ResearchSPAce

http://researchspace.bathspa.ac.uk/

Please scroll down to view the document.

Chapter 6

Constraint, Collaboration and Creativity in Popular Songwriting Teams

Joe Bennett

Popular music has at its economic, musical and cultural centre a single item of intellectual property – the pop song. Over many decades of consumption, popular song has established a set of musical and literary constraints within which creativity operates. These constraints are arrived at by economic and democratic means, being rooted in the quasi-evolutionary process of natural selection engendered by commercial markets, most easily demonstrable through 'the charts'. In popular music, as in any art form, new artists can and do challenge established creative constraints, but what is perhaps remarkable about western popular song is how little the core structural characteristics of mainstream songs have deviated from some of the norms established in the early to mid twentieth century, despite the rapid technological, cultural and social change that drives the popular music industry.

The process of creating popular song differs significantly from that for the majority of instrumental art music in two important respects: firstly, it is a partly literary act, songs having lyrics; secondly, it is extremely common for the composition to be co-written. Historically, around half of US and UK 'hits' are written by collaborative teams, most commonly comprising two individuals.[1] At the time of writing (late 2010), current industry practice in the UK is for the majority of pop singles to be written collaboratively, with very few contemporaneous top 10 hits being written by individuals.[2] This chapter focuses on the collaborative processes used by songwriting teams within the constraints of song form, and particularly on the 'negotiated creativity' that is, I contend, a prerequisite for the successful function of most songwriting teams.

Before we address the central question of *how* songs are written collaboratively, we must identify the nature of the created object itself, and ask at a musically specific level 'what is a song?' Defining the term appears simple enough: Chambers[3] defines 'song' as 'a set of words, short poem, etc to

---

[1]   Terry F. Pettijohn II and Shujaat F. Ahmed, 'Songwriting; loafing or creative collaboration?: A comparison of individual and team written billboard hits in the USA', *Journal of Articles in Support of the Null Hypothesis*, 7/1 (2010), 2.

[2]   PRS for Music, Database search results, http://www.prsformusic.co.uk (2010).

[3]   Chambers, *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary* (London, 1996), http://www.chambersharrap.co.uk/chambers/features/chref/chref.py/main?query=song&title=21st.

be sung, usually with accompanying music'. However, even if we accept the broad classification that the word means simply 'that which is sung' (excluding the small but significant number of instrumental hits that Anglo-American popular music has produced since the 1950s), we need to locate the studied object among many sub-genres, including hymn, lieder, opera, pop song, folk song and children's songs.

This chapter focuses on the Anglo-American commercial mainstream popular song since the 1950s, and more specifically on the 'single', that is, a musical/literary work intended to be appreciated[4] in isolation, not as part of a long-duration listener experience such as a musical theatre show, opera or concept album. There are several reasons for this choice. Firstly, selecting songs intended for commercial consumption increases the likelihood that the composer/s will be trying actively to engage the listener, so creative decisions will share this common incentive.[5] This contrasts with more 'pure' artistic self-expression in (typically amateur) songwriting, where creative goals may be conflicting, highly personal or nebulous. Secondly, commercial popular song, despite its cultural ubiquity, has had little study applied to the process of its creation. Previous research studies[6] have focused on instrumental composition rather than exclusively on songwriting, often in an educational setting, where participants are, by definition, amateur composers. These individuals may therefore have a different set of creative imperatives and constraints from songwriters who are incentivised to create a 'hit', or at least a song that will appeal to a significant numbers of listeners. Thirdly, commercial popular song has an attendant measure of its effectiveness in the form of popular music charts. Originally these were calculated through sales of sheet music, then subsequently by physical sales of singles, and now by downloads or online streams; the music 'chart' is a powerful metric when defining trends in song, covering as it does some 80 or more years of Anglo-American hits. Apart from (helpfully) ranking the most successful songs in order of listener popularity, the practice of using charts as a metric for what constitutes song norms may mediate some of the inevitable subjectivity of musical taste among individuals regarding what makes a 'good song'. Fourthly, songwriters by definition need to write lyrics; in copyright terms, a lyric is usually considered to be a literary work representing 50 per cent of the song. On a pragmatic level, studying the process of collaborative lyric-writing provides text-

---

    4   Given that singles are usually intended for purchase, perhaps 'consumed' would be a better word.

    5   Greg Clydesdale, 'Creativity and competition: The Beatles', *Creativity Research Journal*, 18/2 (April 2006), 129.

    6   John Kratus, 'A time analysis of the compositional processes used by children ages 7 to 11', *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 37/1 (1989), 5. Pamela Burnard and Betty Anne Younker, 'Mapping pathways: Fostering creativity in composition', *Music Education Research*, 4/2 (2002), 245–61. Jeanne Bamberger, 'The development of intuitive musical understanding: A natural experiment', *Psychology of Music*, 31/1 (January 2003), 7–36.

