into the way the world really feels now. Not that my generation isn't, but there's—when stuff happens to you guys, it's still, visceral….You don't even have time to be philosophical, you don't even have the experience to be philosophical about it yet, so you can't even put it in perspective. You're just going, Whoa, okay, what do I do now? Whereas, you know, for my generation, you know, we all, we all get kind of complacent about it, and I don't think I've had the chance to be complacent, because I see, I, most of my days are spent with people who are, you know, 23, 24 years old…You know, at 49, you just see things kind of more—world-weary's not the right word to describe it, but

you just, I have the perspective which allows me maybe a little bit more peace of mind.

To look at it and go—and I can't tell you how many times I've sat in a, a co-write with,

you know, one of the young girls that I write with and, it's like, going through all this

stuff, and they've just been dumped by their boyfriend, and they're sad, and they're

stressed out, and somebody's just told them they're too old to get a record deal, and

they're 26…I've heard a lot of tears in my room *[laughs]* in my studio…I honestly want

to do this as long as I can, because, it makes me… I don't have the chance to get

complacent, Oh, young kids these days. You know?…Because I'm living through their,

with their problems, and vicariously experiencing them with them, I think I understand

them more. (individual interview)

Margaret expressed that she appreciates how writing with younger artist-writers helps her to stay

current:

In this climate, my best option is to write with young artists that I believe in. You know,

find young artists—and then, even if they're not gonna get a cut,[2] at least I make sure that

my songs are staying young and relevant and musically current. (individual interview)

Brooke, a veteran writer who has been in Nashville since the early 1990s, and now spends some

of her time writing in Los Angeles, pointed out that sometimes the veteran in the room has much

to learn from a younger collaborator.

And, so, guiding? I try not to be heavy-handed with that, because really someone that's

been writing for ten minutes may have the biggest lessons in the world for me. So I'm not

going to walk in feeling like I'm the *teacher*. If their behaviors kinda need me to be the

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[2] Getting a song "cut" means having one's song recorded by an artist and included on an album,
EP, or other release.

teacher, then I'm willing to step into that role. But I've had some very young people—

this last trip to LA, I had a new artist, well she's a new writer, she's not an artist. She's

21, and it ended up that she gave me a ride out to where we were going to work. And it

was about 45 minutes, and, I mean, after spending about 45 minutes with her, I was like,

"This kid is not 21; this kid is very well developed, very intelligent." And, and I just, I

stepped back and let her do her thing 'cause she was *great* it. And I loved the song, and I

loved writing with her, and let her publisher know that anytime you want me to write

with her, I am all in. (individual interview)

Andy, similarly, offered this endorsement of younger and older writers collaborating: "And

that's a great reason why young, new writers and older, experienced writers should write

together, because the seasoned ones have the craft, but they also need to be open to the fresh

ideas of the young" (individual interview). Though these pairings may provide ample

opportunities for veteran writers to coach and teach younger collaborators, they also allow

veteran writers to learn from a new generation's perspectives and talents.

Summary

Co-writing partnerships that pair a young artist-writer with a seasoned veteran, a common

occurrence in Nashville, offer an instructive window into the teaching and learning that takes

place among collaborative songwriters. Veteran writers help younger artist-writers "to be

themselves" by probing younger writers' life experiences and helping them to develop song

material from these events and their reflections on them; they also "help them to be themselves"

by helping them make musical choices that balance their individual tastes and desires with the

constraints of the market. Sometimes, these collaborations put veteran writers in the position of

explicitly "teaching" or "coaching" the mechanics of the songwriting craft—but they still require

full contribution from all involved. Frustrations and challenges can arise particularly when young writers are only able to articulate approval or disapproval of a veteran writer's ideas rather than proposing alternatives and revisions. The teaching and learning in these collaborations, despite the disparity in ages and experience levels, is not completely unidirectional. Both younger and older writers acknowledge that less-experienced songwriters still offer a connection to fresh ideas and youthful perspectives that prove beneficial to the learning of their veteran collaborators.

CHAPTER 5: SAM AND WILL

Observing co-writing sessions can be a bit like going on a blind date. Familiar feelings bubble up and over: the excitement, the uncertainty, the fretting over whether things will go well. As my car crept up the steep driveway leading to Sam's spacious West Nashville home, I marveled at exactly what I was doing, given that I had never met or spoken to Sam before, nor had I ever met his co-writer, Will. Another songwriter acquaintance connected me with Will, and we started exchanging messages on Facebook. He was happy to explore the possibility of being observed, confirmed that Sam was comfortable with me sitting in, sent me a date and time and location, and that was that. I grabbed my small kit of supplies (Moleskine notebook, Pilot G2 pen, iPhone), walked to Sam's front door, and rang the bell. Who could know what would await me on the other side?

As it turns out, it was a dog—an eager, friendly one who Sam assured me meant no harm. Sam lovingly restrained his pet and pointed me toward a small set of stairs that led to the room he uses as an office and writing room. I walked into the room, met Will, and then sank into a seat next to him on the leather couch. Sam joined us, sitting at a desk perpendicular to the couch, and I surveyed the room. A closet door stood ajar, revealing a book on lyric-writing on one of its shelves; in a corner next to the closet doors, a guitar sat cradled in a stand—a songwriter's tools. A framed certificate sat on a wooden chest near the door; antique rifles hung on the wall. This is Sam's space—that much is clear.

Sam opened the session by asking Will whether he felt satisfied that the last song they had written was complete.

S: So, we're done with "What Kind of Kiss is This?", right?

W: I think we are. I was doing the demo last night—

S: Yeah.

W: And I went, I went through and, you know, I know that ultimately it's going to be [singer] or somebody that does the demo, so I didn't flesh everything out, but I did all the drums all the way through.

S: Mhm.

W: And I changed the key so it should work for me to sing.

S: Okay.

W: And the only thing that, as I was singing through it, I felt was a little stale was the part of the chorus. So we've got, *[sings] "What kind of kiss is this/da-da read those lips/ba-da-da-da/da-da-da-da-da"*—that part—kinda feels like it lets the air out. Do you see what I'm saying? And that's just a melodic thing. So…

S: Is it 'cause too many syllables, or…?

W: No, I—maybe. I feel like it needs to be jazzed up rhythmically or melodically. So if we did, *[sings] "What kind of kiss is this?/Trying to read those lips/It is it just good night"*—you know what I mean? Something like that? *[playing with rhythm]* Or, *[sings] "Is it just good night or da-da-da-da"*—like, that would be okay.

[…]

S: Why don't we just leave it kind of static? *[sings] "What kind of kiss is this/I'm trying to read those lips/Is it just goodnight or does" [pops higher] "Or does it come"*—you know, kinda leave it flat rather than go down*? [W sings "goodnight" line, S jumps in to demonstrate how it might leap up from that point]* You know, kinda go up? You're, you're always singing out of my key. I—

W: *[laughs]* Sorry!

S: I need you to change that! *[W still laughing; S sings] "Or does it come with a twist?"*

W: *[sings] "What kind of kiss"*—that's better. I think that's, I think you've hit the nail on the head. My problem is it kind of does this and then we're here. *[presumably making hand motions]*

S: Yeah.

W: I think if we—

S: …Just keep it flat and then go up.

W: Keep it flat and then ramp, yeah.

S: *[sings, experimenting with popping up on "or does it come with a twist"]*

W: Yeah, yeah, yeah. *[sings same idea]* Let's record that so we have that. *[pause, S probably getting recording set up; W humming some, singing to self]*

S: It'll take a minute; my GarageBand—

W: That's alright.

S: And that second verse is a little…

W: You know, I was thinking about the second verse too, and my thoughts on that were it was a little flowery for me. I felt that—but that's me; I'm not necessarily a, um, *[pause]*…

S: Do you see a guy singing this?

W: Yeah. See, I almost think it—other than the candy cigarette line, it almost could be a girl singing it. And it'd almost be a better—

S: As usual. *[laughs]*

W: As usual. But the melody feels very guy though.

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S: Kind of. But we gotta masculine up those, macho up those lyrics a little bit,[3] I think.

(session transcript)

At this point, five minutes into the session, it became clear that Sam and Will might not have been quite as "finished" with the song as they had hoped. In fact, they spent the rest of the writing session—nearly two and a half hours—working on the song's second verse and bridge. The two worked diligently to hone each line of lyrics.

W: *[sings] "Still holdin' on." "Still holdin' on/When the night is long gone/Then I won't have to ask." [silence, shifting in seats, other background noise—33 seconds]*

S: Something—we could use the word "want"…*[silence, whispering, shifting papers, typing, silence—1 minute, 5 seconds]*

W: If you're still here when the yellow sun appears. *[laughter]*

S: *[jestingly]* That's good!

W: I think a publisher would really like that one. *[laughs]*

S: Oh, they would—they'd like it all the way to showing you out the door.

W: *[jokingly]* "Oh, yellow sun. I've never heard that one before. I like that."

S: Green sun!

W: Green sun. *[laughs]* Slightly radioactive sun. *[silence, shifting papers, silence, email notification sound, silence, humming, whispering—3 minutes, 9 seconds]*

S: How come we always end up with one of these one-word issues? *[laughter]*Always.

W: Not kidding. *[typing, whispering, brief silence]*

S: Okay. I'm going with "when the night is long gone."

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[3] Though specific examination of them is beyond the scope of this study, it must be acknowledged that some of the comments made by writers in co-writing sessions and interviews reveal troubling assumptions in the country market about gender and other sociological matters.

W: The one that didn't suck?

S: Yeah. *[laughter, silence, whispering, typing—12 seconds]* Do you want to say "I won't have to ask" or "I guess I'll know for sure"?

W: Grammatically, "I guess I'll know for sure" doesn't make any sense…Right? 'Cause "I guess I'll know for sure what kind of kiss is this"? It could, you'd have to say what kind of kiss this is. Do you know, do you see what I'm saying?

S: Yeah, but you're in Tennessee, you're not in Philadelphia.

W: Well! *[laughs]*

S: I might-shoulda wanna..

W: We *[laughs],* we ain't like them fancy people. *[laughter]*

S: God bless your heart.

This excerpt typifies Sam and Will's interactions. In their revision of these second verse lyrics, they spent substantial time with each line, making sure the words fit the concept, sounded fresh and "conversational," and suited the rhyme scheme and meter established by the first verse they had written. As the two writers wrestled with these minutiae, I noticed how much of this collaborative session involved them being physically present in the same room, but individually present in their own minds—thinking, whispering, humming to themselves. In my "jottings," I scribbled, "Lots of silence; bouncing between individual ideation and checking in with partner." As demonstrated in the excerpt above, the purpose of these occasional "check-ins" was to exchange humorous, off-the-wall banter as often as it was to offer a sincere suggestion for the song. The following exchange demonstrates not only this phenomenon, but also Sam's acute awareness of it:

S: Well, let's take—"don't stop now," let's take a chance. Nah, that's too many syllables.

[silence, yawning, whispering, Stuart excuses himself—27 seconds] You know, like

Jekyll and Hyde it—which isn't right, but something, just…

W: "Jekyll and Hyde it," yeah. *[5-second pause]*

S: There was a line I wrote, song I was writing with [writer name] that I really liked, and

it was in that kind of a vein. If I can find it. *[clicking mouse]* Find it. Ah, there we go.

[silence, mouse clicking] I want, I've got a song I wanna—I don't know what to do with

it, but I really like this line. "I love her and all her unnecessary pillows."

W: *[laughs]* It's true! You know what— you've probably had the same experience I do,

but I did not know what a "throw pillow" was before I got married.

J: I didn't either.

W: And, all of the sudden, we have so many pillows, I don't know what to do with them.

[laughs]

S: I know, I know, I know. I just thought, "Oh, okay." Uh…Want to try find that line, just

so it kind of gives us an idea of what I'm, where I'm thinking *[unclear]*.

W: "Kind of" rhymes. I, I love you kind of.

S: "Kind of." That, that's really powerful. *[W laughs]* Ah, yeah.

W: *[some shifting in seats, then sings]* "I love you kind of." *[S whispering to self]*

S: I, maybe I said, "Romeo and Juliet it." Something like a—

W: Oh, yeah! I remember that.

S: Yeah, and I kinda like the, it just—you know, used words that don't belong together

that—

W: Can you lift—I mean, you can't really lift that, though, I guess.

S: No, and—"you're messin' me up, and I like it/don't, don't stop now." And it, and it has to be kinda like a, a "Jekyll and Hyde it," because it's, it's gotta be—*[silence, typing, computer/phone notification sounds—37 seconds] [speaking directly to Stuart]* Yeah, our writing usually is long bouts of silence interrupted by stupid comments. *[Stuart laughs]*

W: Yes, exactly. That's very accurate. Well, Sam just wrote your paper for you. You're done. *[laughs]*

Stuart: Awesome. Great.

S: That's what co-writing's all about—long bouts of silence interrupted by stupid things.

[laughter]

Blunt wording aside, "long bouts of silence interrupted by stupid things" captures two phenomena—silence and humor—that played important roles in the dynamic between these co-writers. In this chapter, I highlight the concepts of silence and humor in co-writing sessions, using Sam and Will's interactions as an illustration and other songwriters' reflections for additional perspective. I also explore the idea of developing "conversational" lyrics, which seemed to be a motivating factor in Sam and Will's work together and an important part of writing for the Nashville market.

Silence

As mentioned above, I was struck by how much of Sam and Will's co-writing session was spent in silence—though I use the word "silence" liberally and do not mean to say that there was no sound present in the room during these moments. Rather, by "silence," I mean periods of time during which the two writers were not engaging each other directly, but instead were quietly thinking, singing, whispering, and humming to themselves. Often, the "checking in" between the writers was rather brief compared to the amount of "silence" that surrounded it:

S: What about if, but if this lingers on, long—no. If this lingers on…[trails off]

W: I don't know about "linger." The word. If this just goes on…*[silence, S whispering—25 seconds]*

S: I mean, if you don't let go, and keep holding me close. *[typing, 14-second pause]*

W: "If you don't let go"—It's not bad. It's a little ordinary.

S: Yeah. *[silence, whispering, D singing to self, silence—49 seconds]* If you keep holding on? *[9-second pause]*

W: *[sings] "If you keep holding on…"* *[silence, mouse clicking—36 seconds]*

To gain an understanding of how prominent these "silent" episodes were in this session, I used the time codes in my transcript to calculate an estimated total amount of time occupied by these silences. Of the two and a half hours that Sam and Will spent writing together, I counted approximately 50 minutes—approximately one-third of the session—spent in silence. This conservative figure likely underestimates the silence, too, as I did not include any "de facto" silences that occurred because one writer left the room to answer a phone call or use the restroom, nor did I include any of the brief pauses whose exact length I did not record in the transcript. When I asked Will about the role of silence in his co-writes with Sam, he explained that this silence was a marker both of familiarity between the two collaborators and of the way he feels his mind works in the background as he considers creative decisions:

Man, that's a really good observation, and I hadn't, it hadn't occurred to me. I think that the silence partially comes with familiarity. I think—different writers react differently, so, if I'm with somebody else, we might talk a little bit more, or we might, in the middle, where Sam and I might be silent, me and somebody else might start talking about a movie or something and then come back. But, for me, it's essentially the same thing,

because my mind is sort of, is going on it, but I'm not focused on it. I'm working on the problem on a subconscious level, and I'm kind of letting my mind wander. I'm thinking something else, and then I'm kinda coming back to it and going, Okay, alright, let's look at this. So it's the same kind of thing. It just happens to, I think, appear with Sam as silence. (individual interview)

Will also noted that he recognizes the need for silence as part of Sam's working style, explaining that Sam "can get very, he gets very inside his own head and kind of thinks and then throws out something…he's still more communicative when he's silent than some other co-writers I've had" (individual interview). Sam's comments, too, reflect his awareness that silence is a need of his:

The more I'm able to [be silent] with other writers, the better I feel around them. Because you know how people like to fill silence. But, it's like, sometimes Will will be noodling on the guitar, and I can't think when that's going on. I say—and he's good about it—I say, Will, please don't do that for a moment, because you just need to, I mean, the wheels are turning and turning and turning, and you just need to be able to go to whatever place that is where those words are getting—and extraneous noise is just, breaks that connection. (individual interview)

Not every writer I interviewed seemed quite as comfortable with silence as Sam and Will appear to be. Payton, a young artist-writer, felt that too much silence could interrupt the "flow" of the session:

I think that's really one of the key things to keeping a session going is to sort of avoid silence. Even though it can be good in some times, when you have this really good idea, and just sort of pushing at it and pushing at it, to have that silence, but I think keeping the ideas going is what keeps a session flowing. (individual interview)

Will also expressed, in effect, that not all silences are created equal. As he acknowledged above, Sam is "more communicative when he's silent than some other co-writers [he has] had," and Will went on to explain that, sometimes, silence represents not careful thought but a problematic lack of communication.

> I had a co-writer who just sat down with her MacBook and I don't think she said a word the entire co-write. And I would throw stuff out, and there would be nothing. There'd be no response. And then, at the end, I'd have a, you know, she handed me, would hand me a lyric sheet, and go, This is what I have. And I would go, Oh, okay. You know. So there's a bad silence, you know, or silence that I would not be comfortable with, which would be to the point that it's not a communicative silence…I need responsiveness, to a point, with the silence. And I know that if I were to crack a joke, Sam would laugh, or if I would throw something out, Sam wouldn't ignore it. (individual interview)

One reason that silence may cause discomfort for some writers is that it sometimes signals tacit disapproval of a proposed idea. Margaret, a veteran songwriter and songwriting teacher, explained simply that "if you throw out a line and I don't say anything, that means I don't like that line" (individual interview). Corinne, another experienced writer, described silence as "the Nashville no":

> One of the things that people do is they don't respond. And that's like the "Nashville no"—if somebody threw something out that nobody says anything, and that kinda gives you hint that maybe people aren't digging [it]. (individual interview)

Zoe, who has been writing songs for many years but only moved to Nashville in the last two, concurred with Will's comments above, in that she prefers responsiveness to the "Nashville no":

I noticed a lot, whenever I would make a suggestion of what I could say in this line, usually silence. Not an agreement nor a disagreement. Then I'd say it again—silence. And I'd go, Okay, they don't like my ideas, but they're not going to say yes or no about it, you know? And that, to me—I don't really like that, when there's silence…I want some prompting. I want some "Yeah, yeah." Keep thinking about that. Keep going…Just something to acknowledge that I said something, you know. (individual interview)

These comments suggest that silence can be a productive force for some writers and a hindrance for others—or, perhaps, that silence's influence over the co-writing environment depends on how that silence is handled. Corinne, another veteran songwriter and songwriting teacher, related to me an experience with a recent writing session that featured more periods of silence than she was accustomed to experiencing:

I also understand that all of us sometimes need time to think, you know, before we say something. And you've just gotta roll with it… in terms of needing time to think, I'll often say, or people I work with will often say, Hey, yeah, that's super awesome. Would you mind just giving me a minute? 'Cause I'm just trying to think about this one thing and—so if you need space, then you ask for it. And then everybody gives you a minute to figure out what you need to figure out. I wrote with these guys last week, and it was slightly disconcerting for just a minute, but it got really comfortable in no time, but both of them were guys who thought in their own heads and didn't say much aloud 'til they were really, really ready to talk. And that was, like, at first, it was like—*Ooo*-kay. Wow. You know?

Part of the reason that Corinne's experience went from "slightly disconcerting" to "really comfortable in no time" was the way the silence was balanced with acknowledgement and affirmation.

> What they both did that was great was that, if I threw anything out, they would both, both of them would go, "Oh yeah, that's really cool." And then they'd go back to thinking. And I could tell that they were thinking. They weren't, you know—they were really thinking through what I just said and trying to figure out how to make it work…so, even if they were very introverted, they still acknowledged what was being said in the room, and then went back to being introverted.

Though this might not be the case in every silence-heavy session, Corinne noted a positive side effect of having spent so much of this recent writing encounter in silence:

> Because all of us, like, there would be silence, everybody's thinking, and then we would all talk, and then everybody would think, and then we'd all talk, and then everybody would think, and then we'd all talk, 'cause we—I brought in this title that everybody was really excited about, and we were really interested in trying to find the best way to present it. And so, in the end—which is so interesting, considering all the silence that we had, you know, in between the times that we talked—in the end, the song ended up incorporating virtually everything we said, by the time we put it all together. (Corinne, individual interview)

Corinne's comments seem to suggest that, in this instance, silence allowed the writers to be more efficient. It may be that having the space to do more thinking, without the pressure to engage in constant chatter, allowed each individual writer to do a bit of "triage" before putting an idea

before the group; as a result, only the more promising, actionable ideas may have been spoken aloud, with fewer suggestions to leave on the "cutting room floor."

It was clear to me that silence was an important part of Sam and Will's shared writing "rhythm." The above comments suggest that silence may be more beneficial to some writers than others, though the degree to which silence is a valued part of a co-writing team's dynamic may have to do with how that silence is handled and how it is balanced with occasional acknowledgement and affirmation. It may be, for some writers and in some situations, that silence allows for a better product to emerge, since less-promising ideas can be "weeded out" by individual writers during their private reflections. Although this study did not examine gender dynamics specifically, several of the comments above regarding discomfort with silence were made by women. There may be a gender component involved in how writers receive and interpret silence and other forms of feedback, which would resonate with Abramo's (2011) previous research on gender differences in vernacular music-making processes.

Humor

As noted above, I knew from my observation of Sam and Will's work together that humor played an essential role in their work and their relationship. Their interaction was peppered with facetious, oddball suggestions and jocular asides. At times, these comments seemed to serve no other purpose than to keep the conversation lively and the atmosphere fun and enjoyable:

W: Are we gonna explode? *[S whispering]* Are we gonna…Can we light this fire?

S: "Don't stop now/let's take this match and strike it." No—you know, what else can you strike besides a match, that sounds a little more—?

W: Bowling pins. *[laughter]*

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S: Oh, there you go—let's strike, we can't strike it, let's spare it. *[laughter]* Um…

W: It writes to our target audience. *[laughs]*

S: Yeah.

W: *[jokingly sings "strike it" line]* Unions? *[snickers]*

At other times, these asides seemed to break or block tension when it was clear that an idea would not work or was falling flat.

W: "If you keep holding on"…*[7-second pause]* "Song" rhymes.

S: "Song," I know—"long after the song," but that's—

W: That's been done.

S: That doesn't mean anything. Gone—

W: If we keep holding on—What about—well, we don't want to say they're in a bar. But like, you know, if you're still holding on, and the bar is still, the bar is closing. *[laughs]*

S: Right. If you're still holdin' on.

W: "If you're still holdin' on." *[19-second pause]* When the moonlight is gone?

S: Thought of that, but that's…*[14-second pause]*

W: If you're still holdin' on…*[20-second pause]*…when the night is long gone. *[9-second pause]* That's not bad. "If you're still holding on/when the night is long gone." *[9-second pause]*

S: It doesn't suck. *[laughter]*

At another point, Sam seemed to make intentional use of a humorous stance when he proposed a line that he knew was not quite "ready for prime time":

S: You know, *[laughs]* this probably isn't it. You know *[laughs]*—when we come up for,

it, when we come up for air*, [D laughs]* if the answer's not there. Maybe we should,

maybe we should try again. *[D laughs]*

W: *[high-pitched]* Uh…it's cute. *[laughs]*

S: Yeah—we're not going for cute.

In both these cases, humor seemed to be part of creating an environment in which it was safe to

volunteer ideas that had a low chance of "making the cut"—and to dismiss and move on from

such ideas without causing any undue tension or hurt feelings.

In our interview, Will explained that humor was an important part of his interactions not

only with Sam, but also with other writers:

I am generally not a super serious person. I mean, I'm serious, but I'm not serious all the

time. You know what I mean? I like to make jokes, I like to bring levity, I like absurdist

humor…Generally speaking, that is an important way for me of establishing rapport with

my co-writers. And, in general, my co-writers that I write with on a regular basis, or that I

decide to continue writing with, even if we don't always write, generally speaking,

there's…an appreciation of humor. Right? And I have been in co-writes where the humor

just goes *pfff.* And I go, Okay. You know, and it, and it does make things a little more

awkward for me. You know what I mean? (individual interview)

In a general sense, Sam noted that "having a sense of humor is really important. Because it

makes it fun. You have to enjoy it. If it's a grind, why bother?" (individual interview) More

specifically, though, he acknowledged that participating in Will's sense of humor was an

important part of allowing Will's working style to be part of the process:

[He] will go off and be silly a lot more than any other writer I deal with. And it's like I said—you have to follow a person's, you have to allow the person to get to where they're going in their own way. And that's part of Will's process…Sometimes—I'll be honest—sometimes I will say, Will, we gotta get back to this. You know, he'll kinda go off a little bit, and I'll kind of get a little frustrated, but then sometimes, I see myself being too serious. And so it's not a criticism against Will, it's just we need to pull each other back in to, to the place where we're doing a good job. But yeah, there's other people I write with who don't have that kind of sense of humor. I still want it to be fun. I mean, I don't want a serious co-write. That's just, when it becomes like work, it's no longer fun, and I think it kinda quells the creative juices. (individual interview)

Humor, then, not only keeps any potential tension over failed suggestions at bay, but also allows one writer the space he needs to work through creative problems in a way that suits his temperament and style. In this regard, Sam's openness to Will's humor is similar to Will's openness to Sam's need for silence—elements of co-writer compatibility that will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 8.

"Conversational"

Often, in my observations of and conversations with songwriters, I found myself attending to certain watchwords and pieces of industry jargon that seemed important to writers' thinking. When I observed Sam and Will, the word of the day was "conversational." As they worked to refine the lyrics of their second verse and bridge, the idea of making sure the words were "conversational" came up repeatedly.

W: *[half-singing] "Ba-ba-ba/My head spins…" [pause]* Pull—what about "pulling me under"? *[sings] "Something, da, pulling me under." [pause]*

S: I like that. *[someone comes in to hand S something, brief exchange, silence]*

W: "This current is pullin' me under*"? [sings] "My head spins/this current is pulling me under"?*

S: Maybe "your perfume" is pulling me under…I don't—current's not, it's too…

W: Too esoteric?

S: Yeah. It's too much like how I normally write. *[W laughs]* It's gotta be really conversational.

Later, the pair discovered a work-around that satisfied the "conversational" need.

S: "I'm wrapped up in you and I like it"?

W: Mm. I don't know. *[sings] "My head spins…"*

S: "I'm all messed up and I like it."

W: That's actually not that bad. It's pretty conversational. *[sings] "My head spins/I'm all messed up and I like it."* Yes. Yes, yes, yes, yes.

At another moment in the session, when Sam developed a line that was particularly straightforward and effective, Will complimented him for developing a line that was so "dumb-good," with a dash of the now-familiar jocularity that imbued this pair's interactions.

S: If you feel—don't stop now, if you feel it, baby, don't, don't fight it. *[5-second pause]*

W: It's very conversational. *[sings] "Don't stop now/If you feel it, baby, don't fight it."* Yeah, man. That's it.

S: It's a little, a little more emotive.

W: It—you know, it's good. That works. It's dumb-good. Do you know what I mean? Like, it's—

S: Yes, I know, and I take that as a compliment. I like to be dumb.

W: Right, and it, well it is! *[laughs]* It is a compliment, because it's a good line, but it's so, like, simple.

S: It's conversational.

W: Yeah.

To me, Sam's admission that one line was "too much like how I normally write," along with his assertion, "I like to be dumb," suggests that he has internalized "conversational" lyric writing as a Nashville norm as well as a learning target for himself. In our interview, he described balancing fresh ideas with "conversational" tone as one of the key challenges of lyric-writing.

