

Songwriting 101 with Hoppie Vaughan by Rebecca Morrison

In 2016 Hoppie Vaughan was invited to speak to a classroom of school kids about songwriting. He went in well-prepared with three thoughtful questions: “Where do songs come from?” “Why would you write a song?” “Why do you like a certain song?”

He soon realized that his young audience didn’t want a songwriting lesson. They wanted to hear him perform his songs. Songwriters and performers are well-acquainted with this kind of audience enthusiasm. “Just get on with the show!” is a compliment to people who write and perform songs.

Vaughan, who is a singer, songwriter, and musician in Roanoke, Virginia, has nearly 40 years’ experience as a songwriter and is currently working on an original, 10-track album. What better time to talk to him about songwriting?

RM: What was the first song you wrote and what inspired you to write it?

HV: Hard to remember the actual song, but I’m sure it was bad. The first band I played in was led by a guitar player who wrote songs. I thought, I can do that and do it better. So I started learning how to write and so on. Living in Nashville was a great experience to nurture that; lots of writers and co-writing everywhere. That’s really where I learned to write songs, and I kept at it.

RM: What are Hoppie’s essential elements of a great song?

HV: The melody has to be very strong. The melody and feel of the song usually come first for me, but there are no rules here. That’s just what I hear first in a song; what draws me in. I believe this grabs the listener first. Other musicians and non-musicians may not listen like I do; something pleasing to the ear that grabs you. Once I have a great melody and feel, I try to match lyrics that have a similar mood. I keep a list of lyrics, lines, and song titles that I scan through regularly. I like using very sharp-pointed words and syllables to get your attention. “The postal cards ya sent are plastered all up on my GE refrigerator” is a line from “Home Forever” on my upcoming album. That’s a familiar and relatable image to a lot of people. From “Hambone” on my second album, “People come from miles around to see Daddy slap his hands across his dungarees”, “David whooped Goliath, brought him to his knees”, “Frog jumped Acropolis and cut the cheese”. This lyric doesn’t mean anything unless you think about it too hard. It’s also a lot of fun to sing. I stay away from throw away words that don’t say much or have been overused or are old clichés, such as “ooo baby, when I look in your eyes” or “I think I’m falling in love with you.” It’s all been done, so I try to be different without over-trying. I like to use the least amount of lyrics to get a big point across. Subject matter is also important. Make it similar to other songs, but also make it new and different and fresh.

RM: How long does it take you between creating a melody and applying lyrics to it?

HV: Sometimes it all comes together in a few minutes, and sometimes it takes days or weeks. I’ve woken from sleep before with the entire song in my head. I usually just sit around and noodle on my guitar, with a few chords and start to put the lyrics to the melody. Sometimes, I just blurt out syllables along with a piece and see what comes out. The mood of the piece of music will determine the subject matter. Sometimes in conversation, somebody will say something that jumps out as a song title, for instance, “Sentimental Whiskey”. My buddy offered me a shot of whiskey from the last bottle he shared with his father who had died a

few years earlier. He said he hadn't had a drink from that bottle of whiskey since his daddy died, so it was "Sentimental Whiskey". I thought, "What a great song idea!"

RM: When you write a song, do you do any kind of demo at home with the various mixed parts; meaning, how do you construct each part before you take it to the studio?

HV: Yes, this is very important. Do as much preproduction as you can. Play the song live, a lot, to work it all out. Gauge audience reaction. I never announce, "This is an original," before I play the song. Sometimes, I just don't say anything and play a song I wrote right in with the other covers. The people who are listening will usually come up and ask, "Who wrote that song? You did? It sounds like blah, blah, blah (name an artist)." When I say that I wrote that, they are pleasantly surprised and ask to buy a CD. I love that! You are usually on the clock when you go into a studio, so be ready and know what you want. Don't dilly-dally around if ya don't know what's next.

RM: Do you allow the other instrumentalists to take your song and put their artistic flair on their own part?

HV: Absolutely, I like to give people the freedom to play their instrument. If ya can't do that, then they shouldn't be there in the first place.

RM: Do you write using an acoustic or an electric guitar?

HV: It's mostly from my old nylon-stringed guitar that my songs come from. Sandra (wife) bought that guitar for me in 1978.

RM: You said it's easy to write dark songs, but you prefer to write positive songs, such as your new song "Life Worth Living" which starts out sad but ends hopeful. Why is that?

HV: I guess lots of people can relate to dark songs; heartbreak, addiction, death. I write about death but in a fun way! People can relate to bad stuff, I guess. That's life.

RM: Who are your top 5 favorite songwriters and why?

HV: This is a hard one. I like Paul Simon's abstract approach. Kebmo is good; you can tell it's from the heart. Stevie Wonder I've always loved. Donald Fagan of Steely Dan is up there for me. Burt Bacharach; I love his stuff even though it's cheesy. People like cheese! I'll have to think about this one more. Oh. Me! You have to like your own songs.

RM: Is there a song or two out there, not your own that you think is a perfect song?

HV: Probably not a perfect song... nah. Then, we could all just stop writing if that was the case.

RM: Advice to hopeful songwriters:

HV: Master your instrument as best you can. This will help you develop your own unique style. Most good songwriters are good players. There's more than G, C, D. Then, noodle around on your instrument as much as you can. Something will come. This will drive your friends and family crazy! Keep your instrument at your favorite chair so you have to pick it up to sit; may not work for a grand piano. Keep a personal recorder close to capture your ideas when they come. Ideas are like dreams, very real and vivid at first; then they fade

away. Most smart phones have a recorder and there are many apps that do this. Keep a book of your songs. I use a pencil on paper and never erase any line or thought. Write the song over as many times as it takes. To me the process that happens from brain to paper is part of the magic. I keep manila files labeled in alphabetical order. Transfer to a computer for cataloging when you think it's finished. Computer files can get lost. Play out at an open mic or at songwriter events as much as you can. Never plagiarize!! Keep at it to get better. Rewrite. Finish. Rewrite. Finish. Then, leave yourself alone. I rest, meditate, or catnap while writing a song, when I hit a wall or can't think of anything to add. Morning is a great time to write when your mind is clear. Songwriting is a craft, remember? It's like painting or sculpting. Finish each project if you can, then move on to the next one. I have written a lot of bad songs to get to the good ones.

Without a doubt, those school kids were eager to experience the instant gratification that comes from hearing a song and absorbing its words and melodies. Perhaps, the answer to the questions Vaughan asked them is short. When individual feelings and experiences and outside musical influences coalesce into the words and melodies of a song, it's hard to keep that song hidden inside yourself. You feel, and you want others to feel, so you write it down and play it. Hopefully your audience will be as eager for you to get on with the show as a classroom full of school kids.