based observational data that are considerably easier to track than the complex music-only decision-making pathways identified by Burnard and Younker.[7]

I contend that the popular song is defined – artistically and musically – by the market forces that perpetuate its survival. This is not commercial cynicism, but rather an extension of the Darwinian model applied by Csikszentmihalyi[8] to all forms of creativity. In Csikszentmihalyi's 'systems model', a creator creates new work that is validated by a 'field' of experts. If validated, it goes on to join the 'domain' of prior works, which in turn will influence existing and future creators. This definition of creativity (that a work must not only be original but also must be an influence on other creators) has rather a high threshold, much higher perhaps than the simple musical/literary uniqueness required to define a popular song as 'original' in copyright terms. Boden distinguishes between creativity that is original to its creator and creativity that is globally original:

> [We should] make a distinction between "psychological" creativity and "historical" creativity (P-creativity and H-creativity, for short). P-creativity involves coming up with a surprising, valuable idea that's new to the person who comes up with it. It doesn't matter how many people have had that idea before. But if a new idea is H-creative, that means that (so far as we know) no one else has had it before: it has arisen for the first time in human history. Clearly, H-creativity is a special case of P-creativity. […] But for someone who is trying to understand the *psychology* of creativity, it's P-creativity that's crucial. Never mind who thought of the idea first: how did *that* person manage to come up with it, given that *they* had never thought of it before?[9]

If we apply Csikszentmihalyi's definition more loosely, and allow for the 'domain' of work to include all popular music that is released,[10] then all original songs are creative (and in Boden's terms, arguably always H-creative). Thus, case studies do not necessarily need to beget hits in order to provide useful information about

---

[7]   Considering that several of Burnard and Younker's observational subjects were songwriters, it is notable that their research does not substantially address lyric creation. This may be due to the authors' stated intent to study 'composers', but it does perhaps demonstrate that lyric writing is considered by some to be an insignificant part of the songwriter's creative process, despite its apparent equal value to the composition (at least in copyright terms).

[8]   Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, 'Society, culture, and person: A systems view of creativity'. In: *The Nature of Creativity: Contemporary Psychological Perspectives* (Cambridge, 1988), 325–39.

[9]   Margaret Boden, *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms*, 2nd edn (Abingdon Routledge, 2004), 2.

[10]   By 'released' I mean that someone has spent time and money on preparing the song for consumption, typically through recording and distributing it, implicitly on the basis of a (usually economic) return. This usefully filters out beginner songwriters who may not have achieved sufficient skills or experience to provide helpful interview or study subjects.

collaborative songwriting as long as any work/process being studied is undertaken by experienced songwriters who understand 'song craft'.

To illustrate the evolution of creative constraints (within which both H- and P-creativity can exist), let us analyse the time-duration of hit single recordings, and compare track length over several decades, using the top 10 best-selling singles in the UK from the five decades from 1960 to 2000.[11] The longest duration of these is Bryan Adams's *Everything I Do (I Do For You)*, at 6 minutes and 33 seconds (6:33); the shortest is The Beatles' *Can't Buy Me Love* at 2:13. The mean average track length per decade varies from 2:43 (1960s) to 4:07 (1990s). Interestingly, after the 1960s the figures for track length show insignificant variation over many years. The mean average track lengths per decade are 2:43 (1960s), 4:03 (1970s), 4:04 (1980s), 4:07 (1990s) and 3:49 (2000s) – with a standard deviation of only 0:51 for the whole sample set over 50 years. Given the large amount of popular music that is produced, the large number of consumers and the market forces at play, we can infer that song duration is a market-defined norm, and that substantially longer or shorter songs did not 'survive' in their environment – that is, the centre of the commercial mainstream. The requisite economy of communication thus becomes part of the songwriter's skillset: 'we must accomplish our aims and tell our entire story *in a time frame of about three minutes* (plus or minus). Every word, every note must count'.[12]

Duration is just one example of a constraint, and I choose it for illustration because, being low-bandwidth numeric data, it is a simple parameter to measure. To take lyric themes as another example, 80 per cent of the hits cited above deal with lyrics related to romantic love – this is something of a truism in popular music and a statistic that does not vary significantly by decade if other similar metrics are used (for example, the Billboard hot 100 chart). Listed below are typical constraints relating to form, key, literary elements, tempo, time signature and melodic pitch range,[13] most of which show very little overall variation in their prevalence in UK/US chart hits of the last 50 years.[14]

- first-person sympathetic protagonist/s, portrayed implicitly by the singer;
- repeating titular choruses (where the song is in chorus form), usually containing the melodic pitch peak of the song, summarizing the overall meaning of the lyric;

---

[11]   Joe Bennett, 'How long, how long must we sing this song?', *Joe Bennett music blog*, 2011, http://joebennett.net/2011/05/03/how-long-how-long-must-we-sing-this-song/.