> You know, there's that, I think, satisfaction that the ear gets, the listener gets when they don't have to think about, What do they mean there? That's, you know—I try not to be too clever, but fresh. Which is probably the hardest thing in lyric writing to do, is to say it in a fresh way without it being too clever or too confusing, and make it sound conversational at the same time…We had a line in here [a song he had been writing with Will on the day of the interview]— "heart over heels" instead of "head over heels." I don't know, it's probably been done before. I don't know. But it was fresh enough that we put it in there. And, so it's finding those little "a-ha" moments throughout the lyric. (individual interview)

Corinne echoed this sentiment, explaining that "sometimes the genius is in figuring out how to say something so simply and so directly, and sometimes it's how to say it in the most interesting way possible" (individual interview). Margaret explained that the problem with overly poetic lyrics was that "nobody talks that way" (individual interview). Will, for his part, explained conversational writing in terms of maximum impact on listeners:

The best way I can explain it is you don't want to sound like a Hallmark card. Okay? Um, if you listen to music from, even the 50s, I mean, it's prose. Right? It's not how somebody would talk. And I think, especially in the last 50 years or so, with music, things have become—with some exceptions—more conversational, in that the artists will just sing stuff like you would speak it. Another way to say it is, you don't want to speak probably above a 3rd or 4th grade level. Okay? If I start using big college words in a song, it probably wouldn't get past the publishers, not because the publishers aren't smart, but because they know that the person at the other end of the radio might not get it, because you're looking for maximum impact…What I'm saying with that is if I play you a song with a lot of deep words and deep meaning and whatever, you might get it. The person sitting next to you might not. Your twelve-year-old sister might not. And you're looking for the maximum amount of people to get it. If you write down in, in that sense, a college-educated person can get it and a third grader can get it. If you write for a college-educated person, third grader's not gonna get it, and you've tightened your market. You know what I mean? (individual interview)

Will's intimation that more poetic, less direct lyrics "wouldn't get past the publishers" reveals that being "conversational" is a constraint that is part of being creative within the Nashville "sub-domain" of songwriting. Sam acknowledged, "I love folk writers, and they can be very poetic, and that's a lot of how I wrote. It doesn't fly here." Will admitted that he may have resisted this constraint at first, but eventually learned to work within its bounds:

Well, I *love* prose. And I love smart lyrics that, you know, are deep and whatever. But, being in town, I have repeatedly—it's been just completely hammered into me—from other co-writers, from publishers, from mentors. It's got to be conversational. And I

initially probably resented that and pushed back a little bit. But I understood where it,

eventually, I understood where it was coming from, because you want your song to have

maximum impact, like I was saying. (individual interview)

Where Will's comments suggest coming to terms with this constraint on lyric writing,

Margaret's reflections on "conversational" writing evince a willing embrace of such commercial

conventions:

 I was working with a girl that's—what did she say? It's like, "My coping mechanisms

were so mature." It's like, what do you mean by that? Okay. What, how about "the things

that kept, that made me feel safe." You know, let's bring it down to the way somebody

really talks, because, you know—and, again, it depends on your audience. You know, if

you're playin' folk clubs on college campuses, it's probably different than—you know,

there's a market for everything, but I've really have always wanted to write commercial

music. And I don't say that as a pejorative term. (individual interview)

Part of the process for these Nashville songwriters, then, is learning how to render their

ideas in ways that are fresh enough to be interesting but "conversational" and direct enough to

satisfy the needs of a market and its clientele. This constraint may inspire resistance, as Dan

intimated, but also can be embraced as part of the creative act, as suggested by Margaret.

Summary

Sam and Will's writing session highlighted two important elements in co-writers'

collaborative dynamics (the respective roles of silence and humor) as well as a market-driven

creative constraint (the need to be "conversational") that shapes how these writers hone their

creative output and their songwriting skills. Silence, for some writers, is an integral part of their

process and a necessary tool for tackling creative problems. Other writers expressed that silence

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can be a hindrance and that it needs to be balanced with some degree of "responsiveness" in order to prevent the "shutting down" of the creative energy in the room. Still, leaving space for silence and individual thought within the collaborative writing space may result in stronger ideas being advanced, as writers have the opportunity to reject or refine sub-par ideas before verbalizing them to their writing partners.

For this pair, humor is an essential part of how they relate to one another. It helps to maintain energetic, lively interaction between the two writers and helps relieve the potential tension of dismissing ideas that do not quite work. As with silence, humor may be a tool that some writers need to use as they cycle through potential solutions to creative problems.

Writing "conversational" lyrics was an important focus for Sam and Will as they worked to refine the lyrics of their second verse and bridge. This constraint is part of writing within and for the Nashville market, and may require some writers to go against their more-poetic instincts. For other writers, the constraint of meeting commercial demands is part of the creative act that they embrace fully.

CHAPTER 6: ZOE AND RACHEL

Zoe's house stands proud on one of East Nashville's tallest hills, tucked at the end of a long driveway. The view from her porch is stunning, overlooking extensive rail yards in one direction and the downtown skyline in the other. Zoe greeted me from that porch as I drove up—undoubtedly she recognized the slow crawl of a vehicle driven by an uncertain navigator—waving and pointing out the path from the main road to her gravel driveway, which I found a few minutes later. She met me at my car, welcomed me, escorted me inside the house, introduced me to Rachel, her sister and co-writer, and Blake, her husband, and gave me a quick tour of the house.

After the tour, we returned to the small downstairs living room that serves as Zoe's writing space. Like many such rooms, it was strewn with evidence that a musician lives and works there. Next to the door, an upright piano against the wall boasted several of Zoe's CDs from her years of work as a songwriter. Two guitars hung in wall-mounted stands (there were more upstairs). Other items of décor seemed to reflect Zoe's husband's work as a sea captain—certificates, a folded American flag in a display case. I positioned myself on a large overstuffed couch and made small talk with Rachel while Zoe went to the kitchen for some water. Rachel explained to me that she does not live in Nashville but is visiting from Iceland; she and Zoe have written together frequently in the past and are giving it another "go" now that Zoe has relocated to be in Nashville full-time.

Zoe returned to the room and asked Rachel where she might prefer to write. Rachel expressed that it did not matter to her, so Zoe recommended that they sit together at a bar-height table next to a row of floor-to-ceiling windows. With these few logistical details settled, the writing began. Zoe grabbed her iPhone, scrolling through notes she had made to herself, and

shared that she had been thinking of a song idea called "grey matters"—an intentional play-on-words designed to examine both the importance of being thoughtful (thoughts being generated in brains, which are composed of grey matter) and the idea of issues in which no clear, cut-and-dried answer exists (that is, in the absence of incontrovertible, black-and-white solutions, we are left to deal with "grey matters"). Rachel agreed that this was a good "hook," and the two quickly set about brainstorming and trading ideas for how to "flesh out" this proposed concept. In the four hours that followed, Zoe and Rachel completed the entire song—two verses, chorus, and bridge. As I observed this pair co-writing, and as I read and analyzed the transcript of the session, two salient phenomena seemed to emerge: selecting and developing "hook" ideas and negotiating process. In this chapter, I explore each of these through the lens of Zoe and Rachel's co-writing session.

Selecting and Developing "Hook" Ideas

As mentioned above, Zoe began her co-writing session with Rachel by proposing that the pair write about "grey matters." Rachel quickly embraced this idea, and the pair immediately began "talking through" the concept and ways it might be developed.

Z: I have an idea for a song, Rachel. It came to me when I was laying upstairs after I cleaned this room, kind of.

R: Yeah?

Z: And the idea is called "Grey Matters."

R: Grey matters!

Z: Yeah.

R: Oh, interesting. Grey matters.

Z: Because I thought it could mean two things—your brain is grey matter, right?

R: Uh-huh.

Z: Grey matters, and then, also, it's—

R: Nothing's black and white, right.

L: Yeah, yeah!

R: It's usually dismissed, grey—the shades of grey is sort of dismissed. It's not really paid much attention, but really it does matter.

Z: Well, yeah, and there's so many ways you could look at it. Another way grey matters is—just thinking about, you know, people who think in black and white, and they dismiss the grey areas, you know?

R: Mhm, mhm.

Z: And, and grey really does matter.

R: Mhm.

Z: Nothing is in black and white, you know?

R: And it's also, like, the mortar of anything, you know?

Z: Oh—what do you mean?

R: It's like it keeps—

Z: Let me write that down. *[to self, typing]* Grey is the mordor…mortor? *[side discussion about how to spell "mortar," not transcribed]*…of everything, you said?

R: Yeah— it kinda, like, keeps it together. Keeps the ideas, relationships—

Z: Yeah! Right. *[keeps typing]*

R: …houses, everything.

Z: Sure.

R: Mortar's usually grey. *[laughs]*

Z: Houses…your brain.

R: Yeah. *[laughter]*

Z: Houses,

R: Relationships…

Z: Families. Okay, let's see. […] Yeah, so I put "grey is the mortar." Uh—between anything?

R: That holds it together.

Z: That holds it together. Oh. *[typing, talking to self]* That holds…together. Everything, yeah.

R: *[unclear]* keeps together…

Z: Oh yeah. Keeps together. Um, houses.

R: Families, relationships.

Z: […] Relationships. The bricks. Not that this is houses, but, you know.

R: Oh, yeah, between the bricks goes the mortar. *[unclear]* holds it together. (session transcript)

This process—selecting a central lyric idea (or, in industry parlance, a "hook") and crafting the rest of the song around it—is standard operating procedure in the Nashville market. As Andy, a veteran songwriter, explained,

In Nashville, more times than not, it's gonna start with some kind of hook idea, 'cause people like to know where they're writing to. I have pop friends that I've written with that, they'll just start with a little melodic idea, and we'll put words to that and just blindly forge ahead, and I gotta tell you, man, I mean, sometimes magic can happen, but the worst thing in the world for a songwriter is to write a verse and a chorus and get down

to where that hook's gonna go and just no way to hook it—and then you're searching.

You've done all this work, and seems smart to me to start with an idea. (individual

interview)

As was the case with Zoe and Rachel, writers often come to writing sessions with hooks "ready

to go"—that is, ready to propose and, if accepted, to develop. For many of the writers I

interviewed, coming to writing sessions prepared with potential hooks is essential. Sam, another

songwriter, explained,

I try to come prepared with hook ideas, story ideas, all the time. So I will generally,

before I meet with anybody, I'll look through my hook book, see if I've added any over

the week. There was one I really liked that I was doing this week that I wanted for Will

[his co-writer] to hear, that I just came up with over the weekend. (individual interview)

Shane, another veteran writer, explained that writers should be prepared not only with a hook—

that is, a title or central word or phrase—but also with a few "ways into" that hook.

Another thing is, please, you know, come to a co-write with a few ideas. And I don't

mean just the title. Like, that's what cracks me up. Sometimes people come to you with a

title, but they don't have any angle into the title. Like, well, what does that mean? Oh, I

don't know, I just, I don't—it doesn't sound cool enough to just be a song, so you have,

you should, in my opinion, you should try to write, in your head at least, as much of the

song as you can…You should have two or three angles into that song, so each time the

chorus comes, maybe there's a little more meaning. (individual interview)

Will, Sam's co-writer, explained that, once a hook is "on the table," the next task is to discuss its

commercial viability and to explore how the idea might be developed.

But they might go, "Okay, that one might be good, let's, let's hold on to that one. Let me look through my hook book," and then maybe we'll come up with two or three hooks, and we'll be like, "What did we"—you know? And then we talk about the hooks and what kind of treatment they could give. Like…would this be a love a song? Would this be first person? Third person? What would it—you know? And then kinda see where it would go. And then we kind of go, Okay, is it commercial. Right? Is that a hook, is that a song that someone would want to sing, that someone would want to play on the radio, and then, if not, then we move on. If it is, then we kind of explore it further. (Will, individual interview)

Although Zoe and Rachel did not necessarily weigh the "grey matters" hook against other possibilities or explicitly discuss its commercial viability, the process these writers followed mirrors many of the comments presented above. Zoe prepared not only the hook itself but also some ideas about how the hook could be further shaped and developed in the song, which she then presented to Rachel, who joined her helping to "explore it further."

In her interview, Rachel pinpointed this hook-oriented approach to writing songs as a defining feature of writing within the Nashville "sub-domain"—and therefore different from how things work at home in Iceland, where she plays and sings in a duo and regularly co-writes with her duo partner.

To me, it's a huge difference in that, here [in Iceland], catch phrases and hooks are not a thing. It's more like you just express how you feel…and you make great melody with it. And it doesn't have to have a bridge—it's very, very different. In Nashville, you need that. You need a catch phrase, you need a hook, you need a structure to your song. Here, doesn't matter. You can write any way you want. (individual interview)

It bears mentioning that, when Rachel co-writes with her duo partner in Iceland, they are writing songs for their own performances rather than in hopes of selling them to recording artists. In this way, Rachel's other co-writing experiences are much less market-constrained than are the songs she co-writes with Zoe for the Nashville market—and this distinction is as important as any geographic or cultural distinction between Nashville and her home in Iceland. Still, it is clear that, as only a part-time participant in the Nashville writing "scene," she has seized upon the selection and development of lyric "hooks" as one of its defining features, and this procedure certainly proved central to the co-writing session between Zoe and Rachel that I observed.

Negotiating Process

As I watched songwriters at work and conversed with them in interviews, it became clear to me that developing as a Nashville writer includes not only learning elements of crafting an effective, successful song, but also assimilating to procedures that are part of Nashville co-writing norms: in other words, writers learn as much about process as they do about product. While observing Zoe and Rachel, I took note of several exchanges like the following:

R: I was thinking clouds, because clouds are grey.

Z: *[excitedly]* Clouds! *[laughter]* Find rhymes for "clouds." Clouds…crowds? Clouds, okay. Let's do a cloud thing here. *[sings] "See the world in black and white," "da-da-da-da-da-da clouds."*

R: But the trick—

Z: Oh.

R: —the tricky thing is how to lead into "between the bricks that built the house."

Z: Yeah—what's that got to do with "the bricks that built the house"?

R: Yeah. So, let's just have a sentence.

Z: Gotcha.

R: Okay. Let's make the sentence—forget about clouds, or forget about something that rhymes with "house." Let's just get the sentence in and then we'll find some word that rhymes. (session transcript)

Here, Rachel seems to have redirected Zoe away from focusing on finding a particular rhyme and toward focusing on the content of the line first, and *then* determining how to word it in a way that suited the rhyme scheme. This interaction highlights what I have come to call "negotiating process": exchanges in which these writers explicitly discussed and negotiated which procedural steps they took in their effort to solve the creative problem at hand.

Such examples occur throughout the transcript of Zoe and Rachel's work together. In some instances, it appeared that one writer was simply trying to demonstrate a technique that she had found useful, recommending that it be employed in service of the song in question:

Z: Okay—we almost have this. We're so close! *[strums, begins to sing "grey," laughs]* I always sing this over and over hundreds of times, and then—not hundreds, but a lot—and then, sometimes, something brilliant pops out.

R: Yeah, right!

Z: So let's sing it.

In another example, Zoe explained why, when writing, she prefers to choose a good, singable key from the outset:

Z: Okay, so, we'll come in with the hook, which is grey matters. *[sings] "Grey…"* I can hear some good harmonies there.

R: Uh-huh.

Z: [...] What key do you like to sing in?

R: Um, it doesn't matter.

Z: Oh, it matters.

R: I can do them all.

Z: I just like to start with something doable, and then not have to relearn it, you know, how to play the song, 'cause it's in the wrong key.

R: Oh, right. Yeah, yeah. Okay.

In instances like this one, Zoe seems to be communicating to Rachel what she has learned about "what works" in songwriting procedure—in this case, that she would like to be intentional about choosing a key for the song up front in order to prevent the need, later, for adjustment and retrofitting. In many such interactions, it felt as though Zoe was occupying a "teacher" role. In my field notes, I wrote,

> Zoe seemed to be the "point" person for much of the write, recommending process steps while still leaving room for Rachel to interject and redirect when needed. I wondered how much this had to do with the fact that, though both sisters are experienced writers, Zoe's recent move to Nashville makes her acquainted with the "scene" in a way that brands her with a certain kind of local expertise. (fieldnote excerpt)

Another Zoe-as-teacher moment occurred when the two writers were discussing how to begin the second verse:

Z: So, let's get a sentence, and then we'll sing the sentence.

R: Alright. Okay.

Z: What's important? Paying more attention to your thoughts, so this is gonna be the mind-brain, grey-matter, brain part, so.

R: Mhm. Well, do you think we should—okay, do you think we should talk about the brain first and our thoughts, and then go into sex and the other thing?

Z: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

R: Or sex and the other thing, and then thoughts are what we need to, to—

Z: Oh, I see.

R: —the grey matter is what we need to…

Z: Yeah, yeah.

R: …really use.

Z: Right.

R: That's the really thing that matters. So which way do want to go?

Z: Possibly, yeah.

R: Or we could just write it, and then we can put it anywhere.

Z: Switch it around. That's very true. Well, um, let's see. *[strums "verse" chords from before, humming along]*

R: Do we wanna say "we" at all, or…you? You walk through life with…

Z: Yeah, I don't want to say "we" because, then, now we're preaching to everybody.

R: Okay. Oh. So what do you do?

Z: So, if we say "she," you know? You know.

R: Oh.

Z: *[strums and sings, starting with "she"…]*

R: Oh. Each one's a different story.

In the first verse, the writers had crafted a story about a male character who struggled with society's "black-and-white" expectations and wanted simply to live comfortably in the "grey."

As they began to work on the second verse, Rachel asked whether they might pivot from third-person and use a pronoun like "we" or "you"—but Zoe intervened, explaining that using "we" or "you" could make the song sound "preachy," and that the second verse should just be another story with another character—a "she" this time. Rachel's response seems to indicate a willingness to follow Zoe's lead on this particular matter. In our interview, Rachel acknowledged the need to rely on Zoe's experience:

> She's got so much more knowledge of writing. Her writing style is really always catchy and, besides living in Nashville, she's learned, too, what people want to hear…So she's structured her style that way. And so, when I go write with Zoe, I have to change my style into what she expects and what Nashville expects. (individual interview)

Rachel's need to adapt to "what Nashville expects," then, may contribute to the need for explicit "process negotiation" in this pair and may be the reason that Zoe often ends up in a "teacher" role.

Not all of the process negotiation consisted of "teachable moments," however. At one point, it seemed clear that the two writers disagreed about how to solve a particular creative problem and truly had to negotiate how they would move forward.

Z: "Grout"? I don't know. I don't think that's it. Let's just do rhymes.

R: See how you can absolutely get stuck on one sentence?

Z: Sure!

R: I'm stuck there.

Z: That's the fun part.

R: Do you ever, like, just move on? Do you ever move on, and then it becomes clear as you write the song?

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Z: Yeah, sure.

R: And then it [unclear]—

Z: Pops up. Oh, yeah!

R: You go back and you're like "this is how it flows."

Z: Oh, yeah—how clear is that?

R: Okay, we should—

Z: Well, wait, wait—let's just try a little hard—uh, longer, and then we'll—

R: Okay.

Z: —we'll move on to the verses.

R: Okay.

Rachel, it seems, felt the two were stuck and would benefit from moving on to a different part of the song and then returning to solve this problem later. Zoe, however, felt she needed just a bit more time to try to develop a solution—and Rachel agreed to honor Zoe's request.

Though it seems inevitable that process negotiation would take place in any collaborative creative effort, what seemed distinctive about Zoe and Rachel's work together was how explicitly they verbalized their inclinations about process to one another. When I asked Rachel about this phenomenon, she attributed it simply to years engaged in the sisterly task of learning how to get along.

It didn't start with songwriting; it started just with being able to live with each other because we were forced together. And we would have to say, Okay, I'm gonna do this, so just expect that and this is what I'm going to do. So I would have to warn her, or she would have to warn me. And so, it came in the same way with writing…And then, she'll automatically think, Okay, this is the way Rachel thinks, or she'll say, Okay, I'm thinking

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of it this way, and let's approach it this way, and I'll think, Okay—it's the way Zoe always thought, so it was no surprise. So, it's like it works automatically…that's why we're so expressive, is sort of like a warning. Because we were, you know, we went through our experimental years of exploding with each other's horrible contrasting personalities and learning how to work together. And how to make it work. (individual interview)

For Zoe, this explicit discussion of procedural choices extends to other co-writing relationships, too, especially when it comes to deciding whether to move on in particularly challenging moments.

I just did that with a girl the other day, where we were just stuck on the chorus, and we're like, Oh, man—why don't we move on? She was like, Why don't we move on? And I go, and I wasn't quite yet ready to move on and I go, Well, let's just, let's just sing it one or two more times and see if something pops out, and if it doesn't, then we'll go on… Sometimes, both of you agree, Yeah, let's go on. And that's happened to me before. And other times, one of us still wants to work on it because we feel like we're close, and then, if we don't get it, then we're like, Yeah, you're right. Let's move on *[laughs]*, you know? Like that, or then, somebody does think of something, and then you're glad you didn't move on. So, I think it just comes down to whether you both feel, at that moment…you both agree and you instantaneously move on, or you just felt—I think you allow the other person just a few more minutes if they really, really think they're on the edge, and if they're not, then you just have to convince them to move on. (individual interview)

Such process negotiations seem to be an important part of the co-writing dynamic for these writers. In some instances, one writer helps the other avoid getting stuck by suggesting that

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they take a different tack or by recommending that they move on. At other times, such process negotiations may reflect the fact that one writer is more experienced with the "Nashville way" of writing and is positioned to "teach" those procedural norms to the other. Rachel's comments linking these explicit process negotiations to the depth and length of this pair's relationship as sisters are worthy of attention, since they seem to intimate that being more explicit about process is an adaptive behavior that has helped these sisters not only to get along in general, but also specifically to be more successful as creative collaborators.

Summary

Two important process considerations emerged from Zoe and Rachel's collaborative work together: selecting and developing "hooks" and negotiating process. The pair's process for settling on a song idea reflected typical Nashville procedure—writers come prepared with titles or phrases of lyrics to be used as the song's "hook" and then work to develop that hook and organize the song around it. The pair also engaged in a noticeable amount of explicit "process negotiation," which sometimes placed Zoe in a "teacher" role, since she is better acquainted with the "Nashville way" of songwriting. This process negotiation may be an important tool in maintaining healthy, productive co-writing relationships.

CHAPTER 7: SOPHIE, NATHAN, AND LAUREN

At the conclusion of a long, winding drive to West Nashville, I found myself in a parking lot outside an apartment complex, hoping I had found the right building. For a few days, I had been exchanging messages with Nathan, one member of this co-writing team, and I texted him to let him know that I had arrived. He walked outside, met me at my car, and walked me up to the apartment, which I learned was the home of his co-writer, Lauren. She introduced herself, and the pair invited me to join them at a bar-height table in a small nook just off the apartment's kitchen. Sophie, the third member of this writing team, arrived shortly thereafter, greeting her co-writers with hugs, introducing herself to me, and cradling her guitar in one of the room's corners. A single candle burned in the table's center, its warm flicker contrasting with the cool, blue-white glow painted on the writers' faces by their computer screens.

Prior to Sophie's arrival, Nathan and Lauren had been perusing a website for pre-existing backing tracks to which they could write, hoping to find one that would be "moody" enough to suit that day's "vibe."

N: Um, we were looking at tracks, or we could write to guitar—do what we do.

S: Yeah, that's fine.

N: I'll show you the one we—

L: Yeah, I have my guitar, too. I'm kinda feelin' either. I don't really have a preference.

E: I don't have a preference right now, but—

N: I don't have a preference either, but I guess just depending whatever we get melody to.

L: Play that cool one, though.

S: Yeah.

L: I like that one.

N: We're feeling moody for sure, though.

S: Yeah. It's that kind of day. *[track plays]*

L: That reminds me of the— *[humming]*

S: Yeah, it has—

N: What song is it?

L: It's from—

S: Yeah, what is that?

L: It's like, *[sings] "Fallin', fallin'"*—what is that? *[humming, chatter]*

S: Yeah, let's not, let's not. *[chatter]* I'm not feeling that. Like, we could…*[track plays]* *["ding" from someone's iPhone]* We need something moodier.

N: I know, I was thinking maybe about, this was a chorus, just so you could hear it.

(session transcript)

The trio continued to consider tracks for several more minutes, until Sophie interjected that she had begun working on a song that they might use.

S: I have this thing *[track still playing]* that I did this morning at 2. *[sheepishly]* I wasn't going to bring it in.

N: What?

S: But I can show it to you. *[talking to L]* It would fit really well with your voice.

N: What is it?

E: It's kinda weird. *[track plays]*

L: What is it?

S: It's a weird title. *[unzips guitar case]* Like, "Slipping Out of My Mouth."

N: Oh, that's cool.

S: But there's something to it.

L: Oh, that's cool. (session transcript)

Sophie played a portion of the song for her co-writers, who agreed that it had potential and spent a few minutes making suggestions. Eventually, however, it became clear that the idea was not "sticking." Recognizing this, Sophie pivoted from the song fragment she had presented to asking Nathan if he had any titles to propose. Nathan mentioned one—"Cologne"—that seemed to grab the group's attention; after a brief discussion, the writers immediately turned to developing this idea by thinking through "feels" and melodic ideas. The work continued apace until, two and a half hours later, the three collaborators were high-fiving in celebration of their new creation—a smoky, tender love song with the alluring hook "I want to wear you like cologne." In this chapter, I examine how Sophie, Nathan, and Lauren employed a melody- or "feel"-based approach to developing the initial hook idea. I also examine, through this trio's interactions and through supporting reflections from interviews with other songwriters, the norms that guide songwriters' sharing of positive feedback—in a so-called "no-free zone"—with one another.

Melody-/"Feel"-Based Approach

As mentioned earlier, at this session's beginning, Sophie offered a fragment of a song she had been working on for her co-writers' consideration. Lauren and Nathan both affirmed Sophie and her idea and began to share some suggestions for how to shape it further, but it became evident rather quickly that, as a team, they were not drawn to working on that particular song in that particular session. Sophie, reading these cues, turned instead to asking Nathan whether he had any title ideas to suggest.

S: Nathan, do you have any one-word titles that are going to blow me away?

N: I don't know if they're going to blow you away, but we have some. We really wanted to write a song called "Cologne."

S: Oh, yeah.

L: Wouldn't that be great? But it has to be, like, super R&B.

S: *[unclear]*

N: Like straight R&B.

L: But then, okay, what was the other one we thought of the other day? Oh—"Sinatra."

N: Oh, "Sinatra." *[unclear]*

S: I like that; that's really cool!

L: Isn't that *[unclear]*? Like, I don't know how we could do it. I don't know what you'd do with it, but we were like, that'd be a sick title.

N: Like, super, super R&B.

S: Old movie feel of some sort, you know—

N: Yeah.

L: Yeah.

S: —not musically, but lyrically.

N: No, yeah, yeah. Exactly.

S: Oh, that's cool.

N: *[unclear]*

L: I'm down for whatever. *[strumming]* If we want to do, like, if we want to do the "Cologne" thing, like *[unclear]*, we'd have to do some super R&B, which I'm all for.

Sophie, Nathan, and Lauren's approach to developing a "hook" differs substantially from Zoe and Rachel's process (see Chapter 6). Whereas Zoe and Rachel selected a hook and then engaged in a "brainstorming" conversation in order to shape lyrics around that idea, Sophie, Nathan, and Lauren settled on a title and then immediately pivoted toward developing "feels" on instruments and ideas for the vocal melody.

N: I had a chorus for that "Cologne" thing.

S: "Cologne"? Cologne is cool.

N: I just don't know where to go with it, you know?

L: What if we just did—like, the verse was just super…*[strums, unclear]*

N: It'd be cool to do minors all the way through and then the chorus is more on the major.

L: Yeah.

S: That's cool.

[Someone strumming minor pattern, iv-i, with rhythmic fingerpicking pattern; writers variously hum melodic fragments over this ostinato]

N: Ooh! *[hears something he likes]* Or, hold on—do that again, hold on. *[L hums]* Oh, you could do something really run-on like that, ready? *[L and N hum together, repeating melodic pattern]*

L: Or you could just do two. *[sings, turning pattern into antecedent/consequent]*

N: Okay, I'm going to start recording. *[strumming/humming continues]* Alright, ready?

[beep from iPhone, signaling recording has begun; L continues strumming and scatting]

Could you even do another new melody for that fourth one?

L: I think you need to, yeah.

N: Yeah. Like, maybe a falsetto thing, like a background thing.

L: Or at least for the one after that, yeah. *[more strumming, melodic exploration]* Or you keep all four of those the same and then do new melody after that.

N: Oh, oh; yeah, yeah. Do it again. *[L hums melodic patterns; adds new one at the end]* Ooh, I like that. *[N joins with L]* And then chorus! *["chop" on guitar, laughter]* Or F, maybe…F is kind of a cool chord, or C, but I mean, C is in major. *[unclear/chatter]* Oh, I like the G.

L: I feel G better, yeah. *[laughter, chatter]*

N: Wait—do you remember that?

L: You got it all [on the recording].

N: Yeah.

L: And, no, I don't remember anything. *[laughter, strumming, "work tape" playback]*

N: I love that so much. Lauren, that might be a chorus if you raise it. *[plays new chords under melodic pattern]* Ooh—that's a chorus if you raise it, don't you think?

S: Yeah; hold on, wait.

[new chords with capo at higher position, strumming, chatter]

N: I just raised it two. *[strumming, scatting in new key]* That's a chorus, don't you think?

S: Can we change up the rhythm of the melody? To make it chorus-y?

N: Yeah. Like what?

S: Like, more simple. Play the verses real quick.

Only after the writers made many of these melodic and harmonic decisions did the first concrete lyric ideas emerge.

S: *[interrupting]* Hold on—can you play the verse real quick?

N: Oh. *[starts playing verse pattern]* *[unclear]*

S: What's the melody in this key? *[L and N start humming/playing]* Okay, so what if it was something like—and this is dumb, okay?—Um…*[sings] "Say the words that you're thinking/in this quiet room/ [truncates melodic pattern at end of phrase slightly to match lyric rhythm] Take it down to a whisper—"*

N: *[hums along]* Ooh, I like "whisper."