[12]   Jimmy Webb, *Tunesmith: Inside the Art of Songwriting* (London, 1999), 37.

[13]   Joe Bennett, 'Collaborative songwriting – the ontology of negotiated creativity in popular music studio practice', *Journal of the Art of Record Production 2010*, 5 (July 2011), http://tinyurl.com/jarp-bennett-2011.

[14]   Shaun Ellis and Tom Engelhardt, 'Visualizing a hit – InfoVis final project', *Can Visualizing 50 Years' Worth of Hit U.S. Pop Song Characteristics Help us Discover Trends Worthy of Further Investigation*? 2010, http://sites.google.com/site/visualizingahit/home.

- rhyme – usually at the end of lyric phrases;
- one, two or three human characters (or a collective 'we');
- an instrumental introduction of less than 20 seconds;
- inclusion of the title in the lyric;
- sung between a two-octave range from bottom C to top C (C2–C4), focusing heavily on the single octave A2–A3;
- thematic lyric content relating to (usually romantic) human relationships;
- use of underlying 4-, 8- and 16-bar phrases, with occasional additions or subtractions;
- based on verse/chorus form or AABA form;
- 4/4 time;
- one diatonic or modal key;
- between two and four minutes in length.

Over decades, many songs will have been written that fall outside these norms, for example, longer than five minutes, or dealing with non-romantic subject matter, but these songs are statistically less likely to be mainstream hits. It therefore follows that experienced songwriters will be familiar with these constraints even if they choose occasionally to break some of them according to artistic impulse. Returning briefly to our simple example of track duration, we can infer that songwriters, at least those hoping for a mainstream hit, can reasonably be expected to work within the creative constraint that song recordings should be longer than two minutes and shorter than five. Even specialist/niche genres of popular music (club/dance music, folk-pop, metal, hip-hop) show a general statistical tendency to adhere to the majority of the norms listed above, with genre-defined deviations from mainstream characteristics. For example, metal is less likely than mainstream pop to deal with themes of romantic love; hip-hop is likely to use simpler chord progressions than metal; folk-pop is likely to contain more heavily developed lyrics than club/dance music; prog-rock is more likely to challenge mainstream norms of tempi or time signature than pop.

To frame this in evolutionary terms, popular song is in a constant state of mutation, with songs representing unique individuals who are 'born' with identifiable genetic characteristics (for example, form, tempo, lyric theme, harmonic rhythm, bar count, duration, melody) 'inherited' from the domain of existing successful/influential songs. Genres could be identified as 'species', which have evolved to suit their fan-base 'environment'. Characteristics of individual songs will vary, and are required to do so to avoid accusations of plagiarism, but they do not deviate so substantially that individuals cannot survive in their environment (or rather, if they do this, they 'die' in commercial terms). So, again using track duration as our illustrative example, a popular song lasting for 30 seconds, or even 30 minutes, would be very unlikely to be purchased by the public in large enough quantities to survive and therefore 'reproduce' by affecting the domain of existing work.

However, it is also reasonable to assume that songwriting is experiencing constant experimentation, and we can easily locate successful examples of occasional challenges to one or more norms. I use song duration as an example of a constraint with occasional deviations; Webb[15] applies similar logic to song form:

> If you can't say what you need or want to say with a verse/chorus/verse/bridge and *another* chorus, perhaps you should admit to yourself that you are working on an *experimental* song. [This] is a song wherein a writer has deliberately set out to "break the form".

Acknowledging that such songs are the exception rather than the rule, Webb concludes that (as he argues, 'evolved') conservatism is inherent in song form, at least for the moment:

> The traditional boundaries of the American song create a kind of benign tyranny […]. Perhaps [someone someday will] set popular songs free from what remains of formal restraint. There is no sign of such an annihilator on the horizon.

It appears, then, that only a small number of song innovations are strong enough to enter, and fewer still to dominate, the domain. Thus, market forces in the form of massed listener preferences over 'generations' of purchasing/chart/airplay cycles will 'naturally select' the characteristics that are most likely to ensure survival. Csikszentmihalyi's Individual-Field-Domain paradigm describes a constant cycle of creation, selection and, implicitly, rejection.

As the generations pass, some of the mutations in individual songs can self-propagate; examples include tempo variation (early 1990s dance music is generally faster than mid 1970s disco) and the increased use of 'four-chord loops' in the song accompaniment (measurably more common in top 10 hits in the 2000s than in any previous decade).[16] Sometimes an environmental change combined with a particularly successful mutation begets a dramatic shift in the dominant species; the most obvious example in popular song's evolution is the relatively sudden shift from AABA or 32-bar form (the form itself famously derided by Adorno)[17] in the early part of the twentieth century to chorus-form songs being dominant from the late 1950s onwards. Adorno's excoriating critique of popular music made the error of analysing one form (popular song) based on the analytical criteria of another (instrumental western art music), thus equating the simplicity of the former (in harmonic and structural terms) with banality. Not all critical writers have made the same mistake; William Mann's equally intellectualised

---

15   Webb, *Tunesmith*, 122–3.

16   Bennett, 'Collaborative songwriting'.

17   Theodore W. Adorno, 'On popular music', *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, IX (1941), 17–48, http://www.icce.rug.nl/~soundscapes/DATABASES/SWA/On_popular_music_1.shtml.

analysis of the early work of The Beatles[18] is cheerfully flattering as it analyses the harmonic and timbral aspects of the songs by judging them by the criteria of other popular music of the era.

Popular music being a market-driven art form, arguably existing within a complex and evolving 'youth culture', it may be impossible to identify accurately the manifold external environmental changes that may cause these changes in song form, but the changes themselves are easily statistically observable over time if a relatively robust metric is used. In searching for such drivers of change, we could speculate that the move toward chorus-based songs (from AABA form) is a result of a more assertive self-defining youth culture demanding greater musical immediacy (socio-cultural), or a result of consumer empowerment of a new postwar generation (socio-economic), or even as the result of the increased availability of legal and illegal stimulants such as amphetamine and caffeine (pharmacological). The approach taken here is to avoid such speculation and observe only the measurable musicological characteristics – and to identify these as creative constraints upon the songwriting team.

I reiterate here that this chapter focuses unashamedly on songs, and song characteristics, that have been defined by the popular mainstream. This is only one environment of many in popular music, and our mainstream has many tributaries. If market forces, in the form of single or download purchases, are a significant driver of song form evolution in chart hits, different factors may cause changes in other forms of popular music. For example, Noys[19] takes the aforementioned pharmacological approach, suggesting that particular recreational drugs drove tempo changes in dance music during the early 1990s:

> As [techno] arrived in Britain (1987–88) it began to be speeded up by those working in this idiom from around 120 BPM to around 150 BPM.[20] In fact at the time there were references to "speed house", describing the use of the drug meta-amphetamine to enjoy this music. Therefore, Hardcore Dance originated in a matrix which was not purely to do with the widespread availability of Ecstasy or "E" (an hallucinogenic known medically as MDMA) but also speed (the drug) and the desire for speed.[21]

Although Noys's implication (that drug choice affected tempo in an evolving new sub-form) is inevitably more speculative than mine, it is also difficult to

---

[18]   William Mann, '*The Times*: What songs The Beatles sang by William Mann', *The Times*, 27 December 1963, http://www.beatlesbible.com/1963/12/27/the-times-what-songs-the-beatles-sang-by-william-mann/.

[19]   Benjamin Noys, 'Into the "jungle"', *Popular Music*, 14/3 (1995), 322.

[20]   BPM = beats per minute. In classical terms the (usually) crotchet pulse of the music's tempo. The term BPM is the preferred language in popular music composition and production circles.

[21]   Here, Noys uses the term 'matrix' in the same way that I use the term 'environment'.

refute. Certainly it is measurably true that house music of the late 1980s had a higher average tempo than mainstream pop of the same era, and that many of the consumers of the music were drug users.

Even if one accepts the contention that song form is defined by constraint, constraints themselves are not necessarily a restriction on creativity, as Amabile[22] acknowledges; 'People will be more creative if you give them freedom to decide how to climb a particular mountain. You needn't let them choose which mountain to climb. In fact, clearly specified goals often enhance people's creativity'. To quote one professional songwriter I interviewed, his creativity operates clearly within the constraints of song form, rather than necessarily challenging the form itself:

> [as a songwriter] you're like a monkey in a zoo that's never known anything else – you just accept your territory. The box is kind of a given really: it's what you do in the box that is exciting.[23]

The need to create unique song ideas within the constraints of popular song 'norms' is an ever-present creative challenge for any songwriter. Deviate too far from the norms and the risk of the song 'failing' rises; stay too closely within them and the song may exhibit cliché – or even plagiarism – and fail anyway.[24] The popular music listener demands a limited bandwidth of novelty.