L: That's cool. *[E hums rest of phrase]*

From this point, the writer's interactions became more focused on shaping lyrics, line by line. Notably, after Nathan's initial discussion of the "Cologne" title, quoted above, the next mention of the title is six minutes later; another 11 minutes intervene before the next mention after that. In this session, the writers seemed to use the title as a guiding "vibe" as they explored melodic and harmonic ideas and, eventually, phrases of lyrics. They did not, however, engage in the kind of explicit brainstorming and "fleshing out" of the concept that Rachel and Zoe used in their development of the "Grey Matters" hook. In fact, it seemed that this trio of writers had to remind each other, as they followed the "vibe" where it led them, to stay focused on "cologne" as an organizing concept and "write to the hook."[4]

S: What's the prechorus melody?

L: Um...*[hums melody, N joins; both stop as N cues chorus]*

E: *[hums snippets]*…so it's four. *[others hum]*

N: Yeah.

L. Yeah.

[long pause; some inaudible chatter]

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[4] "Write to the hook" is a familiar phrase in the Nashville "scene." It refers to making sure that lyrics are constructed such that they ultimately point to the song's most important lyric line, or "hook," found in the chorus.

N: There's something really cool for that. Like, there's something *[unclear]*

S: I know. *[unclear]* I'm looking up "cologne."

N: Oh yeah, *[unclear]* the title! *[laughs]*

L: That's a good idea. That's a good idea.

Nathan described this procedure as typical for his sessions with Lauren and Sophie.

Really it was a song that was kind of the same as all of our processes. I had the title and

vibe and we just kind worked up a melody and Sophie helped guide some lyrics on top of

it. (email correspondence)

Lauren mentioned that she "thought that was a cool write because if I can remember correctly we

didn't really have any initial ideas going in and just kind of started from scratch" (email

correspondence). Although Nathan did come prepared with a title idea and a sense of the

appropriate "vibe," the song did emerge "from scratch" in that the title and vibe were the only

stimulus (as opposed to pre-conceived ideas about how the lyric concept is framed or a pre-

composed fragment of a song that is completed collaboratively).

As discussed with relation to Zoe and Rachel's lyric-oriented hook development process,

some writers feel strongly that having a clear lyric hook idea is essential. Andy, a veteran

country writer, mentioned that he has some "pop friends that [he has] written with that, they'll

just start with a little melodic idea, and we'll put words to that and just blindly forge ahead," but

that it "seems smart to [him] to start with an idea" (individual interview). Shane, too, expressed

reservation about writers who have a title idea but "don't have any angle into the title…you

should have two or three angles into that song" (individual interview). On the other hand, some

writers have described processes that do not necessarily begin with giving primary attention to a

lyric hook. Liam, another writer, acknowledged that sometimes a musical "feel" is the driving

stimulus—though, in the instance he describes, the musical "feel" combined with a lyric "hook" to generate the initial idea.

> I had a co-write with three people yesterday, and we all threw out ideas, and somebody had a really good musical idea, and somebody had a good lyric. But we thought, but the musical idea that had come with the lyric originally we didn't like, so we ended up kind of fusing the musical feel we liked with the lyric that we liked. (individual interview)

Jim, another veteran writer, discussed the concept of using "grooves" as the initial stimuli that drive song creation:

> I was doing a thing for a while, you know, and I do it from time to time, where I just write a bunch of grooves, and I'll come in and start playing them for my co-writers, and say, Does this spark anything?…Sometimes, they'll go, Well, you know, I've got this thing that I've been wanting to write. Wrote one with [co-writer]; I was trying, playing around with DADGAD tuning. And he said, Well, I got this thing, I've just got this title; I don't know what it's about…And I'm like, that's cool. And then, we started working around with a groove and built this entire song around that. (individual interview)

These examples demonstrate the existence of a variety of "ways in" for getting a song started. Developing the conceptual frame that surrounds a song's lyrics remains important—even Sophie, Nathan, and Lauren's relatively "from scratch" writing session included attention to "writing to the hook"—but brainstorming and crafting the song's organizing lyric concept is not uniformly "the" way to begin. Absent some method for measuring and evaluating the effectiveness of these songs, which is well beyond the scope and outside the interest of this study, it is not reasonable to describe any of these approaches as the "best practice" for songwriters. Rather, these examples

and reflections reveal the existence of multiple approaches and prompt consideration of the

potential benefits and downfalls of each.

"No-Free Zone"

As I observed Sophie, Nathan, and Lauren's collaboration, I took note of many

exchanges like the following:

S: I don't know if this is it. *[Starts to sing] "Ca—" [decides against singing]* Like,

"captured in the air," something "atmosphere," dadadadadada. Just so you could have…

N: I like "air" and "atmosphere."

S: Yeah, something—I don't know if "captured" is it…

L: And that works with cologne. *[unclear]*

N: Yeah.

S: Yeah.

Exchanges like the above contain a subtle, but important, feature of many Nashville co-writing

sessions—the absence of an explicit "no" when a proposed idea is not fully accepted by co-

writers. Nathan, by pointing out that he likes "air" and "atmosphere," affirmed some features of

Sophie's suggestion, but also did not offer an unequivocal "yes." In another example, Sophie

affirmed a suggestion of Nathan's, even though she agreed the song needed a "more simple"

line:

S: Mm, I don't know how to do it. Uh…"Say the words that you're thinking in this quiet

room/like a" some kind of whisper "I can fall into."

N: Oh, I like that better.

S: I don't know, like, essence?

L: Like a…

N: "Like a da-da kinda whisper." *[beating out syllables]*

S: But, like, something you could actually fall into would be cool.

N: Yeah.

S: *[sings, searching for missing word]* Or, "like a" something "in a whisper".

N: Or you could do...*[plays, sings/hums to self]* I don't know. I was going to see if you could put "pillow talk whisper" in there.

S: A what?

N: "Pillow-talk whisper," but it's too clunky.

S: Yeah, simple, more simple—but I like that.

As veteran songwriter and songwriting teacher Margaret explained, such interactions represent an important principle for many Nashville writers—that the co-writing room is a "no-free zone."

It's like I read an article—I think it was by [songwriter], and he said that this old classic country writer taught him that co-writing is a "no-free zone."…So you just, you know, you don't ever say "no." You don't wanna ever say anything negative to your co-writer. And, you know, you learn to say things like, "Yeah, I think that's exactly the right idea— is there a more fun way to say it? Or is there a fresher way to say it?" As opposed to, "That's trite. I don't want, I've heard that before." (individual interview)

Zoe described her own experience with learning to say "yes," which began as she was commuting to Nashville for regular visits and co-writing appointments:

Something I learned when I was coming up here, before I moved here, was to try to say "yes" as much as you can. "Yes" to things. Not necessarily saying, "Yes, let's put that line in," but saying, "Yeah, something like that." "Yeah, yeah—something like that. That's so close. Yeah." As opposed to, when I, when I first started co-writing, I'd be like

"Ew, no, oh my God, that's awful, nuh-uh." …learning to shake your head "yes" and

show your body language that you're game and you're into creating something and,

whatever it is they're saying, whether you agree with it or not, to keep the co-write

moving forward by saying "yeah, yeah"—I've really, I've really learned, you know, not

to shut people down by saying "no," because it is really does… even if you just go,

"Yeah, something like that. Yeah, oh my God, yes, that's so close. Let's, let's put

something like that in, but what else? How else can we say it?" (individual interview)

I observed Sophie, Nathan, and Lauren engaging in exactly the behavior Zoe and Margaret

described on numerous occasions, including this interaction:

L: Do you like "Take it down" *[stutters]*—bleh, can't speak. "Take it down to a

whisper/Come on, set the mood"?

N: Ooh—"mood" is cool.

S: *[agreeing]* "Mood" is cool.

N: *[speaks/mumbles lyrics to himself]* Um…

L: *[sings] "Set the mood…" [three second pause]*

N: I like the word "mood"…I think there's a cooler way to say that.

L: Yeah.

In response to Lauren's lyric suggestion, both Sophie and Nathan isolated one promising feature

of the proposed line—the use of the word "mood"—but did not accept the line wholesale. As

Zoe described above, saying "yes" does not mean accepting every suggestion or being dishonest;

rather, it is a matter of affirming one's co-writer and then trying to steer toward a better idea.

Nathan's indication that he liked the word "mood" but thought that there was a "cooler way" to

express the same sentiment is an illustrative example.

Will, whose background includes some work as a professional actor, noted the connection between co-writing as a "no-free" zone and principles espoused in improv comedy:

> Well, I think the number one thing is not to shut off the process…Like, it's always "No, but…" or "Yes, and…"—right? Which is almost an improv thing. I knew of an improv comic, and she was also a writer, and she would say—you know, there's an exercise where…you're improv-ing with somebody and you're bringing them a box, right? And what's in the box? Whatever's in the box, whatever you say is in the box. But then they've gotta take that and, and move that. If they go, "Oh, there's nothing in the box," the improv ends. *[laughter]* It doesn't— that's it! You can't do anything with that. So, it's really the job of both people to keep it rolling, and I've heard it referred to as throwing a ball to and they throw a ball back to you. You've gotta also throw the ball and catch the ball. You know, so, I definitely think that that is conducive to having a good vibe. (individual interview)

Though the need to be positive/supportive was widely acknowledged in my interviews with songwriters, some expressed that, eventually, they hoped to develop the kind of trust with their co-writers that allowed for a little more candor in their responses to one another. Margaret explained that saying "yes" and being positive are important, but "once you get a really comfortable relationship with somebody, you can say, 'Oh, hasn't it been said like that too many,' you know…said like that too many times" (individual interview). Sam, in our interview, described his preference for candor this way:

> With new writers, I will generally say, I want us to be at a point where you can tell me that line sucks with a smile on your face. But mean it. And I can just say, you know what,

you're right…or I can say, You know what? I kinda like that. Give me something better. But just to be honest. (session transcript)

Aaron, a singer-songwriter who performs as a solo artist but also co-writes occasionally, had a slightly different perspective. Rather than to assume that saying "yes" is the default position, Aaron tries to assess the sensitivity of his co-writer when crafting the feedback he shares.

It's different depending on the personality of whoever you're writing with, because, for example, somebody that I know is not super sensitive—all songwriters are sensitive, but not sensitive in *that* particular way—you know, they may throw out something, be like, *[sighing]* "Ah, man, I don't […] Just, just hits me as too, it's too cliché for me," "It's too much of a blues kinda sounding stale riff"…and I don't worry about it hurting their feelings. And they can tell me, like, "Ah, yeah, but, you know, that word sings weird," or "Yeah, but that's too bizarre"… Like, that's easy, you keep throwing stuff at each other. But then, there's some people I write with, and you know this because the personalities, and it's like anything, working with somebody—you'd be like, "Ah, man, that's"—you know, there might be somebody else that throws the same line at you that you might be like, "Yeah, yeah, that's cool, but like, I'm trying to find another way to say it," and you might sugar coat it a little bit because you know might know that person's a little more sensitive and maybe, or maybe somebody that hasn't co-written as much or just their personality in general. (individual interview)

Though some writers seem more wedded to the principle of always saying "yes" than other writers, it is clear that maintaining a positive, supportive atmosphere is important to these

writers. Lauren, speaking about what makes a co-writing session "work," pointed to this positive, comfortable atmosphere as a key ingredient.

> I think being comfortable is the key to a good co-write. Being able to be open and not afraid to spit out any ideas you have even if they might not be the best. The worst ideas can inspire the best ones. When you get uncomfortable and too self-conscious, that's when they don't go so well. (email correspondence)

The comfort that Lauren describes was apparent in her collaboration with Sophie and Nathan. I was particularly struck by this interaction, in which Lauren and Nathan not only acknowledged Sophie's gift for generating novel lyric ideas, but also lovingly teased her for her apologetic and self-deprecating way of proposing them:

S: What about this?

N: *[unclear]*

S: "Trace*"—[sings] "Trace my lips I've been usin'/talk all night"*

N: "To talk all night," that's cool.

S: *"Take this kiss, take this [unclear]"*—"Take this kiss."

N: That's cool.

L: And did you say, "Trace my lips I've been using?"

N: Yeah.

S: Yeah.

L: That's cool.

N: And it sings better.

S: *[singing to self]* I almost want to say—

L: Oh, I like that better.

S: "Take these lips, take this music." But I—

L: Ooh, I kinda like that—

N: That's cool.

L: —because it reminds me of the—

N: You get the coolest little lyrics, Sophie.

L: And you're like, "But this is so weird!"

N: I know!

S: It's weird as well! *[more chatter, unclear]*

L: But it's going to be perfect, so just hold on. *[laughter]*

As a corollary, being needlessly negative or dismissive was seen as a hindrance to the co-writing process—and perhaps a "deal breaker" in terms of arranging more writing sessions. Margaret explained, "Well, I think just being dismissive of what people throw out. That's a thing that'll make me kind of clam up and not want to write with you again" (individual interview). Jim related a negative experience with a particularly dismissive co-writer—which caused him to disengage from participating fully in the session and to avoid subsequent collaboration with this writer.

> Got together with this guy. We'd started on a song; it was his idea. Great idea. And we got about halfway through, and then we got back together again to write on it, and he's going through and he's looking at the lines, and he's going *[unclear]* "Not that one, not that one." You know, and it's like, and I'm going, Wait a minute—I remember writing that line, and he was throwing out all my lines. You know? And so I'm sitting there, and I'm giving it 110%, you know, and I'm throwing up a line, and he'd spike it. And he'd, Nah, nah, no, no. And then he'd say something, you know, and I'm, and I would

comment, but I'm, thinking, That's really lame. And, at a certain point, Okay, well, we've got the first verse and the chorus. And I'm like, Okay, run it by me. And it's like, it's all these lame lines that he'd been throwing in that I thought were just placeholders. You know, and I tried a couple more times to throw in some lines, and he's just spiking every one of my ideas. And I'm like, Okay, this is not, this ain't going well. So, I faked the rest of the session. I put my arm over my guitar, and I'd be looking down, and I had a watch at that time, and I'd sit there and watch my watch, and I'd go, Okay, I can probably stay in this position for about five minutes, and then I'd strum a chord or two, and then I'd look at the wall and kinda look at the clock over there, and see how many more minutes, and it's like, at the very minute that I thought I could get out of it, I said, Man, I gotta, I got some friends I gotta get picked up, sorry, but I gotta go. And got out of the thing and I've never gone back to the guy. (individual interview)

Notably, none of these writers seems to suggest that it is necessary to "go along" with a line that does not suit the song or will not be effective. They do not expect consistent agreement, but do seem to expect consistent agreeability. As Raven, a young writer-artist, explained, even good writers have bad ideas.

Even if, you know, something I'm saying doesn't appeal to my co-writers, they try to… put [themselves] in my shoes and say, "Mmm, I can see how you would like that" or vice versa. It's being sure not to knock anybody down or say "Wow, that idea sucks!" *[laughter]* or, you know, just genuinely just being nice…Even if you don't think it's the greatest idea that's coming out of the other person's mouth, just acknowledge it—we've all had crappy days.

Though not all writers expect for "yes" to be the default answer—some, in fact, seem trained on a level of candor with their co-writers that liberates them from the "no-free zone"—all seem to expect that disagreements be expressed in a way that affirms their co-writers and their ideas.

Summary

Sophie, Nathan, and Lauren differed from other writers in their approach to hook development, which was much more driven by "feel" and melody than Rachel and Zoe's process, which focused on brainstorming around a particular lyric "hook." Though focusing on shaping the conceptual basis of a song's lyrics is important for some writers, others employ "feels" and "grooves" as animating stimuli in the writing process. Determining how these process decisions relate to the "quality" or "effectiveness" of product outcomes is beyond the scope of this study; however, exposure to and consideration of these diverse approaches—and their respective consequences—may be illuminating for songwriters and songwriting teachers.

The collaboration among the members of this writing team also exemplified the expected positive nature of feedback exchanged between songwriters in response to ideas proposed when co-writing. For some songwriters, the co-writing room is a "no-free zone" in which all feedback is stated positively and all suggestions are explicitly affirmed. For others, it is important to pass through this "no-free" phase and into a level of comfort in which more candor about the viability of a particular suggestion is possible. In any case, writers seem consistently opposed to unwarranted negativity and endorse a positive, supportive approach to giving feedback to co-writers.

CHAPTER 8: THE CO-WRITING ROOM

One of the primary aims of this research is to understand how co-writing functions in the

Nashville songwriting environment, particularly as it relates to how the craft of songwriting is

taught and learned. In previous chapters, I examined each of four co-writing sessions, using them

as lenses through which to view certain salient phenomena related to co-writing. In this chapter, I

"zoom out" to present what the data generated in this study suggest about co-writing on the

whole. Four broad themes serve as anchors for this chapter: (a) co-writer selection, (b) the co-

writing environment, (c) co-writing procedures, and (d) learning from co-writers.

Co-Writer Selection

Before a pair or team can enter the co-writing room together, they first must find and

choose one another. Finding the right co-writers is a critical part of participating in the Nashville

co-writing "scene"—and not every co-writing relationship works. As Margaret shared, bluntly,

> There are people who love co-writing with me and there are people that would probably
>
> rather, you know, get a colonoscopy than co-write with me. *[laughter]* You know, you
>
> gotta find the people that you click with. (individual interview)

In this section, I consider the various attributes that the writers in this study identified as

important considerations in "find[ing] the people that you click with."

Co-Writing–Dating Comparisons

Many of the writers in the study either explicitly acknowledged a comparison between

co-writing and dating or described behaviors that resembled the process of looking for a potential

partner. As Payton explained,

It's kinda like dating, in a way, I mean…there has to be some sort of mutual liking in the room in order for it to work at all. There has to be some sort of chemistry. Otherwise, the song's just not gonna work. (individual interview)

Sam indicated that he had to try writing with multiple collaborators before he started to learn what worked for him.

Originally, I didn't know what I was looking for, so I wrote with whoever, anybody wanted to write with me. And, so, there's people I found at open mics and stuff like that. And you start learning what works and doesn't work. (individual interview)

Given that writers enter all of their co-writing appointments with the intention of producing some kind of actionable product, Raven suggested that perhaps speed-dating was an appropriate analog.

People have related to songwriting to speed-dating, where you walk in, in 15 minutes you have to introduce yourself, you know, explain your style, what you're looking for, what you want to write that day, and be able to come out with something two or three hours later that's magical, you know? Everybody's looking for that hit. (individual interview)

Writers indicated that, over time, they have learned to be more selective about the individuals with whom they write. Raven explained,

I've become a little pickier—or I've been able to be a little bit more direct on who and when I want to write. So, I think my co-writing partner choice has become more specific, whereas, a year ago…I was just writing anywhere with anyone…any time, whenever I could. (individual interview)

Sam, who also discussed becoming "pickier" about co-writer selection, seemed to express some unease at the notion of seeing himself as "too good" for certain writers, but also acknowledged this as a consequence of the high-stakes nature of these relationships.

> A publisher I met with last week actually, two weeks ago actually told me, he said, Sam, one of the things you need to do is be more selective with who you co-write with. And it's like I've had a few people want to write with me lately, and I told my wife, I said…I don't ever want to be the snob, like, Oh, I'm too good for you…but it really, when you only have so much time to write, you have to be—it's a business decision who you spend that time with. You know? Because it's your career that you're managing. (individual interview)

Writers also described what drew them to potential co-writers in the first place, what prompted them to consider pursuing a co-writing relationship with a particular individual. Zoe described the "gut feeling" she gets in response to a potential writer's music.

> First of all, you get a feeling, number one, if you like their music. That's number one. Do you like their music?...You get a gut feeling whether or not this could be cool person to write with or not. A lot of people that I've listened to, their songs are *okay*, they're good, you know? And I'm like, Yeah, I think together we could make a great song. And then there's other people where I'm like, I don't even want to start. That person has no clue about song structure or topics or hooks, you know? I don't want to teach someone how to ride a tricycle. You know what I mean. So I just let them go or I'll just say—Hey, you know, I don't feel like we're compatible. (individual interview)

Payton, too, described listening for certain musical attributes in a potential collaborator's songs.

It's different for every person. I mean, I tend to listen for catchy melodies. Something

that's memorable. It gets stuck in my head really easily. And clever lyrics, not just

generic lines that, that are sort of—I want something clever. And so, I just listen and sort

of analyze their songs as they're singing and, like, Oh, I liked that! I think that's really

clever. (individual interview)

Although Andy acknowledged that there may be some traits that are desirable in a potential co-

writing partner, he also acknowledged that some of the factors that bring people together are

intangible.

Similar influences—sometimes different influences, because that's cool too. Maybe just

something unique or individual…Who knows what's in our hearts that draws us to

[someone]—you know, it could be the way somebody sings, the way they phrase words,

or the way they paint a picture…The thing is there's so many different ways to do this

here. (individual interview)

Though certain intangibles may drive the initial connection between two co-writers, the dating-

like experience of co-writing can lead songwriters to a clearer sense of what "works" in these

relationships.

"Easy Hang"

One important element of co-writing relationships that "work"—though it may seem

obvious—is the degree of personal comfort between the writers. As Payton mentioned above,

some "mutual liking" is necessary if collaborators are going to succeed in creating effective

songs together. As Margaret pointed out, "the thing to look for is somebody that you just get

along with, you just like being in the same room with. There's a saying in Nashville that you

have to be an 'easy hang'" (individual interview). Shane explained that writers and musicians whose company is enjoyable are often the ones who get hired.

> My friend [songwriter name] is—he's not, like, a gifted songwriter, but he's solid. He's such a fun hang—I'm telling you, that's a big thing. The hang thing…If you're fun to hang with, you're gonna get gigs, you know. That's just how it is. (individual interview)

The importance of humor in Sam and Will's co-writing session (see Chapter 5) relates to this principle. Sam, as discussed before, felt that humor was important because co-writing sessions should be fun—"if it's a grind, why bother?" (individual interview). Corinne related the story of a particular enjoyable co-write with a high-energy, fun collaborator:

> I recently wrote with this guy where just the energy was so high. We were having so much fun and back-and-forth between us; we were going the same direction. You know? So it's like he knew what I meant, and I knew what he meant, and we were both really excited, and we were both encouraging each other, you know? So, we were, we would each get excited about what the other person was doing and, in this case, there was also a third person in the room, but he and I were kind of the main factor… it was just so much *fun* to trade ideas. (individual interview)

As Jim explained, enjoying and nurturing these "fun hangs" is sometimes as important as being productive.

> I always figure, even if you don't get a song, at least you've spent three hours with somebody that you enjoy being around. I've heard some people even say that they've got some people that they don't get along with but they write good songs with….I don't see how you can do that…One co-writer, we got together, and I blocked off the entire day for him. And we sat there all day, and we got to the end of the, end of the day, and I said, we

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haven't got the guitars out. And he says, Well, that's alright, he says, I wouldn't write

with somebody I wouldn't fish with. (individual interview)

Though other factors may contribute to the compatibility that sustains successful co-writing

partnerships, an enjoyment of each other's company—having a good time with a "fun hang"—is

an important base element in building a successful co-writing partnership.

Complementary Strengths

Many participants discussed the importance of finding writers whose strengths

complement theirs. As Raven explained,

I think one of my strengths as a writer is coming up with melodies or a guitar

lick/pattern/loop, anything like that. I think I'm more on the musical side rather than the

lyrical side. So that's another thing that I look for in a co-writing relationship, is do our

writing strengths complement each other? If I get in the room with another person who's

musical-driven, like I am, then we might be in there forever, you know, trying to find

common ground on lyrical content. Whereas, if I find a great lyricist, I find that,

sometimes, those relationships stick because we're not, we don't have the same qualities.

We have qualities that complement each other. (individual interview)

Margaret, too, expressed that she wants to work with writers who are "strong where [she is] not."

The main thing for me is I look for people that are strong where I'm not. Like, I love—to

me, the exciting part of songwriting is making all the pieces of the puzzle fit…I'm not a

good guitar player, I don't come up with cool little riffs, I don't come up with interesting

grooves or chord progressions. And so I look for the guys that are just super

musical…it's hard if somebody's not at all good with lyrics, because I want to write

better lyrics than I can write on my own. (individual interview)

For Shane, who sees himself as a fast and furious generator of ideas, it can prove beneficial to work with someone whose strength is in editing and finessing details.

> I'm a idea guy…I can't even remember what I just said two seconds ago; I need what they call an "editor" in the, in the mix…I go so fast, and I don't enjoy the cleaning up process as much as other people [who] are just brilliant at that. (individual interview)

Brooke acknowledged in her reflection that such complementary relationships also can help each writer to grow.

> I was the lyric person, the idea person. He is *unbelievable* as a musician and as a singer. One of the best voices you've ever heard. His melodies were kind of middle ground; they weren't super great. But his ability as a musician and as a singer were stunning. And my lyric ideas were just okay, but then you—when we started putting those two things together, my lyrics got a little better, his melody things got better. (individual interview)

Finding a writer with complementary strengths, for these writers, is an important part of "what works" in co-writing relationships. Such partnerships not only help the creative process to move forward, but also can contribute to the growth of the individual writers in question.

Writing Tempos

Though the importance of finding a writer with complementary strengths may seem like a reinforcement of the old truism that "opposites attract," there are some dimensions on which it is important for songwriters to be similar. Some writers that mentioned that the speed at which others work can be an important factor in their compatibility as collaborators. Shane, for example, acknowledged above that he is a "fast" writer. Jim, too, acknowledged this about his own writing tempo: "I annoy some people sometimes because…I'm a *fast* writer. Because I always figure you can always rewrite. But get the damn thing written first" (individual

interview). Jim went on to explain that this sometimes proves an irreconcilable difference: "It gets a little difficult. In fact, I've got a writer or two that I just can't write (with) them anymore, because our tempos are so offset" (individual interview). Margaret, on the other hand, pointed out that she works best with writers who, like her, want to work more slowly.

> I tend to be a very slow, nitpicky writer. So I do a lot better with people that wanna go really slow and nitpick…I have one guy that I write with that we, you know, if we spend three hours and if we get two lines and they're good lines, we're happy. (individual interview)

Though some complementary differences may be important in co-writing partnerships, sufficient similarity in collaborators' writing tempos may be an important part of maintaining a healthy relationship.

Aligning Intentions

In addition to working at similar "writing tempos," writers also discussed the importance of having similar goals and intentions. Sam, for example, expressed his need to work with writers who are as focused and committed as he is.

> They need to be as ambitious as I am, as committed to the process and to success of songwriting, be on the same journey as I am. I don't want to write with someone who's kinda doing it just to see if he can or 'cause it's a nice hobby. And it's not like I'm better than them or anything else; it's just we're on a different path. I've had writers that I loved writing with, but they wouldn't show up, they'd cancel. Would I write with them again? Yeah, if they come to me. I'm not gonna go chase 'em. (individual interview)

Will echoed Sam's sentiments, indicating that "The people I write with are serious, and they want to do this. They're not just—Hey, you know, I'm kind of, you know, going into another career, but I'm just doing this for fun" (individual interview).

In addition to having similar levels of "seriousness," some writers seemed to need a kind of creative alignment in terms of the product to be generated. Brooke, for example, discussed her commitment to writing songs that she loves, even when they may not serve the market particularly well.

> So [one co-writer and I] kinda started that trend early on of having your own sound, your own thing, so, whether we got cuts or not, people started to know that I just kinda did what I loved, and that the market's gonna kinda come in and out of that, but that was always kind of my first and foremost goal. (individual interview)

Aaron expressed that it was important to clarify early in a writing session whether the intention is to create a commercially viable hit or simply to focus on creating an innovative, interesting song.

> It has to be discussed: are we trying to write a song to get it cut, or are we just trying to make the coolest song we can? And if the former rather than the latter is guiding you, then it's gonna make you make certain decisions about where the song needs to go…But, when it always comes up, and they ask the question, "Are we tryin' to…"—and I just, you know, I'm not that guy [who focuses on commercial success]. But, having said that, there's still people like that they're really talented and…they come up with really good words, they come up—they're really talented melodically, they have ideas—and I've written good songs with them…But there's other people I write with that never even comes up…We're both trying to steer it in the same direction in a broader sense, you know. (individual interview)

For Aaron, though he is "not that guy," he seems willing to work with writers who are interested in getting "cuts" so long as their motives are clear. Clarifying and aligning intentions may help these writers to prevent or avoid undue conflict in their co-writing relationships.

Skill Level Parity/"Writing Up"

One factor that guides songwriters' development of co-writing relationships is the respective skill/experience levels of the partners. Zoe's comment, above, that she does not want to "teach someone how to ride a tricycle" suggests that she expects a certain parity between her skill level and her collaborators'. Aaron also endorsed the idea of parity in skill levels, since uneven skills could result in unequal division of labor.

> When you're both really around the same level or experience or whatever, things go really fast, and you can get into something really fast, or figure out when something's not working and move on to something else…The other way around it ends up being—it just is slow, because…one person ends up doing more of the heavy lifting and it just kinda drags along a little bit. (individual interview)

Several writers spoke to me about the concept of "writing up"—seeking to collaborate with writers who are better, more successful, or more established—as a way to grow as a songwriter and to "work one's way up" in the songwriting profession in Nashville. Some writers felt, unwaveringly, that writing up was advisable and desirable. Lauren expressed that "it's important to write with people that you think are better than you because you can learn from them" (email correspondence). Nathan felt that he did not begin improving as a songwriter until he got "in the room" with writers whose skills exceeded his.

> I don't think I was good until I got myself in the room with people that were better than me and I admired. That's how I feel like you get better. You work as hard as you can to

get into the room with people better than you until you're better than them. (email

correspondence)

Other writers took a more measured stance with regard to "writing up." As Jim pointedly

acknowledged,

that always means that somebody's got to be writing down. But, you know, when you

start figuring out the people that you've been hanging around with, it's like, Well, I like

the way this guy writes, you know, and so, you start writing with those people.

(individual interview)

Will expressed frustration at having to "write down," but also expressed his desire to write with

people who were either on his level or better.

I don't ever want to write down, you know? I *have*; it's usually just a very frustrating

experience. You know. So I try to look for people that are, talent-wise, on my level or

better. Preferably better. And usually, those people tend to either be more seasoned and

have…more connections in town or, you know, they can get a song to somebody, you

know. (individual interview)

Will further reflected on the virtues and consequences of "writing up" versus "writing across":

I have heard consistently in town that you do need to write up. And I agree with that, but

I've also heard consistently that you will get better results from people that are in your

group, in your tribe—right? And I also agree with that. I think it's important to try to

expand your group. And it's very important to find—not just write up, whatever. And, I

mean, if you get a chance to write up, absolutely write up, but find the right person to

write up with, because, if I was in a room with, I don't know—just say Bob Dylan,

okay?—I would be really like, "Oh crap."…And it might be hard, even if he was super

cool, to separate myself and just write as if he was a peer. You know, and by the same token, I'm sure there's a lot of hit writers that know exactly what they're doing, and they don't want to hear anything different. (individual interview)

These comments from Will allude to one of the potential pitfalls of "writing up"—the possibility that a writer will be so intimidated by the "elder writer" in the room that the creativity dries up. Corinne, who teaches songwriting and frequently hosts hit writers as guest speakers, related what she had learned from these successful individuals:

You'll learn so much from writing with your peers—and not only that, but, you know, you'll develop your confidence and your comfort level in writing with your peers. I can't tell you how many people, how many really big hit songwriters in my class have said that their experience with "writing up" was often a disappointment, because they were nervous, you know? And because they didn't have the same confidence that they had writing with their peers, and so they were able to do better in situations where they could really stretch, you know? Where they could really be themselves and access part of your brain you can access when you're not scared. (individual interview)

Sam's personal experience echoed these sentiments:

Everybody wants to write with this guy, and I got put in a room with him, and we sat there for three hours staring at each other. So there's no guarantee that, even if you get in with a good writer…that you're not going to let your intimidation screw up the write or that you're going to come up with anything that's going to thrill them and make them want to write with you again. So, it's a hit-or-miss thing, no matter who you write with. So, if you look at that with writing up, you don't put as much weight on it for that thing. (individual interview)

Some writers, then, specifically advocated growing alongside one's creative peers—or, to use Will's words, "your tribe"—rather than to chase opportunities to "write up." Brooke said, "You know, 'writing up' is what everybody wants to do, but really, if you're writing equal, and you're growing together, that's a little more honest, solid way to grow" (individual interview). Corinne, too, seemed to favor growing with one's "tribe":

What I've found to be true, also, is that you start writing with your peers and then groups of peers rise together. And it's better to not push to "write up." You know? It's better—if you get an opportunity to, then you *[unclear]* be prepared; you want to be sure you're ready to take it, cause if you get an opportunity to write up and your skills aren't at a high enough level yet, you'll never get that opportunity again. (individual interview)

Dale echoed Corinne's comments about peer groups rising together.

It's not unlike college here in town. You know, you come with a freshman class, and you're the underdog, and nobody wants to talk to you, and then you eventually, if things go well, and you work hard, then you work your way up, the same as any other business. I don't think there's any magic to it. I think it just, whoever's willing to stand in there the longest and keep swingin'. (individual interview)

For these writers, then, there are important benefits to "writing across"—growing by collaborating with peers with whom it is safe to explore the songwriting craft, without the "intimidation factor" that potentially results in "writing up" situations. Still, Sam, who openly acknowledged that there was no guarantee "writing up" would confer desirable benefits, persisted in seeing "writing up" as part of his songwriting life.

I mean, I would like to do it [writing up], part of it, as a personal growth thing, to see if I have the chops to be able to stay up with them and contribute and be considered a

valuable part of that co-write, you know, rather than the guy who went and ran and got coffee for everybody. You know, that's kind of a pride thing, I guess, a little bit, or whatever, but I really want to be the best writer I can be. And I will always want to improve and, to me, that's one way to do it. I think the business side of [writing up], absolutely. If you can get in with a co-write and you do well, that'll open doors for you. If you get into a co-write and you crash and burn, then that'll close doors for you. So, it can work both ways, and I think each one is individual in how you handle it and how it goes. But the opportunity—if there's opportunities there, you gotta take them. (Sam, individual interview)

For Sam, whatever the pitfalls of "writing up" may be, the practice potentially offers an important form of validation—and this validation may be crucial to the persistence and continued growth of a writer seeking to climb songwriting's professional ladder. Sam's comments also suggest an acceptance of "writing up" as a networking behavior that songwriters must embrace in order to be successful.

From these comments, it appears that, though "writing up" is widely recommended, opinions on the practice vary among members of Nashville's songwriting community. For some, "writing up" is an important way to learn, seek validation, and make professional in-roads that serve one's career as a songwriter. Others are dubious, noting that writing outside one's "tribe" can result in a level of intimidation that inhibits creativity rather than enabling it. Writers may need to heed Will's advice, quoted above—"if you get a chance to write up, absolutely write up, but find the right person to write up with" (individual interview). Writers may need to consider carefully the "distance," in terms of skill, experience, or status, between them and anyone with

whom they "write up," in order to avoid the "intimidation factor." Alternately, songwriters may need to balance their "writing up" experiences with "writing across" experiences.

Summary—Co-Writer Selection

Establishing the dynamics of a collaborative songwriting relationship begins long before writers enter the co-writing room: first, co-writers must be sought out and selected. This process has been compared to dating, as songwriters are drawn to potential collaborators and discover, through a variety of co-writing experiences, what "works" for them. Personal compatibility is an important factor in co-writing; writers believe that working with someone who is a "fun hang" will result in an environment that is not only enjoyable, but also productive. Many writers seek collaborators with strengths different from theirs, as these complementary skill sets can result in better songs and growth for the writers involved. Though these differences can pay helpful dividends, songwriters also expect certain alignments/similarities with their co-writers— especially in terms of their writing "tempos" and their intentions (how serious and how market-driven they are). Opinions differ with regard to how closely aligned co-writers' experience and skill levels should be. Though some enthusiastically affirm the practice of "writing up" (improving oneself by writing others who are better), others advocate writing with one's peers. Writers may have to be careful in their considerations of how far "up" they write, or they may need to balance "writing up" and "writing across" experiences.

The Co-Writing Environment

In addition to considering what traits make a particular individual a good co-writing partner, writers must also work to build an environment, in the co-writing room, that supports creative work. Many of the participants in this study described the need for an environment that was safe and open—which depended on respecting each other as equals, being open-minded, and

establishing trust and confidentiality. Discussion of each these principles follows, along with

consideration of "inhibitors" that prevent the co-writing from being sufficiently safe and open.

Respect and Equality

For several of this study's participants, constructing a safe environment required that co-

writers respect each other and view each other as equals. As Jim asserted, "If you don't respect

me, then don't write with me. You know? If we're writing, we're writing as equals" (individual

interview). Will agreed: "One of the similarities between me and my co-writers is I view

everybody equal, everybody as peers, you know? And I take them seriously, and they take me

seriously" (individual interview). Payton, whom I observed writing with a senior co-writer who

had been her songwriting teacher, emphasized that it was important to view even this "elder"

collaborator as an equal: "Going in to the session, I just sort of put that aside. I never really

looked at it like she was my teacher. I looked at her like she was my co-writer at that particular

moment" (individual interview).

For Brooke, this sense of respect depended on assuming the best from co-writers and

acknowledging that all writers bring insecurities to the room with them.

> I think you have to just kind of know that everyone's doing their best work, and
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> sometimes people are coming from a place of insecurity. So, that's kind of their way of
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> dealing with that. The best room that you can be in is when all three people, or two
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> people, or five people—all are coming from a very secure, honest, whole-hearted way
>
> and place.

For some writers, creating this atmosphere of respect required that writers set their egos

aside. Sam said, "I put a sign up there, it says…'Leave the egos at the door.' It's all about the

song in here. Whatever the song needs" (individual interview). Brooke's comments echoed this sentiment:

There should be no egos involved. The best line, the best idea, the best song wins. Always. It's not about who's more of a hit writer or not a hit writer or whatever. It's *not* about that. It should be—what is the best for today's work? And when you do that, when you step back and allow that to happen, you're going to have the best song. (Brooke, individual interview)

As both Sam's and Brooke's comments indicate, this assumption of respect and equality and surrendering of ego allows the song, rather than the individual songwriters, to be a session's focus.

Open Minds

Several writers mentioned the importance of keeping an open mind. Shane, for example, discussed being open to any idea that is suggested in a session.

Be respectful; try to give an idea a chance….I'm pretty passionate about my ideas, so I think I've put some people off 'cause I really—they're not seeing what I'm saying…and I'm not expressing it correctly, 'cause I'm too excited, and then, they're not giving it enough of a chance…Or I don't have a good enough of an idea—it can certainly be that. *[laughs]* You know?...Give the idea a chance, and try to be respectful of the other person.

These sentiments resonate with the supportive, "no-free zone" discussed with relation to Sophie, Lauren, and Nathan's co-writing session in Chapter 7. Though songwriters cannot be expected to agree on every proposed idea, giving each other's ideas a chance and sharing feedback in a way that affirms one's co-writers is an important part of building an environment that is comfortable enough to support creative activity.

Being open-minded extends not only to specific suggestions made by songwriters, but also to the different processes that various songwriters employ. As Sam said, "You've got to have patience for other people's processes. And realize everybody gets the same place a different way and be okay with that" (individual interview). Corinne, who had to learn how to be comfortable in a writing session where there was more silence than she was accustomed to (see Chapter 5), was glad, in the end, that she had remained open to her co-writers' processes.

> Occasionally I've seen people who get super uncomfortable with silence, you know, like, if I had been uncomfortable with that, that would not have been a fun day. You know? But it was a really fun day, because I just had to get used to, Hey, this is the rhythm of these guys. This is what they do. You know? And actually it was great. (Corinne, individual interview)

> On a broader level, songwriters must be open-minded about the many possible directions a particular co-writing session might take. As Zoe explained,

> I've learned to let go of my songwriting style, because, when you write with somebody, it's a new animal…I've discovered for myself I have to let go. I don't want to go in and shut 'em down by saying, "We're *not* writing a slow song. I'm not wasting my time on a slow song." You just go in open-minded and hopefully excited that something cool's going to be written that you never expected before. (individual interview)

Payton offered a similar reflection.

> When [co-writers are] open-minded, it makes it a lot easier than when they're stuck on one idea, and you have to get it right, that kind of thing. So, if they're sort of this go-with-the-flow kind of, see-where-the-song-takes-us kind of person, I think it makes the

session a lot more enjoyable than trying to sort of fit inside this restrictive box.

(individual interview)

For Rachel, this open-mindedness should prompt one to come to know what to expect from one's co-writer and adjust one's expectations accordingly. If one simply cannot achieve comfort with another's processes, Rachel intimated, then one may need to reevaluate one's co-writer selection process.

I think a real important rule is to understand the person you're writing [with]. If the person is like, *Oh,* I can imagine it like this, and it's completely different from you, if you want to write with that person again, then you need to know that that's the kind of writer they are to make a successful co-write…You have the choice to say, No, I never want to do that again, or that was cool, it was a different way of looking at it, and I want to work with that, so I need to understand where that person's coming from, and hopefully they'll understand where I'm coming from. (individual interview)

For these songwriters, maintaining an open mind is important on multiple levels. One must be open not only to the specific suggestions that co-writers make, but also to the processes they tend to follow, as well as the multiple directions a co-writing session might take.

Trust/Confidentiality

For some writers, building a safe co-writing environment requires that writers feel safe "opening up" and sharing the details of their lives with one another.

I feel like I get better songs out of writes where I'm comfortable opening up to writers maybe that I've written with for a long time. I mean, you're always getting set up with new writers, but unless you feel that connection…it's a lot more difficult to pour your heart. (individual interview)

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For similar reasons, Andy asserted that the best collaborative songs are often the result of good friendship.

> I think really some of the best songs have come out of friendship, because that's how you get to the heart of the matter…knowing each other, and knowing what you're going through. Being able to openly talk about that. (individual interview)

The openness that Andy endorsed, however, depends on an agreed confidentiality among writers. As Jim explained:

> What is in the writing room stays in the writing room. There's a trust there—because I've had people, you know, talking about their marriages about on the edge of breakup, and it's like, Okay, let's write about that. You know? And, well, you don't come out of there and go, Well, man alive! You know, his wife is foolin' around on him…[it's like] a doctor-patient bond or something…There's a safety in that writing room, and it needs to stay there. So, you don't talk out of school. (individual interview)

As Jim's comments suggest, the sense of trust and confidentiality that typify safe and open writing rooms is important both because it helps writers to feel safe and because this sense of comfort, and the resulting candor it engenders in songwriters' interactions can yield ideas for songs.

Inhibitors

Naturally, along with these desirable traits of a safe and open co-writing space come undesirable behaviors that disrupt one's sense of safety in a co-writing space. As discussed in Chapter 7, given that being positive and saying "yes" are valued behaviors in co-writing partnerships, it follows that being needlessly negative and dismissive is viewed as destructive, unhelpful behaviors. For example, when I asked Margaret about behaviors that proved

detrimental to songwriters' co-writing efforts, she answered, "I think just being dismissive of what people throw out. That's a thing that'll make me kind of clam up and not want to write with you again" (individual interview). Likewise, Shane advised, "Don't shoot down somebody's idea. Give 'em a chance to defend it" (individual interview).

For some writers, it is important not only to respond in encouraging, affirming ways to collaborators' ideas and suggestions, but also to maintain a positive attitude overall. Will advised, "Don't come in with a chip on your shoulder, because a lot of times, people will be, 'Ah man,' you know, 'What's out there sucks right now, and I hate so-and-so'" (individual interview). Jim seemed to concur: "Sitting around and harping on how bad the business is…there ain't no room. Nobody's got time for that…You're nurturing something and you're building something that has never been built before… [so] negativity is a big no-no" (individual interview). Corinne related a story in which one writer's negativity had nearly shut down the process.

> I was just writing with these guys in L.A., and I had written with this one guy before, and he came in and he said, his first words were, "I'm tired and I'm cranky."…So even how you set the tone at the beginning of the day…that sets the ball in motion. You know? So, the way that the day starts, if you're energized and excited and you put some positivity out there, then the likelihood that it's gonna go better is much higher. And that day, like, I had written this entire prechorus, and I was really excited about it, and I sang it, and he just stared at me and didn't say one word. And it was just so awful and awkward. (individual interview)

For Liam, songwriters who were guarded and unwilling to "open up" were as frustrating as those who might be outwardly negative: "The hardest thing to write with, hardest person to

write with is a person who is really guarded and defensive…somebody who's not willing to open up and actually talk to you" (individual interview). Other writers emphasized the importance of being present—and, where necessary, eliminating tempting distractions. As Jim expressed,

> Put your damn phone down. Turn your phone off. You've got two or three hours that you guys are working on, you know—you're trying to lasso a muse. And the muse isn't going to be there while you're Facebooking about it. (individual interview)

Aaron agreed, suggesting that even the visible presence of a phone or other device might signal disengagement to one's co-writer.

> I like to turn all that off and focus…Even if I have my cell phone and I set it out, even if I don't get on it, even if I have it turned off, just having it setting here, I'm sending a message to you that maybe something else might be more important right this moment. (individual interview)

Meanwhile, Will expressed that he struggles not with writers who are disengaged, but with those who over-assert themselves in the creative process.

> I've been in the rooms with people who are like, "Well, we're gonna do this. And this is what we're gonna do, and, and this is great. What do you think?" And it wasn't really "what do you think"; it was a very cursory "What do you think—Okay, great, let's do this." And that really sucks, and I'm certainly not invested in the process, and I don't usually write with those people afterwards. (individual interview)

For these writers, the behaviors described above—being negative, withdrawn, distracted, or domineering—keep the co-writing environment from being a safe, open, and productive space and should be avoided.

Summary—The Co-Writing Environment

As important as finding the right collaborators is creating an environment, in the co-writing room, that helps writers feel safe and open, thus allowing them do to their best work. Such an environment requires that songwriters show each other respect and view each other as equals, maintain an open mind, and establish a sense of trust and confidentiality with their collaborators. In addition, certain "inhibitor" behaviors—having a negative attitude, being unwilling to open up, being distracted, or dominating the process—should be avoided.

Co-Writing Procedures

Understanding the learning that takes place within the practice of collaborative songwriting requires an understanding of the broad outlines of the process of co-writing itself. Lave & Wenger (1991) reminded readers of the "indivisible character of learning and work practices" (p. 61) in communities of practice. Folkestad (2012) asserted, "In music-making, activity and learning can be considered as integrated… *to create music also involves learning how to create music*" (p. 195, emphasis original). Some of these co-writing procedures have been highlighted in previous chapters; in this section, I present the core components of the co-writing process in a single outline, referring back to those phenomena already highlighted and presenting other information and insight not already addressed in the cases examined thus far. I present the process in four broad phases: (a) settling in, (b) sharing/selecting ideas, (c) negotiating, and (d) coming to a stop.

Settling In

Co-writing begins with becoming comfortable—"settling in" to the space and the activity. For Brooke, this begins with attending to the physical space and amenities that surround songwriters' work.

I have a space over on the east side…and we always have plenty of water and we have

good coffee. And, this being awards week, both of [the writers I wrote with yesterday]

had been out really late the night before. So, I was aware of that—I'm always aware of

where people are coming from, if they've been on the road, did they just get home last

night? I try to keep an ear for who the people are and what they're coming in with.

Because then, there are ways I can help alleviate—I can have good, strong coffee on,

plenty of bottles of water in the fridge, I have candles lit…I try to make it as comfortable

as possible, and inviting, and relaxing. I feel like that's a part of it. I feel like creating the

moment is a part of it. (individual interview)

Upon arrival, writers typically engage in some level of "small talk" or catching up. This is especially important when the collaborators have not met previously.

I like to spend at least half an hour just talking, just getting to know the person. And

getting them to know me and kind of putting each other at ease with each other. I don't

think you can even start until you do that. (Sam, individual interview)

Brooke described a situation in which she knew her two collaborators individually, but the two did know each other. She took care to step back and allow these two to build a relationship with each other before the work began.

The two people I was with had never met each other. And I've—so, the first probably

thirty minutes of our time, I didn't say anything hardly, and I let them get to know each

[other]—'cause I knew each, I knew the producer way better than the artist, but I know

the artist, and I know the producer. But they didn't know each other. So I'm not trying to

explain each other to the—I let *them* explain each other to themselves. And I could see

that there was a chemistry happening, you know. The artist is younger, you know, and

she is smart, and together, and he quickly saw that. And I saw him see that. You know, I'm watching that unfold….and I got him some good, strong coffee, because I knew that he was hungover as hell…so the beginning of that day was me stepping back and letting them do their thing. (individual interview)

Shane explained that this settling-in process pays such substantial dividends that the disproportionate time spent "just talking" is often justified.

I've been on co-writes where we talk for two and a half hours, and then are like, Dude, I gotta leave in 45 minutes. I'm like, I know, we've been chatting, both of us are chatting, but we're getting to know each other pretty well, and now, all of the sudden…song just comes right out. It's easy. If you do a cold start, you might spend—it's just like if you know there's gonna be traffic in the city at a certain time of day. Well, you don't want to leave so that brings you there right then. You could maybe leave two hours later and still be just as far on the other side of the city at the same time of the day. It's the same kind of thing. (individual interview)

Shane went on to explain that these conversations are important not only for building comfort between writers, but also for unearthing personal anecdotes and experiences that might yield potent song material (as examined the discussion of collaborating with young artist-writers in Chapter 4).

Say, all of the sudden, you find out they just broke up with their wife or boyfriend or they just, their parents died, or something happened—big, you know? And that's what's on their mind. So you can try to write a song about spring break and partying, but their brain's not gonna be in there. The better thing to do is—especially if it's an artist—how, what are you feeling? What are you going through right now? What's going on in your

life? Get to know 'em a little bit, and then try to write a song about that, because that's,

especially if they're not a crazy great songwriter, their idea is gonna be more valid, and

more, you know, authentic. (individual interview)

Even when writers know one another already, a certain amount of opening conversation is

typical. Sam explained,

But let's say we already know each other. Like, Will will come in today—said, Will,

how's it going? You know, what's going on with your life since I've seen you last. And

we'll talk and, he asks me the same thing, and we talk about—we've got some pitches

going on…getting the busywork out of the way. Getting caught up with each other's lives

as friends, and kind of getting into a more relaxed, comfortable state, and, and taking care

of any business we have to. (individual interview)

Whether writers are old friends or brand new acquaintances, a certain amount of "settling

in" is important. In addition to setting up the physical space "just so," writers engage in opening

conversations that help them get comfortable before proceeding to the next phase—

sharing/selecting ideas.

Sharing/Selecting Ideas

After getting settled, writers may continue working on a song they had previously started,

or they may begin a new song together by sharing ideas and then selecting one to pursue. In

most cases, it is expected that writers will come to a writing session with a few ideas prepared,

though these could come from a variety of sources:

I could come in with something that I thought of while I was driving there in the car. It's

the same, vice versa for my co-writer. The night before, maybe I went to a show and

found a key, or a loop pattern—anything musical that I really liked and went home and

found some version of it and said, you know, I really like this song that's on the radio right now; I think we should try to mold something that's similar to that, that's in that vein…Could come up with just a single line, you know? (Raven, individual interview)

Exactly what kinds of ideas are proposed, and how they are realized when selected, varies from session to session. In Chapter 6, the co-writing session between Zoe and Rachel demonstrated one approach to getting started: choosing a specific lyric phrase to be the song's "hook" and then engaging in a conversation in which the conceptual frame for that hook is "fleshed out." As discussed in Chapter 7, however, this is not the only way that songwriters begin: Sophie, Nathan, and Lauren considered several pre-existing tracks, heard a song fragment that Sophie had started, and then finally settled on writing a song with the title "Cologne," which Nathan had proposed. These writers did not begin by "talking out" the concept of "Cologne"; rather, they went immediately to finding musical "feels" that suited the "vibe" implied by that title—and *then* developed lyric content and a proper "hook." Further, as discussed in Chapter 4, when one of the writers in the room is an artist, it is often expected that the artist's ideas and experiences will be the primary driver of the song's content.

Writers' comments in interviews reflected this diversity of process as well. Will described beginning with the consideration of either tracks he has created or "grooves" played on instruments.

I'll start a groove or, sometimes, I'll bring in a prerecorded track for everybody to kind of vibe to. Or I'll play some guitar or, if I have a co-writer that is more just music-based, they'll play the guitar. But we'll kinda start that process from there, but it almost always starts with an idea, if not a hook. (individual interview)

Sam described the process of matching tracks to potential hook ideas.

So we've got the three tracks; let's listen to 'em, see if that resonates somehow. We listen to 'em. And, okay, I've got this, we've got a couple of hooks, throw a few hooks around. How does that work? How did that feel? Okay, but I really like this. Does it fit with any of the tracks you brought? (individual interview)

Brooke, who had recently written a song using a track she created, described the careful way she presented the idea to her collaborators.

"What's everybody feeling today?" And I could see they were both still a little tired, and I said, "Well, I worked on this thing last week in L.A., and, you know, do you guys want to hear it?" They're like, "Yeah." I said, "The chord structure's a little bit different, but I think it really works. 'Cause it's a minor key but it ends in major." And they're like, "Yeah! Let's hear that." So, instead of pulling up, like, this huge track that's got all these things on it, I'd taken just the tempo, the beat, with just a simple piano chord structure. And so I played them that, and they're like, "I like that." So then I added some strings, you know, that I already had—"I like that."—and then I added a little more, I played for them again. "Okay, yeah." So, it's feeding the information in a way that—you're not just trying to get your way. Because who cares if you get your way? If your heart really just wants to write a great song, then offer the information. If they pick up on it, great. If they don't, then move on. If they had said, "Yeah, I'm not feeling that," I'd have moved on to something else. (individual interview)

Brooke went on to emphasize further the importance of letting a song idea go if one's co-writers do not seem drawn to it.

And it's also not about always trying to get your way. Not trying to talk someone into something. If I offer something, and people go, "Yeah," and they're cold on it, or they're,

like, lukewarm? Then I move to something else. I would rather—I have never talked

someone into something and it end up being a song that I love. Ever. *Ever.* I'm always

like, "Great. Let's do something else." (individual interview)

Liam, too, seemed to imply that it was important to "read the room" and follow the idea around

which there seemed to be the most energy.

It might be that, you know, as we're discussing that thought [song idea], everybody starts

piling on ideas. And then, before you know it, you realize, Okay, we've got a lot of

thoughts on this one—what does it feel like? And then, somebody, you know, [says],

Well, I've got some musical feels. Would any of these work? And then, you try that, and

then eventually, you narrow in on one. (individual interview)

These comments suggest that, though details of process may vary, some common

elements appear in the beginning of most writing sessions. Most writers come prepared with

some ideas, which they present to and discuss with their co-writers. Once it becomes apparent

that an idea has "grabbed" the writers in the room, they move on to realizing that idea through a

variety of means.

Negotiating

Selecting an idea to pursue is just the first among a series of negotiations that co-writers

must conduct as they create songs together. Key, structure, chord progression, lyrics—all are

joint decisions that songwriters must navigate together. In interviews, songwriters discussed

several important parts of conducting these negotiations successfully—compromise,

proposing/advocating for ideas, letting go/consensus, and roles.

Compromise. In general, songwriters advocated a spirit of compromise and an openness

to each other's ideas. For Brooke, this openness begins with letting go of one's idea once it is

selected. Once the idea has been chosen, it must be allowed to grow in whatever direction the co-writing team might take it. "You've gotta just be open to [your idea] being completely changed up. You know?…If you're gonna be stubborn about it, then nobody's gonna wanna work with you" (individual interview). Nathan reflected, "I feel like writes go bad when you have two stubborn people not willing to sacrifice" (email correspondence).

Proposing/advocating for ideas. This series of negotiations continues as writers propose lines of lyrics or other ideas as the song gets built. For Liam, it is important that co-writers be able not only to suggest ideas, but also be able to articulate their reasoning.

> And this is where your ability to articulate comes in, I think…'cause you should be able to explain it. And I've actually written with people who are really inarticulate before, but they sometimes make up for it by being really good singers or really good players, and they can let their fingers or their voices show what they're thinking…but, either way, you have to sell them on the idea. (individual interview)

Once an idea has been proposed and an attempt to "sell the idea" has been made, songwriters must attend to the response they receive. As discussed in previous chapters, one's co-writers may respond in silence—which is interpreted by many as the "Nashville no." Also discussed earlier, many songwriters adopt the process of always saying "yes"—that is, not necessarily accepting every idea, but trying to respond to every idea, even those with which one disagrees, with positive, affirming language. If one proposes an idea and it is not accepted wholesale, then one faces a decision about whether to "fight" for the idea. As Corinne explained,

> I always feel like you can try one more time, you know, because sometimes they really just didn't get it, you know? They didn't really hear what you said, or they were thinking of something else, and they didn't fully catch or they didn't get your meaning, and so, I

think it's worthwhile to try one more time to say, you know, well just let me say a little

bit more about what I was thinking there. I was thinking maybe it could be, like, blah

blah blah. And I've had it happen many times where people, like, Oh! Oh, okay, I see

what you mean. (individual interview)

Letting go/consensus. As was the case with proposing and selecting hooks and song

topics, if an attempt to re-propose or clarify a specific idea does not result in an acceptance,

Corinne suggested, then one should be prepared to move on: "If you're not getting consensus on

it, you know, and you've given it a really good shot, then don't hold everybody up by sticking on

the same idea, you know?" (individual interview). Raven echoed these sentiments regarding

consensus.

> Everybody's going to have disagreements here and there, but I think, ultimately, probably
>
> the best outcomes are ones—or the best ideas are ones that you can both agree on. If
>
> you're not both agreeing on it, then maybe it's just not the best idea. Maybe you just
>
> gotta keep trying for a different melody or a different line, or just change the rhyme
>
> completely…Just be willing to experiment and work around it, instead of just getting
>
> hung up on it.

As the following anecdote from Sam illustrates, however, this "letting go" is not always easy.

> I had another humbling moment in that write. I had a line which I still think is better, but
>
> one of the [women] that, kind of, she was the one bringing everybody together, it didn't
>
> hit her. And I'm starting to get—you know, and I really do leave my ego at the door. I
>
> have no issue; I just want a great song. But I was really…everything else they were
>
> coming up with wasn't as good as this line. Alright, I had to remember, Sam, this is a
>
> five-way write. This is a democratic write. And, so, I had to let go of the line, because it

just was gonna cause more—and…I found myself actually kind of pouting a little bit. I

mean, not visibly. I don't think they knew, but in my mind, I thought, Oh god. I said,

Okay, stop that. (individual interview)

Sam's attempt to keep from visibly pouting seems to reflect not only the importance of "letting

go" but also a commitment to maintaining the positive environment, as discussed earlier, that

songwriters expect in co-writing rooms.

Roles. In my observation of co-writing sessions, I noticed that, as part of the process,

songwriters tended to settle into relatively specific roles—not a surprising observation, given

that, as discussed earlier, one of the traits songwriters seek in collaborators is complementary

strengths. For example, Lauren noted that, in her collaborations with Nathan and Sophie, "we all

three just kind of clicked as a writing group since Sophie is so strong at lyrics and Nathan and I

both love melodies and Nathan especially likes titles" (email correspondence). These roles,

though, can sometimes be a matter of negotiation. As Will shared,

It depends on who I'm writing with, because Sam is very much a lyrics guy—and I will

contribute to lyrics. So I like to try to contribute to any, you know, to everything. And he

likes to try to contribute to melody, too…As a general rule, with Sam, I'm the music guy

and then I throw out some lyrics. With other people, they want to do the music—that's,

period, that's what they want to do. So they'll bring the music and I'll write the lyrics,

and we'll kinda go from there. I have been told that I come up with great grooves, and a

lot of people are like, "Man, you're our groove guy." And that's cool; I'm fine with

that…so I can kind of fit in wherever I need to fit in. (individual interview)

Shane, too, discussed that one sometimes needs to shift roles in order to accommodate one's co-

writer.

If somebody's just excited and they come and generate a bunch of ideas, then just sit

back for a second and let them talk and let them say what they have to say, because

you're the editor now. (individual interview)

Though songwriters' different strengths lead them to settle into certain roles, the "negotiation" of

co-writing may require that writers be flexible in the role they occupy, if this is possible.

Coming to a Stop

Naturally, the final stage in the co-writing process is coming to a stop. Several

songwriters discussed the importance of knowing when to "call it a day." For some writers, this

involves calibrating one's expectations regarding how much will be accomplished in a single

writing session, as not every session generates an intact song. Sam explained the progress of one

particular session: "That's as far as we got today. Two and a half hours, and we got a verse-

chorus. Sometimes that's really successful. You know, you go as far as—there's no time limit.

You don't rush these things" (individual interview). I noticed, in observing Corinne and Payton's

session, that Corinne suggested, at one point, "And one thing we can do, too…now that it's just a

couple little things, we can just sorta email on it also. We don't have to finish it this second"

(session transcript). Although these two writers were nearing completion on the song in question,

Corinne seemed to be suggesting that it might be best to end the current session and correspond

electronically about the final few decisions.

In addition to coming to a stop because the day's work is done, songwriters also must

know when to stop because they are "stuck" with a particular song. As Aaron suggested,

"There's a fine line between giving up too easy and not trying hard enough, and not focusing,

and forcing something that's just not going anywhere" (individual interview). When I asked

Brooke what she does when it appears that she and her collaborators have "written themselves into a hole," she offered, simply,

> Ask them if they're hungry and they want to go to lunch. 'Cause if you spend an hour at lunch, then you kinda give yourself a little time to let all the ill go away, and a lot of times you'll just end up calling a day, or—you know, you just take a little bit of a break. That's one side. The other side is you've gotten yourself in a hole and there's a way out. And the way out…will tell you how to finish the song. I've had many a time when I've thought something was dead and not a good idea, and then, a rewrite or an edit or something makes it better. And so you've gotta give yourself time for that. I try not to get impatient. But *[pause]* if something is just pressing and hard and difficult, then probably you're not in the right place that day. You know? Doesn't mean on a different day you don't come back. (individual interview)

Liam expressed that this walking away from a song is sometimes exactly what renews his faith in the song.

> I often find that, once you get away from the song and come back to it, then it starts to make sense…A session we had yesterday, we got started, and we got about a verse and a half into something…I was so tired at the end, I remember thinking, you know, it's like, *[sigh]* this song is all thinky-think, and I wanted it to have—it was an idea that I had come up with, and I want it to be emotional, but we couldn't, nobody seemed to be able. Everybody believed in the idea, but nobody could get into the, sort of, the core of what the song was about. And we were running out of examples to sort of support the idea. But when I looked at it this morning on the laptop, it looked pretty fully formed. So it made me think that I just really needed to take some time away from it. (individual interview)

As these writers' comments suggest, knowing when to stop—whether because enough has been accomplished for the day or because the song in question needs a "breather"—is an important part of the co-writing process.

Summary—Co-Writing Procedures

Though many writers acknowledge, as Raven did, that "it happens different every time," there are certain common elements that typify the co-writing process. Songwriters begin by settling in and becoming comfortable with one another, after which they propose and select ideas to pursue. A series of negotiations follows as songs are brought to completion, and these require a sense of compromise, an ability to advocate for one's ideas, the willingness to let go and achieve consensus, and occupying roles that serve/support one's collaborators. As important as all of these behaviors within the act of co-writing is knowing when to "call it a day," either because enough has been accomplished or because the song in question needs to be set aside for the moment.

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Learning from Co-Writers

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When I asked Payton whether she felt that writing with other people had helped her learn about the songwriting craft,

> I think I learn something from every session. I always go in to a session and come out a
> different person, if that makes sense…I've learned guitar riffs, I've learned how to play
> certain things, or certain phrasing that I never would've thought of in my entire life, but
> this other person may bring up something, and I'll be like—Oh, that's cool! I never
> thought of it that way. (Payton, individual interview)

In general, these writers readily endorsed the notion that co-writing was an important part of learning the craft of songwriting. Jim made his perspective on learning from co-writers especially plain:

S: Do you think that there are things that you are now better at because of the people you've written with?

J: Everything.

S: Everything?

J: Everything. (individual interview)

Writers were not always able to isolate specific skills or habits they had learned from specific collaborators, but three themes about learning within the co-writing environment did emerge from the analysis of transcribed interviews and co-writing sessions: (a) co-writing provides exposure to a wide variety of songwriting techniques and approaches, (b) co-writers serve as "checks and balances" on one another, and (c) co-writing reduces negative pressure, but also introduces a kind of constructive pressure that helps writers grow.

Exposure to Techniques and Approaches

When asked about how co-writing had contributed to their learning of the songwriting craft, many participants simply pointed out that it had exposed them to the wide array of approaches that songwriters employ as they tackle the creative problems of writing songs. As Shane noted,

I've seen people do a lot of stuff. They'll write out a whole verse and then go back and rewrite it. I've seen people that'll only do one word at a time…I've written songs to tracks, before I even went to Nashville, I've written just strumming on guitar or playing piano, I've written just the lyrics and then written the melody to it, I've done it the other

way…I think there's value in all of those, and I don't think that you should ever stop co-

writing, and I don't think you should ever only write one way, because then you don't

understand the other ways. (individual interview)

Corinne acknowledged the same phenomenon of exposure to various approaches employed by

fellow writers—many of which she then tries for herself.

Watching how somebody else processes an idea, you know. I feel like I just learn from

that constantly. Watching how somebody turns a phrase, how somebody lyrically comes

around to something, or how somebody musically manipulates the phrase till they really

hit it in a great way…I will say working with other people allows you to see things

through other lenses…And I'm always trying things that I saw somebody else do.

(individual interview)

Some writers identified specific ways that exposure to other songwriters' habits and procedures

had influenced their writing. Sam described learning from one writer who also works as a vocal

coach:

I have a co-writer who, we don't write much anymore because she's a vocal coach, and

that's kind of consumed her, but we're good friends, and we wrote some, a couple of

really good songs. She taught me so much about phrasing, about listening to a song for

the melodic hooks. She's a genius at it. I mean, it's what she does. She's so good at it.

She's got me listening to songs so different—I'm a lyric guy. That doesn't mean I can't

contribute to melody and that I don't—and I'm learning, and she taught me a lot.

(individual interview)

Liam offered several specific examples of ways in which his co-writers had influenced his writing. As a writer who frequently collaborates with younger artists, he pointed to the way that singers who have grown up in the age of auto-tune sing differently as a result:

> Working with another singer will always teach you different ways to create a melody…One of my, one of the engineers that I work with pointed out something, and he's actually closer to my age. But he said, if you listen to any singers who are younger than 25, who have grown up listening to auto-tuned vocals, that, especially in the pop world, that they can do things with their voices…to get from that note to that with no slide, kind of the way you can do it with ProTools. (individual interview)

I asked Liam if he thought this had influenced his own melodic writing, and he said "Absolutely… I think it's even affected the way I sing when I'm in the studio" (individual interview). Also a guitarist, Liam described the way that different collaborators' styles brought out different artistic choices in his guitar playing.

> One of my co-writers… writes on keyboards and…one of the things she does—and it's definitely a pop influence—she almost never does a major chord with the third in it. She takes the third out all the time…So, generally speaking, what's happened with her is that I initially started doing, when I was playing with her, I would do no-third chords…and then that became doing octaves. So, now, when I'm playing with her now… there's these no-third chords, and me playing octaves *only*…And then there's other people I write with where I'm, you know, using your classic, full, almost bluegrassy, warm-sounding chords with thirds and, so…you find your way into all these different artists. (individual interview)

Encountering and collaborating with writers whose styles vary has allowed Liam to access both different vocal techniques and different guitar playing styles. Both are illustrative examples of how the sheer fact of exposure to other writers/artists and their styles constitutes an important part of the learning that takes place via the practice of co-writing.

Checks and Balances

In addition to exposing each other to various styles and techniques, writers also seemed to support each others' learning by serving as "checks and balances" on one another. As Aaron observed, "Over time, it's really, really hard not to copy yourself…When you work with other people, it kind of breaks you out of your own thing that you do" (individual interview). Part of what enables writers to serve as "checks and balances" for each other is the opportunity and expectation to provide what Will called "instant feedback."

> You have instant feedback…Co-writing tends to make songs better because you can throw something out there and, if someone goes, "Hey, that's really good," you know, "Oh, yeah, great," or, you know, "Oh, well, it doesn't really work for me," or "What if we changed this," you know. (individual interview)

Sam reflected on how Will served as a good "check" for him:

> He's a great check on me. I mean, you know, I'll come up with a line, and he says, Sam. This isn't 1970…He'll call me anytime he feels, and it doesn't mean I'll always agree and it doesn't mean he'll always agree, but neither of us have any compulsion about calling each other on either the melody or the lyric, which I think helps make us a good writing team. (individual interview)

I also noticed, in Sam and Will's work together, the way in which they served as "checks" on one another by reminding each other, through their feedback, of the need to adhere to certain

songwriting principles. In the following exchange, Sam wanted to ensure that the pair had "written to the hook" by writing lines that "set up" the first line of the chorus.

> S: And did we set up the "kind of kiss is this"? I like the lyrics in the first verse, but did we really set up the, first line of the chorus? "Did we give into the music?" I mean, we're not saying—all we, "Did we give in to the music?" […] "Did we lose it in the dark/I don't even know where we are." I think that's, um…*[pause]*
>
> W: I kinda dig it. I like it.
>
> S: You think, "What kind of kiss is this"—it, it sets that up okay?
>
> W: Well, he is, he's, that's, they're starting to question. Right? And that leads into *[sings] "I don't know even know where we are/What kind of kiss is this?"* That doesn't bother me.

Though Sam acted as a "check" on the pair's work by asking whether they had succeeded in setting up the chorus, Will also acted as a "check" on Sam by pointing out the ways the lines in question *did* work and advocating that they stay.

In interviews, many participants reflected on collaborating with co-writers who had helped, to use Aaron's phrase, "break them out of their own thing." Brooke discussed the way one collaborator helped her to improve her phrasing skills—and she, in turn, helped him bring his lyrics "down to earth."

> Phrasing was something that had always been very boxy for me. Just kind of real on the beat, really boxy in everything, and he had this really—he's got a very soulful voice, so he can kind of move in and out of a phrasing, and so I started getting—and he's very particular where vowels fall and where consonants fall, and that kind of thing. He was the first guy that I really started learning that [from]. And then, I was the person going, "It

needs to make sense." People need to emotionally connect, and he's a wonderful human

being, I think emotionally there were times he was a little bit removed from his lyrics. I

think maybe I helped him move into the lyric a little more… I feel like I helped him start

to have a little more everyday-man voice. (individual interview)

Shane, too, reflected on how his co-writers help him to keep his lyrics grounded and relatable.

My best co-writes, my best country co-writes are with people that are really, you know,

Southern, true country fans, because they'll add the legitimate language and rein me back

if I'm trying to be Mr. Professor, as they call me…Um, simmer down there, professor.

(individual interview)

Liam explained that, as a matter of standard operating procedure, he often asked co-writers to

explain or justify the line they suggested in a co-writing session. Though he admitted that some

writers struggled with this request to defend their suggestions, he also explained that some

writers expressed their appreciation for the way Liam had served as a "check" on them.

One writer I worked with says, "You don't tolerate my bullshit"—so he basically said,

You know, whenever I kind of get off on a tangent and say, "Yeah, it's this—my line is

the best one," rather than just accepting it, you make me back it up—and he said, I *love*

that, because then, you know, I know that when I step out of there, I didn't just twist your

arm…Many other people I've written with have said, I like that you've, you know, in a

very comfortable, non-threating way, make me *work for it* a little bit, you know? So I

think I kind of do that as well. (individual interview)

These comments indicate that, through providing "instant feedback" and reminding each

other of certain songwriting principles, writers help each other "break out of their own thing." By

serving as "checks and balances" on one another, writers help each other to grow as practitioners of the songwriting craft.

Pressure

A few writers mentioned the concept of "pressure" in their comments about co-writing. Raven, for example, felt that sharing the process with others reduced some of the pressure she felt around the songwriting process.

> I think co-writing has taken away some fear. Like I said, I don't consider myself *solely* a songwriter. I even use the term "singer/songwriter" loosely, you know? Because I think performing and entertaining are my favorite and strongest suits. And, so, would I be able to sit down and solely craft a song on my own? I have. Do I get pissed at myself and think, "Oh, I'm not doing enough"…Absolutely! You know, I get impatient and I start second-guessing everything, which is why I love doing co-writing and, so, I think, just practicing that part and blending with other people a lot in this co-writing process has taken the pressure off. (individual interview)

It seems that, for Raven, the presence of others helps her feel more safe and comfortable exploring the songwriting process. Corinne described the presence of others and pressure in different terms.

> Co-writing gives you creative pressure, and that creative pressure to be better and to adapt to the situation, you know? To adapt to a song, to adapt to styles of writing, to adapt to people—that creative pressure ups your game just by applying pressure…It's like playing basketball versus practicing, you know? And so, when you actually play the game, you learn *so* much more, and it's not that you don't need to practice, but you really

need to get in there and play to know, understand what it's really like, you know?

(individual interview)

For Corinne, then, the presence of other writers *increases* pressure—but in a positive way. As her basketball analogy implies, being in the room with others introduces a pressure to perform, to "get in there and play" in a way that forces one to engage the process and learn.

Despite the seemingly opposing descriptions, perhaps both are true. Perhaps the co-writing room can be both a source of comfort for those intimidated by the creative process and a source of constructive pressure for those individuals who need the nudge to "get in there and play." It may be that co-writing supports individuals' learning by simultaneously offering both safety and accountability.

Summary—Learning from Co-Writers

Participants in this study acknowledged that co-writing was an important space for their learning and growth as songwriters. Working with a variety of collaborators provides writers with exposure to a variety of songwriting techniques and approaches, and these collaborators also seem to serve as "checks and balances" in ways that help writers grow. For some writers, the company of others in the co-writing room reduces the pressure of creative activity; for others, the increased pressure of being accountable to one's collaborators is helpful fuel to the fire of exploring the creative process.

Chapter Summary

Co-writing begins with finding and selecting suitable co-writers—a process that many have compared to dating. In potential co-writing partners, songwriters seek to find individuals who are personally compatible, "easy hangs"; who have complementary strengths; and who have similar writing tempos and intentions. Writers also consider the skill and experience level of

potential writers: for some, it is important to collaborate with whose who are better ("write up"); for others, it is better to "write across" with one's peers. It may be important, in "writing up," to avoid writing with collaborators whose skills are so superior that intimidation results and the writing process shuts down. Alternatively, it may be important to seek a balance between "writing up" and "writing across."

Successful co-writing experiences also depend on establishing an environment in which writers feel safe and open. Writers believe they must show each other respect and assume that they are equals, maintain open minds, establish trust/confidentiality, and avoid behaviors that specifically inhibit the songwriting process: being negative, being defensive or withdrawn, succumbing to distractions, or dominating the co-writing environment.

Once writers have been selected and an environment established, writers tend to follow certain standard procedures. Writers "settle in" by making the physical space of the co-writing room comfortable and by engaging in conversations that help writers feel safe and open with one another. Songwriters then consider and select song ideas—and must be willing to let go of ideas that fail to "grab" their co-writers' attention. Once a song idea is selected, bringing that idea to life requires a lengthy set of negotiations, which depend on being willing to compromise, being able to propose and advocate for one's ideas, being willing to "let go" of individual ideas and privilege consensus, and being able to adapt to the roles that one's co-writers play in the room. Knowing when to end a writing session is also important, whether the end comes because the day has been sufficiently productive or because the song being written is "stuck," and the writers need a break.

Participants affirmed the importance of co-writing as a space for learning the songwriting craft. Songwriters "teach" their co-writers by exposing them to a variety of writing processes and

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approaches, serving as "checks and balances" for one another, and reducing the pressure that some individuals feel about creativity, while providing other individuals the pressure they need in order to kick-start their creative endeavors.

CHAPTER 9: BEYOND THE CO-WRITING ROOM

Co-writing rooms, and the rituals and relationships they host and represent, form an

essential component of Nashville songwriters' lives and learning processes—but they also exist

within a larger ecosystem of creative/professional activity and opportunities for learning. In this

chapter, I will consider the various facets of the world "beyond the writing room" as described

by participants in interviews. Specifically, I will discuss the broader norms of Nashville and "the

market," the role of open mic and writers' nights in songwriters' development, the contributions

of certain "important actors" to songwriters' lives and careers, the function of professional

organizations, the learning that happens in more formal spaces like workshops and songwriting

classes, and the individual practices that songwriters employ in order to "sharpen their tools."

Nashville/"The Market"

The creative and professional activities of these professional songwriters do not reside in

a vacuum. They lie cradled in the rolling hills of Middle Tennessee; they live in the converted

craftsman homes that have become the offices lining Music Row. This study's participant

songwriters and their creative and professional practices must be understood through the lens of

their "situatedness" (Folkestad, 2012, p. 195) in Nashville and the country music market.

Moving to Nashville

Many writers, in their "back-stories," describe having identified Nashville as the

destination where the songwriting careers they envisioned were possible. Payton, who seized

upon professional songwriting aspirations at an early age, related how she and her parents

decided to move to Nashville.

> I became really good at [writing], and I started to love it, and we decided that, if I wanted
>
> to sort of hone that craft and build it into something more, that I would have to move

somewhere where I was surrounded by songwriters. Country songwriters. And L.A. wasn't that place. So, when I was about fourteen, fifteen, we moved to Nashville. (individual interview)

For Dale, Nashville proved the best option among the United States' songwriting "hubs."

And Nashville was the only place I'd ever been where…prospective landlords would ask, What do you do? And you'd say, I'm a songwriter. They didn't go, Well, I'm sorry. This place is rented…There's only a few places, if you're gonna write songs, there's only a few places in America that you can live. Los Angeles, Austin now, and New York. That's pretty much, that's it. And by far the most family-oriented, in terms of being able to lead a fairly normal life at a fairly normal income level, would be Nashville. (individual interview)

Brooke pegged Nashville as the safer, more cost-effective choice.

I wanted to be a professional songwriter and so I knew that I could go to L.A., Nashville, or New York. I was pretty [inexperienced]…so I was like, "I feel like I'll do better in Nashville than L.A." And it cost a lot less to be here. (individual interview)

For Liam, moving to Nashville offered both an opportunity to focus on songwriting and the chance to leave behind a touring lifestyle that was hard on his family.

Well, why don't we pick a city somewhere where, where the actual writing of the songs is paramount? And you would go there, figure out how the system works, and then, just try to build from there…So, and it was also a way to get off the road, because my way of making money before that had been touring. And, you know, if you want to be involved in your kid's life, touring is—you know, I was gone 200 days a year, and it just wasn't— it's hard on a marriage, it's hard on everything. So, came here. (individual interview)

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These participants identified Nashville as the place to situate their careers for both professional

and personal reasons. Certainly, the songwriting-centric culture of the city was an important

factor, given their career aspirations; however, these writers also considered factors like cost,

suitability for raising a family, and the strength of their prospects for success.

"Nashville Norms"

Writers also acknowledged the way that their creative identities were informed,

influenced, and constrained by the norms of Nashville songwriting and the demands of the

country market. Sam explained that, for him, being a country writer was the product of, rather

than a prerequisite to, his move to Nashville.

> I mean, I wasn't, it wasn't my desire to be a country writer. I was writing singer-
>
> songwriter stuff all my life. I just say, Okay, how do I make this viable for a market? You
>
> know, and country was about the only place. And I used to come out here two or three
>
> times a year for five or six days…I'd wrap it around a three-day workshop and go visit
>
> with a publisher or something. I wasn't really doing hardly any co-writing, but I was
>
> trying to learn. It was never enough. I never really got it 'til I was here and immersed in it
>
> for a few years to really say, Okay, *this* is what a country song is. *This* is what country
>
> writing is. (individual interview)

Sam's comments allude to the fact that even the act of co-writing is a behavior that writers adopt

because it is expected in Nashville. Will, too, acknowledged, "Before I moved to Nashville, I

didn't co-write…but I knew from coming back and forth that you kinda have to do that here. It's

sort of the—it's the norm" (individual interview). Andy asserted that the emphasis on co-writing

is not necessarily motivated by artistic principle, as "a publisher would rather have a writer that

wrote three-way writes and hung out with the right people than a writer that could write a great song by themselves. Because it's so political now" (individual interview).

Raven, who sees herself primarily as an artist-performer but is actively involved in co-writing much of her material, noted how being in a "songwriting town" has influenced what gets emphasized in her work.

When I moved to Nashville, that all changes, I mean, from bigger festivals that I did in Ontario—there isn't that in Nashville. There's writers' rounds and there are bars where you can go make tips, and that switch, I think, made me focus less so much on—yeah, the performance aspect, the entertainment aspect is big, but in a writers' round[5], people aren't as focused on whether you're dancing or being super animated in your face or how crazy you play the guitar or whip your hair, anything like that. They're *listening* to the *lyrics!* Nashville's a songwriting town, and so, I think, immediately upon moving here, I realized that that whole flashy aspect of entertainment isn't necessarily the entire thing here…I've gone to so many writers' rounds, listening so attentively, that I think those in particular have contributed *hugely* to my ability to listen and then to deliver the next day in a co-write. (individual interview)

Zoe, who moved to Nashville with the specific intention of pursuing songwriting, has evolved in the opposite direction, as she realized that she needed to embrace seeing herself as an artist, too.

This whole year, I've realized, because I moved here to be a songwriter, but now I've realized, now that I'm in the field amongst all these artists and—who are also songwriters—I've realized, I'm not just a songwriter; I'm an artist…I'm making a

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[5] "Writers' rounds" are events in which multiple songwriters (usually three or four) share the stage simultaneously, and each takes a specified number of "turns" playing a song.

country album that's all my demos that I made over the past 13 years. So that's one new album I'm coming out with, and then my second album I'm coming out with is eight songs—the songs *I* love to sing that I wrote with myself or with other people too. You know? So I'll have two albums covering all the songs I sing that people seem to love, and I'll have two products to sell to the tourists when I play at Two Old Hippies or The Commodore—wherever the tourists are, you know? (individual interview)

Being in Nashville and growing accustomed to its norms seems to have had tangible influence on these writers' creative and professional identities—include the degree to which they affiliate with the country genre, whether they see themselves as co-writers, and whether they identify more as writers or performing artists.

Market Demands

In addition to learning how to see and situate themselves professionally, these writers also have learned how to shape their creative agendas in a way that suits the demands of the commercial country market. Will observed that becoming knowledgeable about what songs and song features are market-friendly was an important part of his growth since his arrival to Nashville.

It comes from talking to people who say, "Oh, you know, such-and-such a song was picked up," and then I listen to it, and I go, "Oh, okay; that's what they're looking for right now." You know, or going to pitch meetings and just hearing what people are pitching to publishers and hearing what's taken. Right? And going, Okay, so they're looking for more of a rap feel, or they're looking for more of this. Which isn't always a hard and fast rule, but if you get enough of that information, you can go, Okay. Alright. They're looking more in this direction than, you know, this direction. Also knowing

certain ins and outs—like, I wrote, when I first came to town in 2013, I wrote a fantastic

song about somebody's grandfather, okay? And it was first-person. It was a great song.

And I did not know this, and I pitched it several times, and people were like, "That's

really good, but no thanks." Until someone mentioned to me that, because of the way the

industry is structured, if someone's going to write a, sing a personal song about their

grandfather, they're going to write themselves. Right? So, now I know to either be very,

very general with that topic—or write it with the artist. As opposed to just, you know,

bangin' it out and making a demo of it. So, little ins and outs like that, I know now that I

didn't know. (individual interview)

The emphasis on developing "conversational" lyrics, discussed with relation to Sam and Will's

co-writing session (see Chapter 5), is another example of the "ins and outs" Will described. I also

noticed, when I observed Sam and Will at work in their co-writing session, that they frequently

referred to the country artist Blake Shelton as a kind of model to guide their writing. When I

asked Will about this, he explained that this was, in part, a response to what others in the

business had recommended.

We have heard, over and over again, aim for Blake Shelton, and you'll hit a bunch of

artists kind of in that range…Blake might cut it, and there's, like, 5 or 6 other people that

kinda want to be Blake, and they'll probably cut it too. You know? Or it's more of a

wider market. Whereas, if you steer it more towards a Toby Keith or a Chris Stapleton,

it's much more narrow. You know? And there's some times when we'll look at a pitch

sheet,[6] and we'll say, Oh, okay, so-and-so's looking. Let's try to write a song for so-and-so. You know, and we've done that before, too. But, usually, it's more general. (individual interview)

Zoe offered her own reflection about how the nature of commercial music shapes writers' creative activity.

They tell us songwriters—try to write a song that's up-tempo, is a good, positive topic…and make sure a woman can relate to it, because it's the women in their car driving to work from, you know, 7:30 to 8 in the morning that listen to radio, and if you can speak to her and grab her attention, she'll buy your album or your record. (individual interview)

Some writers struggle with this reality. Shane, in particular, felt that Nashville songwriting had sustained a loss of artfulness since his arrival—which made Shane feel ever more comfortable with his recent decision to relocate away from Nashville.

It didn't make me that sad to leave Nashville because of the crappy music that's out…if I was there during some renaissance where all the music was amazing, and I felt like—Ah, you know, these are my people—but I feel like the people that are there are just more, they're good at networking and they're good at cloning this idea that seems to be the idea that's catching everybody's fancy at the labels and radio stations, which probably sells a lot of beers; I don't know. You know, that's all it really is, in the end, with commercial music…There was more of an art to it when I got there, and there's still people writing artful songs; they're just not getting cut. (individual interview)

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[6] "Pitch sheets" are equivalent to the "tip sheets" that Bennett (2014) described in his dissertation on collaborative songwriting: "Music publishers frequently send out 'tip sheets' providing opportunities for songwriters to pitch work, and some song briefs [details] are included" (p. 217).

Shane pointedly confessed that he was not necessarily proud of all the music he had written during his years in Nashville—that he had simply "done his job."

> I mean, I had some successes; it wasn't that big, but I had some stuff. But it's just the stuff I had successes isn't something I would want to play for crowds for the rest of my life. I'm not that proud of writing some of those songs. You know? And I knew what the market was, so I just did my job. (individual interview)

Though Margaret acknowledged that market demands may be responsible for some songs that are "really derivative and boring," she also placed a greater measure of faith in the industry's ability to produce some gems as well.

> Radio stations play music so that people don't change the station while the commercials are on. That's the purpose of [commercial] music, is to keep people tuned in so they can hear the commercials…this is why I love Nashville, because that's the truth of it. We're writing—the industry lives and dies on can this music sell product to the advertisers? And, in the context of that system, we get songs like "The House That Built Me" and "I Drive Your Truck" and "Whiskey Lullaby" and "Letter to Me" and—you know? And some of the silly little ditties are just so smart and clever and creative. (individual interview)

Some writers' comments seemed to suggest that learning within the Nashville sub-domain involved not only internalizing the movement of the market, but also actively contradicting it when necessary. Liam intimated that the suggestions of industry professionals were not to be given too much weight.

> But often times, to be fair, [A&R people] don't know what they want. So that's where our thing is…we just have to come up with great songs for them, because they don't

really know how to ask for what they want. Great ideas kinda come from wherever they

come from. (individual interview)

Zoe explained that learning how to be herself had been an important part of her development

since moving to Nashville.

When it's all said and done, you have to do it your way. You have to say your truthful

way that you see the world or whatever topic you're trying to write about. You write it

your way and try to be original…And that, *that* actually is the part I learned only since

I've been here in Nashville, is, you know, I was doing all the stuff they told me to do, but,

but I didn't know until I actually *moved* here that I have to do it my way. I can't follow

all these directions and then sound like a generic piece of product or something. I have to

be original, stand out, you know? (individual interview)

Dale described a specific instance in which he learned that the addition of a bridge to one of his

songs—which happens to be an especially famous hit from the 1990s—revealed itself to be an

unconvincing retrofit.

 [The song] was being turned down by everybody, the reason being because, a lot of the

reason was because it did not have a bridge. It's two verses, two choruses, and that's it.

And no bridge. And so, the idea was, Well, you know, all great songs have a bridge.

[laughter] And so I immediately set about to write a bridge and…the only thing I can

liken it to, you know, you've got a nice house, and then you decide to put a porch on, and

you just go get your brother-in-law and a case of beer and see what you can come up

with, and you've got this really nice house, and then out the back you have this wing that

goes, where'd that come from? You know, that doesn't fit here at all. Well, it has a porch

now…it's just detracting from the entire house. And so, the second lesson that I learned

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with the song was I *am* done with it…it's gonna stand or it's gonna fall, but it's gonna stand or fall as it is. (individual interview)

Summary—Nashville/"The Market"

Pursuing songwriting careers in Nashville seems to have had important influence over these writers' professional activities. Absorbing Nashville "norms"—identifying with the country genre, participating in co-writing culture, using specific artists as models, pursuing particular lyric themes, making certain choices about form and structure—has proven an important part of these participants' learning as songwriters. Though some writers view these constraints more favorably than others, understanding their role in the creative activity of these participants is important to understanding how they grow and develop.

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Open Mic/Writers' Nights

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For songwriters looking to get a "foot in the door" in Nashville, open mic nights and writers' rounds are often important places to begin. As veteran songwriter Dale noted, one of the first items on the agenda for a songwriter new to town is to

> do what everybody else does when they get here: you go out and sign up for the open mic writers' shows. And somewhere in the wee hours of the morning, you get to play a couple of songs. To whoever may still be there. (individual interview)

Not all such events are created equal, though. As Dale went on to explain,

> Well, the Bluebird was a place where you could go and see what the competition was like. But the thought of playing there—that's reserved; you have to kind of work your way up the chain for that. There's a place right over here on 8th Avenue called Douglas Corner, and that was the place that probably saved my life in more ways than one…[The proprietor] used to have these open shows, and he would let new kids in town kind of put

together shows and play, you know, during the weeknight…[The Bluebird is] much more famous, and when you come here, you have to rehearse, you have to audition, and then at some point, you'll get a slot on a Sunday night show, and then you have to do three of those in order to be considered to do an early show [on another night]. And then, to get to a late show is, you know, you have to have something happen. So Douglas Corner was a big help to me. (individual interview)

A bit of terminology clarification is necessary here. The meaning of "open mic" is as expected: these events are "open" to anyone who wishes sign up for a "slot" to perform—usually playing one or two songs, depending on the procedure employed by the venue. As mentioned earlier, "writers' rounds" proceed a little differently. In general, a "round" features three or four songwriters on stage at the same time, with each taking a specified number of turns—Writer A plays, then Writer B, then Writer C, followed by Writer A again, and so forth. These are usually more exclusive; at some venues, individual writers are booked to host "a round" and then invite two or three colleagues to perform with them. "Writers' night" is a more flexible term. At the Bluebird Café, for example, Sunday Writers' Nights are open by audition. These auditions are held quarterly, and those who pass the audition are booked for a Sunday night performance in which each of eight to ten songwriters plays a three-song set (www.bluebirdcafe.com, n.d.). At the Commodore Grille, however, "Writers' Night" refers to a series of writers' rounds, each lasting half an hour, with pre-booked acts. At the end of the evening, an "open round" is available for songwriters who sign up the night of the show (www.debichampion.com, n.d.). Given this flexibility of language, I will, in my prose, use "open mic" to refer to open events for which any songwriter can sign up to play and "writers' night" to refer to any other type of event.

In quotations from participants, I will retain the original language used by the interviewee in question, even if it should depart from the rough definitions offered above.

In an effort both to recruit participants and to become more familiar with an aspiring songwriter's experience of navigating Nashville's professional culture, I participated in open mic nights at several venues, taking "jottings" in my notebook and writing fieldnotes. The open mic night I have played most frequently is at the Bluebird Café, and I wrote these notes after my first experience at that venue.

> The Bluebird Café is a small space. While I waited for the show to begin, I did a rough headcount of those in the room and estimated that the room holds about 100 people—and it was chock full. Its surroundings are plain enough: it is part of yet another strip mall on Hillsboro Pike, south of downtown, near the upscale Green Hills Mall. Entering the café feels like walking into any other small neighborhood restaurant. One opens the glass door, walks past the counter where merchandise is sold, and enters the dining room. Tables and chairs are oriented around the stage at the front of the room (to the right as you enter), which sits opposite the bar at the back—whose barstools face not the bartender or the bar, but the stage. At the back of the room, next to the bar, sits a small sound board, which is separated by small aisle from six or so short church pews, which allow for a bit more seating when the tables and bar fill up. The only sources of outside light are the windows and glass door at the café's entry and a small window in the back door—which is at the end of a small hallway that leads back by the kitchen, preventing that small bit of light from traveling very far into the main dining room. Chandeliers and sconces provide light for the dining room, though these are dimmed during performances. Autographed headshots line much of the wall space. Overhead, a drop ceiling plays host

to a simple lighting system for the stage. Tinsel and icicle lights adorn the wall behind the stage, along with a banner advertising the Recording Industry Association of America, which sponsors the café's open mic nights, and a small sign advertising the website and social media presence of the songwriter and songwriting teacher who typically hosts the open mic.

[…]

I pulled into the parking lot at 5:07pm, noticing that a line of about 50 people, all waiting to sit in the audience, had already formed in the lot. The performers, whose guitar cases gave them away, formed a separate line just in front of the café entrance. As the next songwriter queued up behind me, I greeted him and asked if he had played this venue before. He said yes, a few times, and that it was a great venue—quiet and supportive audience, nice-sounding room. We made small talk about where we were from. He recommended a few other open mic nights to me. We ended up sitting next to each other at the bar. When the list of songwriter names and numbers was read, we learned that we were songwriters 24 and 25 on the list—the last two to get in. He explained that he had brought a GoPro camera to capture his performance and offered, since I would be performing just after him, to keep the video running and to share the recording with me via e-mail afterward.

[…]

The interactions among songwriters at the open mic were pretty typical. The expectation that the room be quiet during performances is very explicitly stated, so side chatter is minimal, but songwriters still exchange compliments during transitions and offer each other cards, email addresses, etc. I was disappointed that no one approached me about co-

writing, but one writer did tell me he thought my song sounded "like a hit" and that he'd love to hear Michael Bublé sing it. I wonder how many of the writers who performed were shopping for co-writers and how many of them linked up. I didn't witness a ton of what looked like such activity, but it could've been happening. (fieldnote excerpt)

Building Relationships

Though these notes come from a single night at the Bluebird, they capture some of the key features of open mics and writers' nights: they are spaces in which people share their work, listen to others, and—perhaps most importantly—build relationships. As Margaret noted, these events are one of the first places writers look to start building their community:

Writers' nights are one of the places you can start plugging in. You know, anybody can get up at [venue], I have my Tuesday nights at [venue], anybody can get up at 10:00 and play a song. And, in this town, if you're good, people will be drawn to you—and the other thing is, if you go to a writers' night, and you're new in town, and you don't have any friends, and you don't have any co-writers and you wish you did, you're in a room where there's at least, probably, you know, five to 20 other people in that same situation. You know? When I first moved to town, I didn't know anybody. I thought, "Oh, I'm gonna be so lonely." And, it was the best time of my life, because so many people had just moved there. And we were all looking for friends, and we were all, and we all had this thing in common. And it was a lot of fun. (individual interview)

In addition to soothing the loneliness of the wide-eyed writer who has just arrived to town, these events often serve as spaces for finding collaborators. Though I did not, in the fieldnote above, directly witness any co-writer relationships being formed, the writers I spoke with in interviews

pointed to these events as places where such relationships begin. Sam, who began his Nashville songwriting career later in his life, explained:

> I'm not your typical young 21-year-old guy going out to open mic or writers' rounds and staying out, you know, going out three or four nights a week and staying out until one or two in the morning…My goal was to try to get out twice a week. Play out. And, for the period that I had that goal, I was pretty good at getting there. At least once or twice a week. And I met some, a few of my songwriters that I still write with. (individual interview)

Zoe, for her part, explained that she has developed co-writing relationships with individuals who approached her after hearing her play her songs.

> I played a couple of rounds, writers' rounds, here in Nashville…as I was in those rounds, or open mic sometimes, a writer would approach—a stranger, you know, a virtual stranger would come up and say, "Hey, I really loved your song; are you interested in writing?" And I'd go, Well, give me your card, and I'll go home and listen to your stuff and see if I'm compatible with you…And so they give me their card, or their info; I go to their website or ReverbNation and I listen to their songs. And, if their songs inspire me, um, then I'll email them or text them and say, Yeah, when you wanna write? And, so, basically almost everybody I've written with is, it's happened that they come up to me and ask me to write with them because they heard me play. (individual interview)

These are not the only or best venue for establishing co-writing relationships, and Sam expressed some skepticism about the networking benefit of participating in open mic and writers' nights, based on some advice he received from a publisher:

I was just told this by a pretty respected publisher in town just a couple weeks ago. He

said, you don't need to play writers' rounds and open mics. Mainly, all you're gonna do

is meet more people at or below your level. (individual interview)

Even where the networking benefits may be found wanting, though, there may be other learning

that happens via participation in these events.

Other Learning

For Liam, the benefits of writers' nights extend beyond simply networking and finding

collaborators; he sees them as part of keeping his performance skills up to speed.

I try to play as often as possible. As I learn songs, most of my songs are being, are going

to artists who I hope will run with them, but I also maintain about 30 or 40 songs that I

can play by myself at rounds, when I do rounds. So I try to keep up with the performance

aspect of songs as well. (individual interview)

In addition to keeping up performance skills, writers' nights—especially rounds played by highly

successful songwriters—can give writers an opportunity to hear successful songs performed by

the people who wrote them (rather than, in some cases, the artists who recorded them), as noted

by Margaret: "I think it's incredibly instructive to go hear the hit writers play the songs that

ended up on the radio, because you really see the writing of the song in that setting…when it's

just a voice and a guitar" (individual interview). More about listening as a learning practice will

be discussed later in this chapter.

Summary—Open Mic/Writers' Nights

Open mic and writers' nights are an important part of the Nashville songwriting

"ecosystem." They help songwriters to network with one another and, in some cases, to develop

co-writing relationships. They are also important venues for careful listening and, for some writers, the maintenance of performance skills.

Important Actors

In my interviews with songwriters, I noticed that many of them discussed individuals who had played key roles in their induction to the Nashville songwriting environment and their learning within the craft and profession. Some of these "important actors" were instrumental in encouraging and enabling these writers to "make the leap" and move to Nashville. Shane, who attended a few multi-day songwriting workshops before moving to Nashville, made important contacts who encouraged him to be there full-time and engage in the local "scene":

> I met a lot of people at [workshops], and I met a lot of teachers. Some of them I became friends with and stayed, I still am friends with. And they were all hit writers, you know. And they were telling me, you gotta get out here, you gotta just play as many writers nights as you can, network with as many people as you can, write with as many people as you can. (individual interview)

Andy met a Nashville-based songwriter while he was playing with a band in California, and she encouraged him to consider making the move.

> So, anyway, when [she] played her songs, I'm sitting there in this club, and I'm like 21, and thinking, these are much better than everybody else's songs, you know? And, afterwards, I went up and talked to her and she agreed to write with me. And she had been living in Nashville, she had written songs for George Jones and Tammy Wynette, she had had number one hits. And, anyway, she wrote a song with me…we became friends, and she kinda mentored me. And I guess, really seeing into her world, I realized

that—Hey, I could just write songs…She encouraged me to come to Nashville. (Andy, individual interview)

Sponsors

Some of these important actors engaged in what I call "sponsoring" new writers, by helping them arrange appointments, make contacts, and otherwise become enmeshed in the Nashville "scene." As a young artist-writer, Raven relied on the sponsorship of her manager both before she moved to Nashville and after she arrived.

My manager has been a huge inspiration and great teacher and just a great guide…After traveling back and forth to Nashville for a couple years and meeting with [manager] and doing some showcases here and there, and him having set up some co-writes, some just overall learning opportunities to come down and mingle in Nashville and network and all that good stuff, I knew that I was in good hands working with him. (individual interview)

When Andy shared with a contact of his that he was planning to move to Nashville to pursue songwriting professionally, this contact shared with him the name and phone number of a friend who had been successful in the Nashville songwriting scene. Andy reached out upon arrival to town, and this individual became an important sponsor and mentor for him.

[An acquaintance] gave me [mentor]'s phone number, and said call [mentor] when you get to Nashville, and that was the only phone number I had. [Mentor] was in a hit streak at the time; he was having hits…I didn't even know that when I called him. I just knew that he was somebody that made a living writing songs. So I called [mentor] when I got here…right there on the phone, he said, Well, I'll meet you at the Pancake Pantry. He introduced me to a waitress named [name], and he said [name], Andy's just moved to town. He's come here to be a songwriter, and she said, Honey, Kris Kristofferson used to

sweep the floors at the studio across the street, and we feed songwriters. If you're ever

hungry and need a meal, you come see me, and you can wash dishes, and we'll feed

you…And then after our breakfast, we went to [mentor]'s car and I played him a couple

of my songs on a cassette, and he liked them and agreed to write with me, and that was

my introduction to Music Row. (individual interview)

Will, too, reached out to an experienced friend of his upon arriving to Nashville, and she helped

him connect with co-writers—who, in turn, helped him connect further.

Between wanting to make new friends and wanting to get in the groove, I reached out to a

friend of mine who hooked me up with Sam …She hooked me up with probably two or

three other people, too, and just from there, it was like, Well, "Oh—you're, you know, I

like you, you're a good writer. Why don't you meet my buddy so-and-so," and then, you

know, kind of generated a bigger circle. (individual interview)

Brooke indicated that she believes strongly in the importance of these sponsorship/mentorship

relationships. Her comments revealed that, while she appreciates the prowess of young writers

who are skilled networkers, she also believes strongly that they should leave room for others to

"tell the story."

I can appreciate someone approaching me…I can appreciate their audacity or their

forwardness. But how much better is it if…a writer has heard someone and goes, "Oh my

God, Brooke, you should hear this person"? That's more of a legitimate way, and so, do

your own work. Develop your own muscles. And wait for someone else to tell the story.

You know, I don't know that you have to be the one, you know, telling people how great

you are. You know what I mean? Let someone else do that. (individual interview)

Though songwriters make their own "moves" when "plugging in" in Nashville, sponsors and mentors often help to open doors and build initial connections for newcomers.

Open Mic Hosts

Hosts of open mic and writers' nights can play important roles in sponsoring and mentoring young writers. Margaret, who hosts a popular open mic night in town, called herself "the lifeguard at the wading pool" (individual interview). When I asked her to talk about this role, she pointed immediately to a different open mic host who structures her events in a way that helps young writers connect with each other and with "elder" writers.

> What [other writer/host] does better than anyone in town is create the sense of community. You know, when songwriters are new in town, she'll introduce them to other people, and she'll just kinda give them, You know, man, you just need the, how do I get around? Well, you should play the open mic for a while, get to know some people, you'll make some friends…she just kinda helps them learn, and just the way the sets up her nights, it's kinda hard to just show up and do your thing and leave. You don't play her nights if you do that…She used to really run *way* off schedule. She would say, Okay, you're gonna play between 7 and 10, and you're going to play between 10 and midnight. So, if you showed up at 7, well, you might not play till 10:30. You know, but the thing is, that meant you were in there three hours, and so there was the plus side…you have to be in the room, and what's gonna happen if you're in a room full of songwriters? You're gonna talk to the songwriters that play. (individual interview)

This particular open mic host is able to enact a sponsor/mentor role by designing her open mic procedure with the need for songwriters to network and make connections in mind.

Publishers

Publishers came up in several interviews, which indicates that they, too, are important actors in the lives of these writers. In addition to being gatekeepers—in that they decide whether to take on writers as contracted staff writers—publishers sometimes act as "sponsors," in that they help writers find co-writing partnerships that might prove advantageous to their careers. Sam hoped to develop the kind of relationship with a publisher where this was possible.

> My goal with these music publishers is more—I don't expect them to sign me to a [publishing] deal, not now. But I would like to have them feel confident enough in my writing that they would hook me up with one, some of their writers. (Sam, individual interview)

Publishers also provide feedback to songwriters that helps them to hone their craft, as reflected in this anecdote from Margaret:

> I remember playing a song for a publisher, and he said, Well, you're commenting on what happened, but you never really tell us the story. And I didn't know what he meant! And I'm like, Oh, these publishers. They just think they gotta say *something*. And then I was in a workshop, and they were telling this girl, You're just kinda commenting on what happened, but you never really tell the story. And she was getting really defensive about it. So the next thing, I'm walking around, I'm thinking about it—why is she being so defensive? I don't get it. That was so obvious, and then I went—holy crap! That's what that guy was trying to tell me. (individual interview)

Dale reminisced about a time when seeking feedback from these publishers was a much more open, informal process.

And at the time we moved here, it was still very much Music Row…You know, people

would, were still going around and playing songs for people…People would just drop by

and, and want to play songs for [publisher]—not to pitch him songs, to consider

recording them, but just what do you think about this? (individual interview)

Liam, too, indicated this was traditionally part of a publisher's role.

I think it's really, it's ultimately the relationship between the writer and the publisher in

the old-school design of what publishers used to do. They were like that. They were like

the ones who you'd bounce ideas off. (individual interview)

However the nature of interacting with them may have evolved, publishers persist in being

valuable figures in songwriters' lives and careers. Shane, discussing advice that he gave to

aspiring writers, indicated that they should "Try to get some publisher meetings, and play this,

this work tape, and just see what your response is" (individual interview). Sam indicated that

"this year my goal is to, is to have some music publishers that I can go to on a regular basis"

(individual interview). The gatekeeping, sponsorship, and feedback roles that publishers play

make them important actors for songwriters who interact with them.

Summary—Important Actors

Songwriters rely on important actors to help them navigate the "scene" in Nashville.

Some figures are important in encouraging and convincing writers to "take the plunge" and move

to Nashville in the first place. Others play important mentorship/sponsorship roles, in that they

take new songwriters under their wing and help them build relationships with others who will

help them advance. Some open mic hosts occupy an important sponsor/mentor role, in that the

way they structure their events can be helpful in allowing songwriters to connect with one

another. Publishers, who are important gatekeepers in the scene, also can fill roles of sponsoring writers and giving them feedback.

Professional Organizations

As in other industries, songwriters connect with each other through membership in professional organizations such as Broadcast Music International (BMI); the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP); Nashville Songwriters Association International (NSAI); Global Songwriters Connection (GSC); and the Society of European Stage Authors and Composers (SESAC). Several of these groups came up in conversation with the participants in this study, and it was clear that they play important roles in songwriters' induction to and learning within the songwriting profession. Songwriters' comments about these organizations suggest that they serve two important functions: (a) to connect songwriters with each other, especially those who are new to the city and/or business; and (b) to communicate, through events and programs offered, the creative and professional norms of songwriting in Nashville.

Before proceeding, it is important to note that the design of this study did not specifically target these organizations and their offerings; as such, no official representative of any of these organizations is included among the participants, nor did I approach any of the organizations about securing official consent to be studied as part of this research. My intention here is exclusively to capture songwriters' reflections and perceptions about the role of these organizations, in a global sense, in their professional lives. There is no intention of comparing and contrasting the respective successes or merits of the individual organizations. For that reason, and for the protection of the study's participants, I am not including the organizations'

names or any other identifiable information (e.g., the name of any easily-recognized event or program) in any of the quoted material for this section.

Making Connections

Several writers acknowledged that professional organizations played a critical role in helping them find professional contacts and cultivate relationships with them—an especially important aid to writers who are just embarking on their songwriting careers. Margaret relayed the following experience of connecting with other songwriters when she was a "new arrival":

Somebody told me about…there was such a thing called staff writers in Nashville, and I read a little bit about the town and then I got fired from a job and I got unemployment, so, it's like, okay—why not? I'd never been here before; I didn't know anybody; I didn't have a job; I didn't have a place to say; I just sold everything that wouldn't fit in the car and came here. And I thought, you know, all my friends are like, "You're doing *what?* You're doing *what?*" And then I got here, and I went to the [Organization] meeting…and everybody goes, like, "Oh, yeah, me too, me too." It's like, Oh—well, if I'm crazy, at least I've found the other people that are crazy like me. (individual interview)

In addition to helping songwriters feel connected to one another on a personal level, these organizations help them to build professionally valuable relationships. Brooke explained,

I would love to say there's one person that's responsible for introducing me to people, but it really was just a lot of people. I joined [Organization] early on and they were always so great at sending people my way that they thought we would connect. (individual interview)

One organization offers multi-day workshops for newer songwriters, and Shane explained that this was an important networking/connecting opportunity for him.

I joined the [Organization]…and they had these [events], so I met a lot of people at

[events], and I met a lot of teachers. Some of them I became friends with and stayed, I

still am friends with now. And they were all hit writers, you know. (individual interview)

Will, who had gotten involved with one organization before moving to Nashville full-time,

reached out to colleagues from this organization upon arriving town in order to find co-writers.

When I hit town I really didn't know anybody. I had a couple of contacts from

[Organization]—they had left [Organization] and moved on to [Different

Organization]…And probably within a couple of months of hitting town, I reached out to

them and said, "Listen," you know, "I'm looking for co-writers." (individual interview)

Corinne echoed other writers' sentiments, noting the importance that the multi-day events and

regular meetings that these organizations hold for songwriters looking to make friends and find

collaborators.

One of the biggest things that happened was going to that [event], and events that

[Organization] holds. They have [an event], and back in the day—and I don't think it's so

much the same anymore—but [Different Organization] also held a lot of these

events…Both of them had weekly meetings and stuff, and so, between all those things,

especially the [event], you know, I went to three [such events], and in those times, I met

lots of people, it was just so crazy, 'cause you get to sit and listen to lots of people's

songs, and you hang out with people enough to make friends, and to sort of get to know

people that you might vibe with, and I have had many multi-year relationships with

people that came out of that situation. (individual interview)

Both personally and professionally, these organizations help individual songwriters to make

connections with colleagues as they navigate the landscape of the Nashville songwriting "scene."

Communicating Norms

In addition to providing opportunities for them to connect with one another, these organizations help songwriters to learn about Nashville, the market it serves, and related norms and principles. For Jim, who does not live in Nashville full-time but regularly commutes from his home, a local chapter of one organization in his hometown helped him develop an understanding of the "business side" of Nashville songwriting.

> My wife said, "I heard something about this—there's [an Organization] starting in our town." And so, and she'd only heard one thing about it, so we went and ferreted it out, and I was at the very first [Organization] meeting in [City]. And a year later I was the coordinator. And, through that, I started learning that it's the music *business*. (Jim, individual interview)

Zoe explained that these organizations can help songwriters develop an understanding of the market and "what people want."

> I mean there's people at [Organization] that, you know, they'll say, Last year, there were this amount of number one hits that were in three-four time; there were this amount that had two choruses, and this one, there's been five songs that have rap in it. You know? So, there's people study and then they just, they'll give that info to people in the seminars.

These organizations also provide programs through which songwriters can share songs and receive feedback. For Payton, this was a priority:

> I joined [Organization]. That was one of the first things I did when I got here. And, so, I would go to [Organization] events, and I'd play my songs and have some of the workers at [Organization] analyze them and tell me what to fix and, and how to be better and sort of mentor me in that way. (individual interview)

For Zoe, however, the feedback offered by these organizations felt defeating and contradictory to her creative/professional goals. As she explained, she no longer places much weight on the feedback offered in these programs.

> I wrote all these songs and then I'd present 'em, come to Nashville and show 'em to [Organization] and [Other Organization] and they would shoot 'em down. And I'd leave here with my tail between my legs, and I'd go home and I'd start with my new ideas and my new rules. Do it, go, come back, they shoot 'em down again. Go back home with my tail between—you know. Then I moved here finally, and everything for me changed. I used to go four times a year to [these organizations] and show 'em my songs, show 'em what I was doing. [Since moving] I've been once…to [Other Organizaiton], maybe once to [Different Organization], [Organization] and I haven't gotten back because I realized that, as I'm going out and meeting all these new songwriters and artists who are also artists that they were singing their songs that they wrote and they weren't asking *anyone* to critique them or say …is this a good song to you? They were just singin' 'em, take 'em or leave 'em. (session transcript)

For Zoe, then, the feedback that these organizations provide on behalf of "the market" can be constraining and prohibitive. Her disillusionment with the offerings provided by these organizations is not a complete outlier: Shane, too, expressed frustration at the apparent mission of one organization in particular.

> They've had their ups and downs; I feel that they're in a down right now…I think, if you're just moving to town, it's a great organization. You know, it's a great time, great chance to just get a idea what's going on, who's who and where to go and who to watch and what kind of songs you should be writing, whatever. But I don't agree with the

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whole…they're like, you should encourage everybody to write. If you don't want to write

so bad that you can't not write, if you don't want to play music so bad that you can't not

do it, don't do it. (individual interview)

Though these professional organizations can be helpful communicators of important norms,

some writers may feel at odds with these norms and how they are conveyed.

Summary—Professional Organizations

Professional organizations can be valuable components learning within the songwriting

profession. For newer writers, participation and membership in professional organizations can

give them important early opportunities to connect with one another and build their own

networks. In addition, the events and programs these organizations sponsor help acquaint writers

to the norms of the business, the demands of the market, and expectations of songs written in this

particular domain. For Zoe, however, the critiques these organizations provide unduly constrain

her efforts to follow her own creative instincts. For Shane, though one organization does a good

job of equipping new writers with the tools needed to acclimate themselves to the professional

environment, his opinion is that the organization's mission of encouraging all who are interested

in pursuing songwriting to do so opens the door to individuals who may lack the passion and

dedication needed to make their way in the profession. These findings are limited by the fact that

the design of this research does not specifically target these professional organizations for study.

These songwriters' comments offer a glimpse into how these organizations function in

songwriters' professional lives; however, more investigation of these organizations would yield

further insight into their role in Nashville's songwriting culture.

Classes/Workshops

Opportunities to learn songwriting in a more "formal" or "traditional" classroom environment do exist in Nashville, and many of the writers mentioned having taken advantage of them. Zoe pointed out that they are particularly helpful right after one arrives on the "scene":

> If you're not already a very structured, set-in-your-way type artist/songwriter—if you're not, and you're still learning, because you decided maybe two years ago to be a songwriter, or you've always wanted to be one, but just now you're really focusing on it, you should definitely go to any kind of seminar, workshop, any kind of music thing—if it's free, even better. (individual interview)

Many of the songwriters described positive experiences after attending a multi-day workshop that one professional organization offers regularly. Corinne explained, "It's three days with, you know, big hit songwriters, great songwriters lecturing and giving you feedback on your songs and it was just the most exciting thing" (individual interview).

As suggested in Corinne's comment, these classes and workshops often provide newer songwriters with opportunities to connect with and learn from more seasoned professionals and stakeholders. When Corinne had the opportunity, early in her songwriting career, to organize a songwriting class, she populated it with guest speakers who had navigated the business and been successful.

> I had the opportunity to teach this class for adults from the community, so what I did was I went out and asked every great writer that I ever wanted to learn from to come and be a guest in my class. And they all came…and I got lots of people coming in, and I got lots of clients, I mean, you know, students, and then lots of really great writers and, over the years; I learned so much from them. (individual interview)

Margaret also leads a workshop in town that connects younger, inexperienced writers with publishers who can give business-oriented feedback. As Margaret explained, organizing the workshop has led to a lot of learning not only for her students, but also for her.

> One of the advantages I have is that I do these workshops three times a year. So, I'm getting all that education three times a year. Three times a year, I'm hearing the publishers talk about what's workin' and what's not workin', and then the writers ask them questions, and I hear all the answers to the questions. And so, I'm learning all the time, and it helps me stay relevant…I mean, you *cannot* sit and listen to 48 songs get picked apart 3 times a year by professionals who make a living and are successful in the business without it starting to sink in. (individual interview)

When I asked Corinne about how the learning in these classes and workshops differs from other opportunities for learning (regular practice, co-writing and learning from peers), she explained that classes give teachers an opportunity to link the principles they share with underlying rationale.

> I think the classroom experience is great because there's a time to absorb information…to really let somebody open your eyes to something, you know, through an explanation…What you get in a class is somebody explaining to you why, because, sometimes, people—I've seen this over and over again—sometimes, people don't put any stock into what you're saying, what you're trying to teach them, until you can explain why you're saying what you say. And then I've seen, as a teacher, just a million times, just the light bulb going off for somebody who's like, "Oh, okay. This is why." So classroom gives you *why*. (individual interview)

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Several songwriters also mentioned that attending these classes and workshops—many of which are sponsored by professional organizations in town—helped them to make professional contacts. As Sam explained,

> It's a three-day weekend where you go in three days from 8 to 5 and you write four hours with—you split into groups of three attendee writers with a pro writer. And each, those three attendee writers write with a different pro writer. And so, you're writing with someone who's had number one hit songs. And two of the three people I met, I really liked. And they've been threatening to, to cowrite with me ever since, and that was two years ago. (individual interview)

Zoe, though she felt classes and workshops were helpful to beginners, also expressed that they were only helpful to a certain point, after which it was necessary to go "out in the field" and begin applying what she had learned in earnest:

> I noticed that, after about going to four seminars, I was learning the same thing over and over again, and the fourth time, when I was tempted to do a fifth, I was like, "No, it's the same people," you know…I was, like, graduated, you know what I mean? It was like, Okay, I learned those things, I do those things already, I'm good. I need to, to just go out in the field and do it. (individual interview)

Payton, who has also taken songwriting classes, felt that the analytical approach espoused in some of them was disconnected from how "real" songwriters do their work.

> One thing that I do not like about songwriting classes is when they talk about meter and sort of how every syllable has to rhyme with this and that and what not, and all of the mathematical structure of writing. That really takes the creativity out of songwriting, and

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I feel like most Nashville writers don't write like that. And so, that was very interesting to learn and to not use. (individual interview)

Songwriting classes and workshops, for many of the writers in this study, provided valuable opportunities to learn from seasoned professionals and to make connections. Teachers have the chance to share certain songwriting principles explicitly and with a clear rationale. These events may be especially helpful to new writers who are still gathering professional knowledge as they forge their new careers—and may be less helpful to others, either because they have been to enough of these events to have "graduated" or because they find a disconnection between what is taught and how songwriting happens in the "real" world around them.

"Sharpening Tools"

In addition to examining co-writing spaces as sites for teaching and learning among songwriters, I also was interested in learning from songwriters about how they understand and manage their individual growth as practitioners of the craft—how they think about "sharpening their tools." Many of the writers I interviewed were indeed conscious of their own progress and, when asked, could pinpoint areas of songwriting in which they hoped to improve. Raven, for example, expressed a desire to refine her lyric writing.

I'd like to become a stronger lyricist…I know I have these ideas in my head, but it's just a matter of translating them to paper. To words that rhyme and fit well together. And, instead of just always focusing on finding a groove that really sticks with me, I want to find lyrics that match that on my own. (individual interview)

Will hoped to improve his melodic writing skills.

I would like to really just get better with melodies. And I think I can come up with good melodies, but I wanna make them even better…I wanna really lift the choruses up, and I think I have improved, but maybe I'm not improving as fast as I'd like. (individual interview)

Corinne highlighted her interest in developing a skill that she perceives as having increased currency in the Nashville market:

I really want to be better at production. I've produced some records that involve live musicians, and I've done some programming and done some making my own demos and stuff. But I really think, if we're talking today about what everybody, like, skills everybody needs, and I've been telling people this, and it is getting them publishing deals—like, my students—if you will focus on really getting really skilled at ProTools and at Logic and at building tracks, you will be a commodity. (individual interview)

When asked how they went about getting better as writers, many participants pointed to repeated practice and experience. As Lauren noted, "the only way to get better is to keep doing it. I write almost every day of the week whether I feel like it or not" (email correspondence). Jim, too, expressed that one of the best ways to improve one's facility with songwriting is simply to do a lot of it.

[A songwriter] did a seminar one time and, and one of the things he said was we're just building birdhouses. And he says, somebody that's built three birdhouses is not gonna be as good of a builder as somebody who's built 1,500 birdhouses. At a certain point they go, Okay, yeah, this angle, oh yeah, over time you learn that this angle on the roof makes it where it doesn't leak. You know? And that's kind of where I'm at. I've built a lot of birdhouses. (individual interview)

As Andy explained, an important part of developing this body of experience is seeing less-than-successful songs through to completion—and accepting them as part of the learning process.

> Sometimes you just freakin' write, and some are crap and some are great. More are gonna be crap than are gonna be great, but maybe you just plow through and write some songs. Because the truth is that, even when you're writing bad songs or songs that you know, like—I can't tell you how many times I've sat in a room going, I'm never going to get this cut. I know this idea is not what, you know. But what I'm doing is exercising my muscles…It's like, those days, I'm just sharpening my tools. (individual interview)

That practitioners of any craft would point to dedicated, consistent practice as an important element of developing expertise is unsurprising. In addition to this more global principle, participants also discussed specific habits and practices that contribute to their learning and growth as writers. Three practice areas—listening/analyzing, accumulating ideas, and writing alone—seemed particularly salient. A discussion of each follows, along with brief consideration of other practices that were more particular to individual writers but still worthy of mention.

Listening/Analyzing

Many participants identified listening to and analyzing a variety of songs as an important part of their ongoing growth in the songwriting craft. Dale explained,

> I always tell people, you know, if you want to learn how to write a great song, then you need to listen to a lot of great songs, because there's a reason why they last through time; they have all the right elements. (individual interview)

Margaret also felt that listening was a crucial component in learning what is and is not effective. As mentioned earlier, she particularly recommended hearing songs performed live, in "stripped-down" fashion, by the writers who composed them.

> Just listening to lots and lots of songs, and listening to lots of beginning-effort songs and listening to lots of hit songs and hearing what's on the radio. I think it's incredibly instructive to go hear the hit writers play the songs that ended up on the radio, because you really see the writing of the song in that setting…when it's just a voice and a guitar. (individual interview)

Songwriters also must develop a sense of what is current and satisfies the market's demands. Sam, though he admitted to being a less frequent listener than other writers, explained that he did try to listen to country radio in order to keep his finger on the pulse of the market and "see where it's going."

> I probably don't listen to as much music as a lot of people do. It's interesting. I don't care for most of the music on country radio right now. I listen mostly to a classic rock station, because I don't mind the pop sound to [current country music], but I'm a lyric guy, and when you've got a pop song, the lyrics don't have any depth to them, I'm not really interested…I love good music, I love well-written songs, and I love to listen to them— and I will listen, I'll try to listen to some pop stuff, some pop country to see where it's going. (individual interview)

Liam indicated that he focuses his listening activity specifically on exposure to new material— going so far as to actively avoid re-hearing any material that he has already digested and processed.

I just constantly listen to new music. I *only* listen to new music…even on the radio, if

something comes on that I know, and I've already absorbed, I will just change the

channel until something that I don't know comes out. (individual interview)

These comments indicate that listening has an important function of exposure—to what is

new, current, and effective. Songwriters also mentioned studying and analyzing songs they hear

in order to understand what makes them compelling. Brooke, for example, explained that

analysis of new listening material is part of her strategy for breaking out of musical "ruts":

"Musically, if I'm stunted…then I buy albums that no one's heard of and I study what they're

doing that I like" (individual interview). Raven described bringing this kind of analytical

listening into her sessions with co-writers:

Sometimes I bring in artists that I like, and we sit there for the first half-hour and just

listen and study to what it is about this artist and this song that I'm relating to, I'm really

obsessed with at that moment, and try to—not necessarily exactly duplicate it, but, you

know, all music is relative and is derived from something else. (individual interview)

Liam explained that the act of listening to and analyzing songs pervades his life, including in

conversations with his adolescent daughter.

I mean, I've got a 12-year-old daughter, and she and I listen to modern pop and we argue

about what's good—is this Drake song *good*? Do you like it? Do you like the groove on

this song? You know, so we have these great little conversations…I'm willing to take in

everything because I just love music. And I'm just hoping it's all gonna feed the muse.

(individual interview)

Aaron described perhaps the most involved listening/analysis behavior, which has helped

him to develop a more intimate understanding of the finer points of song structure and form.

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A guy basically was just saying…you should go and take all the songs you love and break them down. The rhyme scheme, you know—break down the form….Early on, I was more of a stream-of-consciousness writer and I kinda thought, you know, it is what it is, and even if every line didn't rhyme perfectly, I was inspired, and how can you—I didn't quite—this was when in my 20s—I didn't quite believe in all that yet…but when I actually spent time breaking down all the songs I really loved, what I found was there was a really, really tight form and pattern, even to the people I think of as the most left-of-center writers in music. And I realized all those people were all still following form. And then I broke down songs from maybe some other writers who—maybe I liked the songs, or liked the melodies, or I liked part of the song, and I realized there were some things that were all over the map. There was no form, or there was—it was different every verse. Some verses rhymed, some didn't, and I started realizing—Okay, oh, I get it. That's why some people are critical of this person…And for me, that was, once I started doing that, and I started—*then* I turned, finally, a very different critical eye on my own writing…All of a sudden, I start staring at all my songs, and I see the patterns just everywhere. (individual interview)

Notably, Aaron's listening to and analysis of other writers' songs prompted him to look differently at his own work. Dale, too, noted the connection between studying other writers' work and studying one's own.

Study songs that are, that have all stood the test of time. And find out what, why, what's in there. And you don't have to copy it, but there are elements of this thing you need to emulate, you know. And also, as much as you can, as best as you can, write a lot. To have things to judge—well, I really like this, and why did I waste my day doing this. So you

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can have some comparisons. And then when you start having some in this pile where—

this means something to me. Then you can study your own elements, and what it is it

about this song that makes it speak to you. (individual interview)

Listening is an important part of these writers' continued "sharpening." In the first place,

listening provides exposure to what is "out there," in terms of both finding new ideas and

keeping up with the market. Songwriters also engage in analysis to understand the mechanics of

song form and other dimensions of the craft. This analytical approach to listening can help them

to understand what other writers do to craft effective songs, but also can give writers a lens for

understanding their own work.

Accumulating Ideas

In addition to their listening efforts, many writers discussed the processes by which they

seek out inspiration and capture potential ideas for songs. It is common, for example, for writers

to keep a "hook book" (or its electronic equivalent) in which they record titles, lines, or other bits

of material that could contribute to a song "hook." Shane described the variety of sources from

which he draws inspiration for his hook book.

> Whenever I have an idea, whether it's 'cause I'm reading a novel and somebody
>
> introduces a concept, I'm like, Ah, if I could just distill that down into a hook, I'll have a
>
> pretty good song there, you know? So, whether it's that, or just, I overhear some people
>
> talkin' at Starbucks, or wherever, I'm like, What'd he just say? You know, say, "Cold
>
> around the heart"—is that in a movie? That sounds like a good title, you know?…Or I'll
>
> be at a movie, and then… they always have that key scene where they introduce the
>
> title… it's kind of obnoxious, actually. But sometimes, that's where the writers, the poor
>
> Hollywood team of writers, the guy's really trying to shine so he can get that Oscar

[laughter] or whatever, and he's really gonna write the crap out of that scene, and sometimes good stuff comes out of that. And I'll read a novel and I'll be like—some people, like Milan Kundera and Salman Rushdie and Kurt Vonnegut…they're so creative, they'll have enough to write a whole song…just to get you kick-started, you know? (individual interview)

Like Shane, many writers pointed specifically to watching movies and reading as important parts of staying inspired and maintaining a library of ideas. Brooke acknowledged, "You know, when I'm lyrically feeling burned out, I start reading more, and I watch movies more, and I make notes" (individual interview). Aaron discussed reading fiction and poetry as well as watching classic movies:

When I read a novel, I get ideas. I mean, I end up getting out my highlighter and finding little bits and nuggets and, you know, one phrase from Kerouac…can inspire me to write my own song because of what it triggers in me. Or one line of a Bukowski poem spurs me on to write a song…I don't find it as much in movies anymore, but in classic movies—and I've heard songs before, I'm like—oh, I bet they got that line from that movie. 'Cause a great movie with a great script—same thing. There'll be a line, you know, especially classic movies, that'll inspire. (individual interview)

Jim, who acknowledged coming up with better lines as one of his goals for growth, explained that he needed to support this by reading more. He particularly highlighted "trashy harlequin novels" as helpful resources for him, since they capture everyday interactions between people that make for good song material.

I'm gonna read more. Stephen King says that if you don't read, you can't write…I'm gonna read more trashy harlequin novels…I always had trouble with novel fiction. But

you get down to these trashy harlequin things and they're not spending so much time

telling you about the little town…they get the interaction between people. And the

interactions that those people have are interactions that everybody has on a daily basis,

and the way they describe them, you go, Oh! That's interesting. You know, I've got a

couple of lines that I've kinda plucked out of those novels. (individual interview)

For Sam, regardless of the specific source, it is important to remain alert and catch these

opportunities for inspiration whenever they come.

But I always feel my job is more inside my head, and I'm absorbing everything that

I'm—always being on call. Whatever I'm doing, I'm on call. Listening. If it's music,

what's going on? If it's a movie, are there any cool lyrics there? If it's a greeting card, is

there, is that a cool line in the greeting card? You know? Always on call, ready to try to

absorb something that's out there.

Sam's assertion that he is "always on call" suggests that songwriters must be active in their

pursuit of these inspiration sources. Similarly, Liam emphasized the writer's responsibility and

agency in finding and cultivating inspiration.

You know the whole idea of writing for inspiration?…I get ideas periodically, but if I

waited for inspiration, it would never—like, for me, inspiration, I mean, is 9:00. After I

leave here, I've got a day—I've got a whole, a month worth of co-writes booked and I

need to have something to bring to the table. So today is my day where I sit there in a

room and I just basically try to fill this book with ideas, so that I've got stuff to draw

from. So today's one of those days. I always like to have days like that where I can just

accumulate ideas.

This approach—setting aside entire days simply for collecting and recording ideas—sets Liam apart from other writers interviewed in the study, but highlights again the need for songwriters to be active in seeking inspiration and accumulating ideas.

Chasing ideas and recording them in "hook books" is an important part of these writers' efforts to stay "sharp." Many songwriters seek out books and movies as sources of inspiration. Of course, plenty of other sources exist, too—greeting cards, overheard conversations—but the underlying point seems to be that songwriters have a responsibility to seek these bits of inspiration actively.

Writing Alone

In addition to listening and accumulating ideas, the participants in this study—all of whom engage in co-writing on some level—often highlighted the importance of continuing to write alone as well. Writers (a) valued solo writing as an important part for "developing their own muscles" outside the co-writing space, and (b) felt that certain songs call for being written alone rather than being shared with others.

"Develop your own muscles." Though all of the participant songwriters in this study co-write regularly, many of them identified solo writing as an important component of their continued growth as songwriters. Brooke, a multi-decade veteran of the Nashville "scene," felt strongly that songwriters must write alone in order to "develop their own muscles."

> I feel like people need to develop their own muscles and their own skill sets. And *[pause]* there's a lot of people that get to skate and, but then, let's say they lose their record deal—they never developed as writers. So, it's all gonna tumble down. So if you're wanting to have a career as a *legitimate* songwriter, you've got to develop your own muscles…I look for people that write alone…you listen and you know that there's no

other influence but them. So…with [one particular co-writer]—he only wrote alone until

we met. And, you know, when he would play out, I would just be mesmerized by him

and be like, "Oh my God," and I knew that he had—he's 100% responsible for that

melody, that lyric, that arrangement, the whole—all of it. He's responsible for it.

(individual interview)

Dale, another veteran writer, felt that solo writing was an important part of developing his own

voice before diving fully into the Nashville co-writing "scene."

I would *highly* advocate that they learn how to write songs by themselves first, because I

don't know how in the world you ever become a great co-writer if you can't sit alone in a

room and come out with a finished product…Jimmy Webb never co-wrote with anybody.

Kristofferson, you don't see "Kristofferson *and*." Most of the Willie Nelson things are

written by himself…Billy Joel, James Taylor, all the singer-songwriters, a lot of

them…they wrote by themselves. They developed their own style. So, by the time I got

here, I had, for better or worse, had developed some semblance of this is what my songs

sound like. And I didn't co-write for the first…three years I was here, probably.

(individual interview)

Brooke also felt that solo writing was an important venue for uninhibited idea development:

But the writing alone, I think what that does is…you're not inhibited, you'll say

whatever. If you're not trying to please someone. And that's where you're going to find

some of your best ideas, is in those moments by yourself. (individual interview)

Raven, a young artist-writer, valued solo writing as an opportunity to be more "authentic" and to

have dedicated practice.

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I think I should spend more time writing alone. Even if it pains me, because I'm so

impatient and it takes four times as long as a co-writing session, I think it's a great

exercise to just go back to the drawing board, do it yourself, and see what comes out,

like, from 100% you. It might be more authentic, you know? And it's just dedicated

practice. (individual interview)

Later, Raven explained that co-writing offered an opportunity for more freedom and less caution.

I need to be a little more fearless in that sense. Less cautious, you know, kinda throw the

caution to the wind and, without judgment, sit down in the little practice rooms that we

have here at [university], and even if the kid's bangin' on the drums like crazy in the

room next to me, just sit down and concentrate and not worry about anything else or

what's coming out of my mouth, you know, what kinda words or what kinda melodies

are coming out of my hands and the guitar, and just write freely. (individual interview)

These comments seem to suggest that, for these writers, solo writing offers a space in which

writers are able to explore freely, without the potential constraints imposed by the presence of

another writer.

Some writers expressed concern at how infrequently they engage in solo writing now that

they are enmeshed in the world of co-writing. Jim, for example, expressed that he no longer

trusts himself as an individual writer after so many years of co-writing.

I've co-written so much that I don't trust myself. And, so, I've gotta start getting back

into writing more by myself, so that I can trust my own instincts rather than waiting for

someone else to go, "Oh, yeah. Yeah, that's a good line."…I've got a couple of titles that

I've been kinda keeping for myself, and about every so often I'll bring 'em out and see if

I'm a good enough writer to write that song….So I want to get back to doing that.

(individual interview)

Will, for his part, felt that his co-writing schedule (and his other "gigs") left little room for remaining active as a solo writer: "I haven't had the time to solo write since I've been here….I've probably written six songs since I've been here *on my own* completely. And I need to kinda change that" (individual interview). He went to explain that solo writing was important not only for growth in the creative work of songwriting, but also for establishing one's professional stature:

> There are people that don't solo write. And then there's people that don't co-write. But I think that, for two reasons, solo writing is important. Reason number one being if you can get better on your own, you're gonna get better in a co-writing session. You're gonna bring more to a writing session. Number two, if I'm looking for a publishing deal, and all of my songs that I submit are co-written, they don't know what I've written and what I haven't written. Like, I mean, what I've contributed. So, you know, I think it speaks very strongly to a publisher to look at your name on a page and see the *only* name and say, Wow—that's a really great song. I see that you're a great writer, you know. (individual interview)

Though co-writing is an important part of these writers' creative-professional activity, they also value the role of solo writing as a tool for learning. Writing alone offers them opportunities to exercise their creative "muscles," explore ideas in a free and unconstrained environment, and establish their *bona fides* in the market.

Songs to write alone. In addition to seeing solo writing as an important tool for refining their creative skills and establishing their professional profiles, writers seemed to feel that certain

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songs simply should be written alone, whether for personal or professional reasons. As Jim's comment above—that there are certain songs that he has been "kinda keeping for [himself]"—suggests, there are certain songs that writers feel should be theirs exclusively. As Margaret explained, "You know, if I have a strong emotion about something and I have an idea about something from my personal life, I'll write that by myself" (individual interview). Shane, whose ideas tend to have an intellectual bent, expressed that certain ideas simply did not lend themselves to co-writing:

> I'm guilty of introducing complex ideas that aren't very writable…I try to save those now for my own things. 'Cause it's a weird, dark, misty trail that isn't easy to follow, and it's hard to bring somebody else along on that, you know? (individual interview)

Margaret's perspective was similar, in that she felt that the songs she writes alone are not commercially viable, but rather a reflection of her musical background and habits.

> If you just leave me to my own devices, I'm gonna write stuff that sounds kinda folky, sounds kinda Broadway, because, when I was a kid, that's what I grew up on, was all the folk music in the 60s and 70s and all the Broadway showtunes that my parents had. You know, I love that, and so—like that song I did [at writers night]…that's *so* Broadway. But that just, that's how it spilled out of me. That's me writing *my* song. Well, no one is ever gonna cut that song.…Those aren't songs that are gonna get cut. Those are personal expression. (individual interview)

Aaron discussed the fact that, sometimes, writers stumble upon ideas that feel "special" and want to keep those to themselves.

> I listened to some songwriters, veteran guys that are retired, speak, and there was this one guy who was, he went to an office every day for twenty, thirty years and wrote songs

from 9 to 5 and went home…but every now and then he had something that came to him that he just, he thought it was different and special and he didn't think he got that many like that, so he just worked on it slowly on his own till he could fully realize it. So, it's that recognition that, like, Oh, this is actually something different that I've tapped into. (individual interview)

As Dale explained, the danger of bringing such "special" ideas to a co-writing room is that the song idea might develop in a direction its originator never intended.

There's nothing more disappointing than walking in with a—where you go, *I've got this in the bag.* You know exactly what this one's supposed to be, just by the title alone. And about the second, about the time the first line gets thrown out, you go, No, that's not, that's not it at all. But you're kinda committed at that point.…if you've got that good of an idea, you've got that—if you've got it that much in your head, then you owe it to yourself to sit down and finish it. Don't let it get away. (individual interview)

Margaret related an experience that resembled what Dale described.

I have a song that I started with a co-writer, and it isn't that I don't want to write with her, but it's like, it came out of something I said to her, which was just kind of a real personal statement about how I approach life…if we get together tomorrow, unless I have time to do it tomorrow, I think I might just say, Let's just start something else. Because, if I'm gonna write this song, it has to *really* say what *I'm* trying to say. That doesn't mean that she can't help me do that and make it much more musically and entertaining than it would if I wrote it by myself because I love writing with her—but…what we have so far, it's just not—like, when I sing that song, like, the song I wrote about my dad, or the song

I wrote about Nashville—I am 100% in that song. There's not one moment where I'm not

completely invested in what I'm saying to the audience. (individual interview)

As result, Margaret concluded that songwriters

kinda have to know what ideas not to take in *Or*—not to take in too soon. You know, *or*

you need to be able to say, "I wrote this chorus, and, you know, I don't—like, this is the

way I want to chorus to be." (individual interview)

For these writers, knowing which song ideas belong exclusively to them and which ones they are

prepared to share is important. Some ideas lack the commercial viability to be good candidates

for bringing to a co-writing session that is focused on writing a song that will get "cut." On the

other hand, given Dale's comments, some ideas are so promising that "you owe it to yourself" to

write them alone. Songwriters also reserve for themselves songs that serve a purely personal,

expressive purpose.

Other Learning Pursuits

Some of the individual pursuits songwriters mentioned in their interviews, though not

necessarily common to multiple writers, seem worth mentioning in an effort to understand how

these songwriters learn. In particular, songwriters mentioned private lessons, YouTube learning,

and completing assignments/exercises. Discussion of each learning pursuit follows.

Private lessons. Some writers mentioned seeking out private instruction from a teacher

or peer in order to sharpen some part of their skill set. Payton and Raven, both young artist-

writers, mentioned taking private lessons on guitar, which helps them to be more effective in the

writing room. As Raven explained,

I take guitar lessons bi-weekly, from [teacher], who is an amazing guitar teacher…I find

that a lot of my ideas also come from whatever I learned that day, and I start playing

around on that when I get home and use that the next day. (individual interview)

Corinne, who indicated her desire to improve her producing skills, also mentioned hiring a friend

to give her a few lessons on ProTools. Sam was the only writer to mention having sought out

private songwriting lessons (though Margaret mentioned that she has been hired to provide

private coaching/consultation). Sam sought out his private lesson teacher after hearing him speak

at a workshop.

The first week after I got here was, there was an NSAI workshop, a weekend workshop,

and I attended, and one of the guest speakers, was a guy named [Name], who is an

amazing songwriter. He hasn't had a lot of commercial success, but he is just an amazing

songwriter. But he was teaching it, he taught the class, the one-hour class, in a way that I

really liked. He was reaching me. He was articulating his thoughts really well. And I

thought, Hmm, wonder if he teaches one-on-one. And I got a hold of him, and sure

enough, he did. So, a few months later, I started going to see him once a week. And, so,

my goal at that point became—okay, you know, I played him some of my songs that I

came out here with, and he just, in a semi-nice way, ripped them all apart. And—it's like

going into boot camp when they, they tear everybody down before they can build you

back up. And it was very humbling and, at times, very discouraging. But I'll never forget,

about 8 months to a year later, I brought him a song, I played for him, and he goes,

"Congratulations, Sam, you're now a country songwriter." And that was big coming from

him. 'Cause it isn't just about country being writing a radio-friendly song. It was all the

pieces that go into writing a good song were there in the one song. And, so, that was a big

moment. (individual interview)

Sam, who moved to Nashville to pursue songwriting professionally after a successful career in

another field, noted that he was fortunate that his financial security enabled him to afford this

private instruction: "I'm fortunate I'm at a period in my life where I'm not 21 and busing tables

and trying to pay the rent. So I have a little more expendable income" (individual interview). For

those who can afford it, though, private instruction either in songwriting itself or in an enabling

skill like guitar may be an important element in growing within the songwriting profession.

YouTube learning. For some writers, YouTube proved a helpful resource in developing

skills related to songwriting. Payton, though she takes private lessons on guitar, mentioned using

YouTube to further refine her playing.

I do a lot of YouTube learning. YouTube is a very great resource for learning guitar—not

necessarily in the beginning; I tried that. Didn't work. But sort of now that I know what

I'm doing when it comes to my guitar, YouTube has been a great help. (individual)

Corinne also mentioned using YouTube as a resource to support her efforts to learn production

technology like ProTools.

There's a lot of time asking your friends, you know, how did you do this? How did you

do that? So, I mean, I have my friends, and then there's a lot of looking on YouTube, you

know… I think everybody I know really YouTubes it a lot. (individual interview)

Given the ubiquity of tools like YouTube in today's world, it is somewhat surprising that this

resource did not receive more mention in the data set—though this may be a product of the semi-

structured interview protocol, which did not necessarily contain specific questions about the use

of online tools.

Individual assignments/exercises. Some songwriters mentioned assignments/exercises they give to themselves to help spark creativity and spur growth. Jim, who mentioned that he hoped to improve his lyric writing, indicated that he wanted to start doing daily writing exercises: "I'm going to start doing morning pages…Get up in the morning and force myself to do an object write for five or ten minutes" (individual interview). Will mentioned the technique of using a "dummy melody," which he learned from a music teacher in his childhood:

> So he basically said, "Let's look at the song, 'Hey, Good Lookin'', by Hank Williams," alright? He said, "I want you to listen to the music, but I want to write your own lyrics and your own hook…and you're going to put all your new, you know, all new stuff over it," and the reason he did that is to teach me how to line up the words with the music and prosody and all that stuff. And the said, "Okay, now you're going to change the music." (individual interview)

Jim described using a similar process for using an existing song as source/stimulus material:

> Take a song that you really like. Dissect the thing. Break it down with the lyrics. Go, Okay, here's my meter, here's my rhyme points, okay, so I've gotta have a line that's da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da—you know. And copy all those lyrics. Write your own lyrics to it, then throw the song away and write another melody to it. Then, then approach the thing like, well, somebody just brought me these lyrics, and I've got to write a melody to it. You already know what song you're copying, so you know where you have to stay away from, and it's like, Okay, well, maybe where they went up, then you go down. (individual interview)

> Aaron, as mentioned earlier, employs analytical techniques to study and edit his own songs, which contribute to his learning and growth.

I have a stack of typed-up lyrics that I'll get up in the morning and, with my red pen, just like I'm grading paper…I kinda look at it and go, "Huh. Boy, that line's great, that line's great. That one's not great."…It's just some little trick somewhere I picked up to continue to edit myself. And then I'll record them, whether it's—I used to do a demo with my computer recording software. Now, a lot of times I'll use an iPhone…but I'll just drive around and just listen to stuff. And then, when I listen to it when I'm driving, I'm like—Oh, too long. Or, Oh, one of those verses, you know—too many verses, or it takes too long to get to the chorus, or, man, this song really needs a bridge.

For these writers, these assignments/exercises seem to be helpful in targeting a specific skill, kick-starting the creative process, and analyzing one's own work in a way that spurs further growth.

Summary—"Sharpening Tools"

In addition to learning via collaborating with others, or via engagement with the larger songwriting community through open mic nights, professional organizations, and classes/workshops, songwriters also engage in individual learning pursuits that help them to "sharpen their tools." Many writers spoke about the importance of listening and analyzing, accumulating ideas, and writing alone. Some songwriters also discussed seeking private instruction, learning via YouTube, and completing individual exercises/assignments that help them meet specific learning goals.

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Chapter Summary

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Understanding the learning practices of collaborative songwriters in Nashville requires attending not only to activity related specifically to the process of co-writing, but also the larger world that surrounds co-writing activity. Nashville and "the market," certain important actors,

open mic and writers' nights, professional organizations, formal learning spaces, and individual learning practices all play important roles in songwriters' development.

Being a participant in the Nashville "scene" influences how songwriters see themselves and what procedures they employ in their creative activity (i.e., co-writing). The demands of the "market" also guide and constrain certain creative choices that songwriters make. Songwriters must learn both how to honor these constraints and how to defy them thoughtfully when appropriate.

A variety of "important actors" play critical roles in songwriters' development. Songwriters rely on mentors and "sponsors" who help them make appointments and navigate songwriting's professional culture. Open mic and writers' night hosts play an important mentoring role, and publishers—who are important gatekeepers for songwriters—also can function as sponsors and providers of useful feedback.

Professional organizations provide spaces in which songwriters can connect with one another. Their programming also gives songwriters opportunities to learn about the norms that guide the Nashville songwriting scene. Though writers recognize these organizations as valuable resources especially for beginning writers, some writers take issue with the feedback that these organizations provide regarding writers' songs as well as the mission of one organization in particular that seems interested in encouraging anyone interested to pursue songwriting seriously.

Many songwriters avail themselves of formal learning through classes and workshops. These offerings help put songwriters in touch with seasoned professionals and also provide yet another venue for networking and connection. For newer writers, these spaces can offer an opportunity to learn principles of songwriting from a teacher who is able to articulate a clear

rationale. For other writers, the material in these workshops and classes is either redundant or divorced from the way Nashville songwriters "really" write.

Songwriters also employ a variety of independent learning activities to help "sharpen their tools." Many writers place emphasis on the importance of listening and analysis, accumulating ideas, and continuing to write alone. Other writers have engaged in less common, but still noteworthy, individual learning practices—including seeking out private instruction, using YouTube as a resource, and working through self-assigned exercises that target specific skills or help them to self-edit.

CHAPTER 10: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this research is to understand how professional songwriters in Nashville, Tennessee teach and learn from one another in the process of engaging in collaborative songwriting and to understand what contextual factors surrounding that activity also contribute to songwriters' learning. Three research questions guided this study:

1. How do collaborative songwriters describe the process of being inducted into, and learning within, the practice of professional songwriting in Nashville?

2. What teaching and learning behaviors can be identified in the collaborative songwriting processes of Nashville songwriters?

3. Who are the important actors in the process of learning to be a collaborative songwriter in Nashville, and what roles do they play (e.g., gatekeeper, mentor, role model)?

In this chapter, I discuss the findings in relation to each of these questions, consider implications for teachers of songwriting and music educators in general, and offer recommendations for future research.

Discussion

In the preceding chapters, I presented the findings from this study in what I think of as concentric circles—first looking at each co-writing session I observed as a case that illuminates certain phenomena regarding collaborative songwriting, then "zooming out" to look at co-writing on the whole, then broadening once more to consider the environmental factors that surround and influence the co-writing space. In this section, I review and discuss these same themes, using the study's three guiding research questions as anchors.

Songwriters' Descriptions of Induction and Learning

The songwriters in this study seemed to locate their learning in multiple contexts: in the co-writing room, in classes and workshops, in individual practice, and in participation in the Nashville songwriting community overall. On the broadest level, songwriters described the importance of simply being in Nashville and participating in the "scene"—attending open mic and writers' nights, encountering and conversing with veteran writers and music industry professionals, learning Nashville norms and market expectations (e.g., the expectation that one will co-write, the need for song lyrics to be "conversational"). This process of professional assimilation reflects what Lave and Wenger (1991) described as "centripetal participation in the learning curriculum of the ambient community" (p. 100). Of course, part of learning and becoming active in this "scene" depends on steps taken by certain "important actors," which will be discussed with relation to the third research question.

Though popular music and informal music making and learning have often been associated with each other—perhaps conflated—it is worth noting these songwriters' reflections did not indicate that they learn exclusively through informal means. Many of the writers in this study discussed their attendance at classes and workshops, and some discussed having taken private lessons. The classes and workshops that these songwriters describe attending often are led by "hit" songwriters who have achieved professional success and are charged with sharing "tricks of the trade" with attendees. Workshops also often provide opportunities for songwriters to play their songs for publishers or veteran songwriters and receive feedback. In such environments, the roles of student and teacher seem to be rather clearly defined, as does the direction in which knowledge flows from expert to novice. Whereas previous research (Biasutti, 2012; Campbell, 1995; Davis, 2005; Green, 2002; Jaffurs, 2004) has focused on the informal

learning practices that popular musicians employ (as does the present study, in part), it bears

mention that these songwriters explicitly acknowledged the role of formal learning environments

in their development. This may reflect a difference between the learning that happens among

musicians in pop/rock bands, who were the primary population studied in the aforementioned

research, and that which happens among commercial songwriters. Further, Folkestad's (2006)

assertion that formal and informal learning are poles of a continuum, as well as part of a dialectic

pair, also proves useful here. To focus on either the formal or the informal practices that

songwriters employ, to the exclusion of the other, would be to paint an incomplete picture.

Some of the practices songwriters described do reflect certain principles of informal

music learning established in previous scholarship. In addition to learning through the act of

collaborating with others and through participation in formal learning events like classes and

workshops, participants in this study described a variety of individual practices that they use to

"sharpen their tools" as writers. Some of these seemed common to multiple writers and therefore

part of "standard" procedure; others seemed more particular to individual writers who had

developed or chosen these practices based on their needs and goals for growth. These reflect the

"independent learning methods through self-teaching techniques" that Green (2002, p. 16)

described in her study of popular musicians' learning.

Listening and copying, which Green (2002) described as the overarching learning

practice of popular musicians, does not transfer directly to the sub-domain of songwriting, since

the expectation of generating original material renders the "copying" element less relevant

(though the "dummy melody" procedure described by Will and Jim might be considered a

reasonable analog). Listening, however, certainly emerged as an important component of these

songwriters' learning. Using Green's taxonomy, it is probably best to describe these writers'

listening practices as *purposive* listening. Though, again, they did not listen with the intention of copying the material as musicians in cover bands might do, their intent to internalize the mechanics of crafting effective songs through listening to and analyzing beloved examples suggests an analogous form of "purposiveness" in these listening exercises.

Teaching and Learning Behaviors in Collaborative Songwriting

One of the motivating interests for this study was specifically to understand how the co-writing space in particular served as a site for teaching and learning among collaborative songwriters in Nashville. Given that co-writing is a "Nashville norm," and given an assumption of the "indivisible character of learning and work practices" (Lave & Wenger, 1991), it seemed reasonable to suspect that the act of co-writing was an important component in Nashville writers' ongoing learning and refining of the songwriting craft.

Arguably, one of the most important parts of collaborative songwriting happens well before a particular co-writing session begins. First, writers must seek out and select co-writing partners. Given that an important part of informal learning practices is choice on the part of the learner—Folkestad (2006) referred to informal learning as "self-chosen and voluntary learning" (p. 141)—choosing with whom to write, and therefore from whom to learn, is of critical concern. A number of factors seemed to guide the process of co-writer selection, including personal compatibility and alignment of writing tempos and creative/professional intentions. Of notable consequence for learning, however, is songwriters' careful consideration of their co-writers' skills and strengths. Participants described seeking co-writers with complementary strengths, such that each could bring a different strength to the song and both participants could grow. Participants also described the importance of considering a co-writer's general skill level: though some writers valued "writing up" with more-experienced or more-skilled peers, others

recommended "writing across" with members of one's "tribe." Irrespective of strengths or skill levels, many songwriters described the need to enjoy each other's company when co-writing—to be a "fun hang"—echoing previous research that found support for using friendship pairs in collaborative composing assignments (Burland & Davidson, 2001; Hewitt, 2008; Miell & MacDonald, 2000).

Once songwriters have found one another, they have the opportunity to influence each other through their collaborative activities in the writing room. Songwriters' descriptions of their learning often pointed to the sheer value of being exposed to a variety of styles and approaches through their co-writing experiences in a way that resonates with Green's (2002) description of "group learning," which "occurs as a result of peer interaction but in the absence of any teaching" (p. 76). Songwriters may "pick up" techniques from their collaborators even without the collaborator making any explicit effort to teach or explain a concept or "trick." On other occasions, however, writers engaged in more explicit teaching behaviors of the kind that Green defined as "peer-directed learning." This was especially evident in the co-writing session between Corinne and Payton, which was an example of the common practice of pairing a young artist-writer with a more seasoned veteran writer. Similar moments occurred in the co-writing session between Zoe and Rachel, since Rachel, who does not live in Nashville, needed to rely on Zoe's expertise as a "local" in some instances.

Other behaviors I observed in co-writing sessions seemed to fulfill yet another teaching/learning function. In their negotiations of song content and their responses to each other's ideas, songwriters served as "checks and balances" on one another by reminding each other of certain songwriting principles. Since these are explicit interactions, they do not quite align with Green's (2002) definition of "group learning"; however, since they do not involve the

explicit teaching of any new material *per se*, they also seem not to qualify as "peer-directed learning." Rather, I view these interactions as a form of "peer coaching" in which collaborators remind each other of certain practices and principles in a way that supports both creative activity and learning.

Working with co-writers also influenced some writers' sense of pressure around creative activity. For some, having "company" for the creative journey reduces pressure and builds comfort. For others, the presence of others results in a constructive pressure increase, as one's accountability to one's co-writers forces one to engage and pursue success in the co-writing room.

Though the ways songwriters endeavor to protect a certain kind of atmosphere in the co-writing room may not qualify as "teaching and learning behaviors," the creation of these environmental conditions has important influence over the quality of creative activity, and of learning, that can occur in these spaces. The protection of a positive, "no-free," safe and open space seems to be a critical component for these writers.

Important Actors

Just as the activity of professional songwriting does not exist in a vacuum, songwriters and their careers are not islands unto themselves. As they navigate the professional landscape of Nashville, these writers must connect with, work alongside, learn from, and lean on certain stakeholders—which Lave and Wenger (1991) referred to as a "richly diverse field of essential actors" (p. 56).

Some of the most important "actors" in the Nashville "scene" are the various professional organizations with which songwriters affiliate. In addition to creating spaces in which songwriters can connect with one another, the programming these organizations provide is an

important part of how songwriters learn the norms and principles that underlie the professional activity of songwriting in Nashville. Arguably, this function puts professional organizations in the position of not only transmitting such norms, but also establishing and perpetuating them.

Songwriters also depend on mentors and sponsors—often veteran writers—who help them learn the "ins and outs" of Nashville songwriting and help them to build professionally advantageous relationships. Hosts of open mic nights sometimes fulfill this role by structuring their open mic procedures in a way that facilitates this learning for writers. Publishers can fulfill mentor/sponsor roles by helping writers connect with potential collaborators, but they also inhabit an important gatekeeper role, in that they have decision-making power over which songwriters get contracted as staff writers for publishing houses.

Implications for Practice

This research was intended to provide an initial, exploratory understanding of the professional and learning activities of Nashville songwriters, with the aim of understanding how learning within this particular professional context might inform the classroom teaching and learning that occurs in more formal venues (i.e., songwriting classes in K–12 and college/university settings). Of course, the learning "ends" for a professional songwriter pursuing commercial success in a particular market may differ substantially from those of a student enrolled in a songwriting class, so not all of these findings will "translate" directly to the K–12 or university classroom. Nevertheless, some of the learning practices and insights from this study might prove useful to songwriting teachers as they design instructional experiences for their students.

As discussed above, the songwriters in this study did not describe their learning exclusively in informal terms. In addition to the informal practices that allowed them to refine

their craft, these participants availed themselves of more formal learning opportunities (classes, workshops, private lessons). Learning the craft of songwriting seems to depend on both types of learning, and songwriting teachers may wish to consider how this influences the design of their courses, remembering that Folkestad (2006) drew a distinction between formal-vs.-informal *situations* (sites where learning occurs) and formal-vs.-informal *practices* (the activities of learning). Songwriting classes are inevitably positioned in formal *situations,* but teachers of these classes can incorporate both formal and informal learning *practices* within them.

For the participants in this study, the informal learning available to them through the practice of co-writing was essential to their growth as songwriters. Co-writing afforded them opportunities for both "group" and "peer-directed" learning (Green, 2002), as well as the kind of "peer coaching" that occurs as songwriters act as "checks and balances" on one another within the creative process. Songwriting teachers may wish to consider how incorporating frequent co-writing activities within their songwriting classes could provide spaces for informal learning among participants that enhance and complement the more formal learning practices that occur elsewhere in the curriculum.

One advantage of co-writing that teachers may wish to consider is the availability of "instant feedback," as described by Will. In the songwriting curriculum model outlined by Kratus (2013), peers have the opportunity to teach and learn from one another by exchanging feedback in the "songwriters' circle." Each week, class members share either completed or in-progress songs with one another; after each performance, the class engages discussion of the song that was shared, considering what worked and did not work, what might improve it, and so forth. This feedback, though instructive, happens after the song (or partial song) is created, whereas the "instant feedback" of co-writing is embedded within the process of writing the song.

The real-time nature of this learning is also what allows for the exposure to different styles and techniques that writers in this study acknowledged. Though retrospective conversations, such as those that occur in Kratus' "songwriters' circle," may offer opportunities for songwriters to "compare notes" about the processes and techniques they employ as they write, co-writing affords songwriters a venue for experiencing and "trying on" each others' approaches.

Findings regarding participants' choice of co-writing partners may be of interest to songwriting teachers when considering designing co-writing activities in the classroom. While these writers took a variety of traits into consideration when selecting their collaborators, two that seem particularly important to learning are (a) that co-writers have complementary strengths, and (b) that co-writers' respective skill levels be matched enough to allow for comfort and productivity in the writing room. Teachers might consider these traits when deciding how to pair students for collaborative writing assignments in their classes. When assigning co-writing activities, it may be important to place students in pairs or teams with students whose strengths are complementary. Writers' reflections about the benefits and consequences of "writing up" versus writing with "your tribe" deserve consideration as well. In classroom co-writing activities, teachers may need to take care that pairs' or teams' skills are not so disparate that the creative process is inhibited.

The common practice of pairing young artist-writers with more experienced veteran writers provides an example of how more explicit teaching can be embedded within the activity of co-writing. In these sessions, there is an expectation that the veteran writer will mentor the younger writer, but also an expectation that the two together will generate a creative product. This model could be a candidate for adoption/adaptation for songwriting teachers. In addition to assigning students activities in which they co-write with one another, teachers may wish to

incorporate teacher-student co-writing activities. It bears mention that those who find themselves teaching songwriting may not have an extensive background in songwriting or consider themselves expert songwriters—and that some intimidation around the idea of being the "elder writer" in such a situation may result. I would encourage these teachers to view their musical training, even if it was not focused on songwriting, as a form of expertise worthy of sharing with student songwriters. Much of the knowledge acquired through "traditional" music study—including, for example, understanding of form and structure—can be adapted and applied to the work of songwriting. Also, as Green (2002) asserted,

> one of the most needed and most helpful ways to move forwards, for those teachers who
> believe in the potential of informal popular music learning practices, but who have *not*
> had personal experience with them, is to put themselves into the position of young
> popular musicians, and try out some informal learning practices themselves. (p. 214)

Engaging in co-writing activities with students may present an opportunity for exactly this kind of experience.

Co-writing activity in Nashville depends on certain behavioral and environmental norms—the expectation of a positive, "no-free" environment, the elimination of distractions, the development of trust between co-writers—that the writers in this study have come to understand and adopt through their assimilation to their professional environment. The success of student co-writing experiences likely depends on a similar set of norms that guide students' collaborative interactions—but students in a semester- or year-long course may not enjoy the same luxury of time to "figure out" these norms for themselves. Certainly, students stand to gain from having directly experienced the negotiations—and, at times, the disagreement/conflict—involved in collaborative creative activity, but should not be expected to do so without guidance. Teachers

may wish to set aside time, in songwriting classes, to teach about the norms that help such collaborative endeavors to be successful.

Though co-writing experiences may confer some important benefits for student songwriters and their learning, it is important to remember that participants in this study also emphasized the importance of continuing to write alone. For some writers, taking the time to develop their own independent voices was part of what contributed to their ability to be effective contributors in co-writing sessions. In songwriting classrooms, then, co-writing experiences should be one part of a "balanced diet" alongside other activities. In addition to solo writing, the other independent practices that seemed to be common to multiple songwriters in this study—listening/analyzing and accumulating ideas—could inform the activities songwriting teachers design for their students. Some of the songwriters in this study designed independent practices for themselves based on their perceptions of their own needs and goals for growth. Student songwriters may do the same thing, and teachers may wish to create space in their classrooms for students to share with one another the "tricks" they have devised.

These findings yield insight not only for teachers of songwriting, but also for music educators in general. In particular, the finding that these participants' learning draws on both formal and informal modes of learning demands attention. How can other formal learning *situations* become sites where both formal and informal *practices* are enacted? It is important to remember that, though some literature (Kratus, 2007; Williams, 2011; Woody, 2007) has called into question the traditional large-ensemble-based model of music education in the United States, these arguments do not necessarily preclude the existence of band, choir, and orchestra classes in secondary schools. Rather than dismissing these models wholesale, music educators might ask how the combination of formal and informal learning practices that enriches songwriters'

creative/professional lives might find reflection in the K–12 music classroom. How can the "peer-directed learning" and "group learning" that typify popular musicians' heuristic pursuits find their way into school music classrooms—including band, choir, and orchestra classrooms? How could ensemble classes that have been so predicated on the expertise of the teacher or "director" become spaces, like the co-writing space, in which students are able to use their complementary strengths to teach and learn from one another? How can the "instant feedback" and "peer coaching" that are available through co-writing experiences be adapted and applied in other musical-educational sub-domains? Collaborative composition—whether it takes the form of what is called "songwriting" or not—may be a powerful tool to use in a wide variety of music classrooms, and the creative/behavioral norms that guide the work of this study's participants might be instructive not only for those engaged in songwriting, but also for those engaged in any collaborative creative task. The addition of songwriting as a course offering would likely open up spaces in which a broader variety of students felt welcome in school music classrooms; however, the plausibility of making such a curricular addition varies from state to state, district to district, school to school. Absent the possibility of such structural reforms, however, music educators retain the power to incorporate songwriting into their classrooms and capitalize upon the rich opportunities it provides for self-expression, peer coaching, and musical growth.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study's findings provide an initial, broad view of how professional songwriters are inducted into, and continue to learn within, the practice of professional songwriting in Nashville. These insights contribute to a growing body of research that examines the learning practices of popular musicians in a variety of sub-domains, genres, styles, and so forth. Important questions

remain, however, and further scholarship could help deepen and refine the understandings generated in this exploratory study.

First, Nashville is only one of songwriting's professional "hubs." New York and Los Angeles (and, perhaps, Austin), as reflected in some of the comments from songwriters in this study, are also considered centers for this particular musical activity. Presumably, songwriting is just as "situated" in these other locations as it is in Nashville. Conducting similar studies in these other "hubs" would help to create a more comprehensive picture of how professional songwriters learn across these centers of songwriting activity. Additionally, a few of the Nashville-based songwriters in this study alluded to the fact that their work occasionally takes them to Los Angeles, which perhaps indicates that the "borders" between these "hubs" are blurring and/or vanishing. Future research in this area may have to account for this phenomenon; it also might be beneficial to focus on the activities of writers who bounce between "hubs" in order to understand whether there are discernible differences in the way these practitioners act in different situated environments.

In future work, it would be helpful for scholars to focus on individual components of the broad picture painted here in order to gain deeper understanding of specific phenomena. For example, while songwriters' comments in this study identified certain "important actors" in songwriters' professional lives in Nashville, the interrelations of these important actors could form the exclusive focus for future inquiry, perhaps using social network analysis (Marin & Wellman, 2011) as a tool for gaining deeper understanding. Future studies also could examine more deeply the verbal feedback that songwriters exchange in co-writing sessions, using a tool like Kruger's (1992) "transactive talk" theory as a lens.

My work in this study resided mostly at the "observer" end of the "participant-observer" continuum. One technique I considered using but was not able to realize in this study was to engage in co-writing myself. Bennett (2014) employed this technique in a portion of his dissertation on collaborative songwriting, but these sessions were situated in a different professional environment in the United Kingdom, and Bennett's research questions did not specifically focus on teaching and learning. Studies that capture the experiences and learning of researchers who position themselves as participants in the co-writing process would offer a different perspective on how co-writing spaces serve as sites for teaching and learning.

It may be useful to follow in Green's (2002, 2008) footsteps by developing a follow-up research project (Green, 2008) in which the findings from a study of popular musicians (Green, 2002) are applied in the development of a curriculum and then "tested" in a school setting. Though the findings of this study have the potential to inform the practice of songwriting teachers, their transfer to classroom practice cannot be fully understood until such transfer is attempted and studied. It may be beneficial, for example, to implement a series of co-writing projects with students and explore how students' interactions in co-writing sessions compare with the interactions of professional songwriters engaged in the same activity.

Though this information was not germane to the research questions of the present study, I did learn through interviews that a handful of this study's participants had earned undergraduate degrees in music, and one of them earned a master's degree in composition. Another songwriter had not studied music formally, but is now employed by a university music department as a faculty member and charged with the task of building a songwriting program. These individuals could offer valuable insight regarding the relationships—and tensions—between their experiences as popular/commercial musicians and their experiences with music in more

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"traditional" environments. Given music educators' interest in "bridging the gap" between the Western European anchoring of both tertiary music study and music in K–12 schools, studying the experiences of these individuals who have lived in both worlds could yield helpful understanding.

Closing Thoughts

Though much work remains for those who hope to understand how songwriters learn, my hope is that this study offers two important benefits. First, and most important, I hope that these findings will help interested music teachers feel more inspired and equipped to design songwriting learning experiences for their students. Songwriting is "new territory" for many music teachers who were prepared primarily to lead large ensembles, and I hope that the development of knowledge around how songwriting is learned will help teachers feel informed enough that the development and implementation of songwriting courses and programs seems achievable. Second, I hope this work will contribute meaningfully to the work of scholars who are interested in how popular musicians of various kinds learn and refine their craft. With so many styles and genres (sub-domains) in the larger domain of popular music, each with its attendant set of norms and practices, a world's worth of work awaits scholars who wish to help teachers bring a wide variety of musics into their classrooms and teach them in ways that are informed by how this music is made in the "real world." If we are committed to creating music classrooms in which all students feel welcomed, valued, affirmed, challenged, and cared for, this work is essential.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX: PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHIES

Aaron grew up in Middle Tennessee and attended a university in the greater Nashville area. Early in his career, he sought a career as a full-time staff writer on contract with a publishing company, but eventually decided that he would prefer to focus on being a singer-songwriter and independent recording artist—though he still co-writes with Nashville colleagues on occasion. He records about one album a year and tours domestically "wherever's a 10-hour drive from Nashville" and in Europe. He has lived in Nashville proper since the early 2000s.

Andy caught the songwriting "bug" when he began writing new lyrics to melodies he heard on the radio around age 13 or 14. In high school, he learned to play basic guitar and began writing his own songs. After college, he played in a country-rock band in Los Angeles for several years, but was drawn to the possibility of making his living exclusively as a songwriter, prompting a move to Nashville in his early 20s. The first professional contact he made upon his arrival became an important friend and mentor with whom he eventually wrote a number-one hit song. Andy has also taught songwriting at several local universities.

Brooke moved to Nashville in the early 1990s. She received her first publishing deal and her first "cut" later that decade. She also has owned her own company since the late 1990s. Though she has been a dedicated country writer from the start, she recently has started collaborating with some writers in Los Angeles on some more pop-oriented material. Her goal is to have songs cut in each of four decades. She has "covered" the 1990s, the 2000s, and the 2010s already; she hopes to "stick around" long enough to have a song cut in the 2020s.

Corinne, who is a formally-trained composer with a master's degree from a well-regarded conservatory in the United States, "fell into" songwriting in the late 1990s, when an emotional event in her life prompted her to write a song that, when she shared with others,

received enthusiastic affirmation. She traveled to Nashville to attend a songwriting workshop and fell in love with both songwriting and the city. She moved to Nashville to take a job teaching private piano lessons and has continued to pursue songwriting ever since, eventually securing a publishing deal and a management deal. She also teaches multiple songwriting classes in town.

Dale grew up in a nearby Southern state. He wrote songs and played in duos through his college years and beyond, during which he grew accustomed to being "*hated* in clubs and things" because he was "always doing original material." Dale's wife, sensing that songwriting was his true passion/calling, forced his hand by giving their landlord 30 days' notice and then announcing to Dale that they would be moving to Nashville. He moved to Nashville 1986; one of his first contacts and co-writers went on to be one of the most successful country artists of the 1990s.

Jim commutes to Nashville from a Midwestern state for a ten-day stint about every six weeks. Like many writers, he began writing parodies of songs on the radio at an early age. After holding a few day jobs, Jim pursued a music career as a member of touring bands. He visited Nashville occasionally during those years, but became truly involved in the "scene" when a local chapter of a Nashville-based professional organization was established in his town. He has been commuting to Nashville since the mid-1990s.

Lauren moved to Nashville about two years ago to begin studying at a university in the greater Nashville area. She and her co-writer, Nathan, have known each other since they were in middle school together, well before moving to Nashville.

Liam has been making music professionally for nearly 25 years; in his words, he has been "happily obscure for a very long time." After many years as a touring musician, he sought a way to continue making music without needing to be on the road, so he could be more present in his

family's life. He and his wife relocated, with their then-nine-month-old daughter, twelve years ago. Despite some early successes, Liam intimated that it had been a long road to establishing stability as a songwriter in Nashville—after twelve years in Nashville, he felt that had really only been the preceding year that things had "picked up" for him.

Margaret moved to Nashville in the early 1980s after losing a job, collecting unemployment, and deciding to make a career change. She had a big "cut" about a decade later. She has never had a publishing contract, but continues to write and makes part of her living by teaching songwriting and hosting open mic and writers' nights.

Nathan's parents supported his music career by driving him back and forth to Nashville from a nearby state on a monthly basis when he was in his mid-teens. He moved to Nashville on his own when he was 17. He and his co-writer Lauren have known each other since middle school; Nathan reported that, as a result, the two are so "in sync" that they sometimes generate exactly the same melodic and lyric ideas.

Payton grew up in Hawaii and California. She was first noticed for her vocal gifts around age eight or nine, when a producer heard her singing as the followed her mother through the grocery store. Her parents moved their family to Nashville when Payton was 15 so she could pursue a career in place where she was "surrounded by songwriters."

Rachel lives in Iceland, not Nashville, but she visits and co-writes with her sister Zoe on occasion. In Iceland, Rachel plays and sings in a duo and co-writes with her duo partner. She has been writing songs since her childhood, and she and Zoe first co-wrote a song when they were in their late 20s.

Raven had already begun to pursue a career as an artist-writer when she moved to Nashville in her mid-teens. She finished high school while beginning her full-time Nashville

career and now studies at a university in the Nashville area. Before making the full move, she visited Nashville regularly, and her manager helped her make connections and arrange co-writing appointments.

Sam has been writing songs since his teens and pursued a music career in early adulthood, but found himself married, with a family and a steady job, by his late 20s, and he focused on those priorities at that time. Later, when he lived in California, he got involved with a band for whom he wrote an entire album. In the early 2010s, he and his wife decided on a whim to move to Nashville so he could pursue a career as a professional songwriter. In our interviews, Sam often mentioned how his years of experience as a businessman influenced his strategies for pursuing success as a songwriter in Nashville.

Shane began his music career at a young age, playing in bands with his father. He performed with a duo in high school and college, toured with some bands, and finally settled down in Florida for a couple decades, where he trained to be a producer at a studio. When the studio's success dried up, some colleagues encouraged him to move to Nashville, where he lived and worked for more than a decade. He recently has moved back to his home state, having decided that he can maintain his music career from his home and still make occasional trips to Nashville for writing appointments and performances.

Sophie is a writer who connected with Nathan about a year ago. Both Nathan and Lauren pointed to lyric writing as one of the strengths that makes her an asset as a co-writer.

Will began performing as an actor and singer during his childhood. He took lessons from a music teacher who had experiences writing commercial songs and film scores, and this teacher decided to teach Will about songwriting. As a young adult, Will commuted to New York City for his acting career, recording commercials and voiceovers. He also traveled to Nashville

occasionally to participate in the songwriting "scene." He studied music composition in college, intending to pursue a career in film scoring, since this combined his love of acting with his passion for music. Later, after getting married, he and his wife decided that it would be cost-effective to move to Nashville so Will could pursue his music career there. He has lived in Nashville for three years.

Zoe commuted to Nashville for almost 15 years, attending workshops, making co-writing appointments, and pitching songs. When her husband retired from military service two years ago, they chose to move to Nashville full-time in support of her career.

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