Why Collaboration?

Perhaps surprisingly, given the cultural significance ascribed to *individual* songwriters in the media, songwriting *teams* are responsible for an approximately equally large number of (number 1) hits in the UK/US charts of the last 50 years or so. Pettijohn and Ahmed ask – but perhaps fail to answer – the following questions in their statistical study of chart hits 1955–2009:

> Do groups, with their shared areas of expertise, create better songs than individuals working alone? Do songwriting individuals have to compromise their visions when working in groups, thereby producing a lower quality song?[25]

Pettijohn and Ahmed's statistical findings show that songwriting teams were responsible for approximately as many number one Billboard chart hits as

---

[22]   Teresa M. Amabile, 'How to kill creativity', *Harvard Business Review*, 76/5 (1998), 81.

[23]   Jez Ashurst, 'On collaborative songwriting', interview by Joe Bennett, audio, 2010.

[24]   Marade et al. define this as 'risk'; Angelo A. Marade, Jeffrey A. Gibbons and Thomas M. Brinthaupt, 'The role of risk-taking in songwriting success', *The Journal of Creative Behavior*, 41/2 (2007), 125–49.

[25]   Pettijohn and Ahmed, 'Songwriting; loafing or creative collaboration?'

individual songwriters, and that a two-person songwriting team is the most common group size. Beyond this, their inferences are speculative and perhaps a little specious, in that the research does not acknowledge the unknowable number of *unsuccessful* songs that contribute to the successful – and therefore measurable – division of number ones between collaborators and individuals.[26]

Thus, their conclusions regarding 'social loafing' (described as 'the likelihood of individuals contributing less when working on a task as part of a group than when working on a task alone')[27] are to be treated with caution: songs that are anything less than market-ready are unlikely to be successful anyway, and given the highly competitive nature of songwriting and the number of songs competing for dominance, any hypothetical loafer may not be part of a hit-creating team in the first place owing to the prior intervention of music industry 'gatekeepers' such as record labels and publishers. In the words of one songwriter:

> [as a professional] everyone you write with is talented. It goes without saying. I've never been in a room with a collaborator who's been signed [by a publishing company or record label] and thought "Hold on – how the hell did you get where you are?" They've all got something to bring to the table.[28]

If we compare Pettijohn and Ahmed's findings with quantitative evidence of publication, it appears that discussion of the songwriting act, arguably under-developed though it is in academe and in the media, disproportionately favours interest in individual songwriters rather than teams. Zollo[29] provides the largest single collection of interviews with world-famous songwriters, undertaken over more than 10 years. Of the 62 interviews in the collection, only two are with collaborative teams, and a further eight are with individuals who are known or partly known for collaboration. However, my main reason for undertaking research into collaborative songwriting as opposed to individual songwriting is a pragmatic one of observational methodology – it is easier to observe collaborative teams at work because the requisite need to communicate and negotiate creative ideas makes them manifest and more overtly observable. We cannot know the internal workings of an individual songwriter's mind (or that of any composer) without intervening, almost certainly destructively, in their working methods. Sloboda[30]

---

[26]   This unknown and forever lost 'cutting room floor' material is essential to the operation of Csikszentmihalyi's Systems Model and to the evolutionary process it implies, but it is in the nature of evolution that it only preserves examples of *successful* reproduction – unsuccessful individuals are lost to history. As the British author Douglas Adams once famously summarised the evolutionary process – 'that which survives, survives'.

[27]   Pettijohn and Ahmed, 'Songwriting loafing or creative collaboration?', 2.

[28]   Ashurst, 'On collaborative songwriting'.

[29]   Paul Zollo, *Songwriters on Songwriting* (Boston, MA, 1997).

[30]   John Sloboda, *The Musical Mind: The Cognitive Psychology of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 102–3.

identifies four possible methods by which we may understand the psychology of solo composition: examination of historical repertoire; interview with the composer; real-time observation; and analysis of improvisation. He discounts the first two categories as being too distant from the compositional act and subject to distortion; the fourth is a particular subset of performance that does not directly relate to a less instantaneous musical activity such as songwriting and is arguably not 'composition' in its truest sense. So we are left, in Sloboda's view, with real-time observation as the only way of studying the act of composition, by solo composers, at least:

> The only thing which [sic] gives a chance of working is to have a living composer speaking all his or her thoughts out loud to an observer or a tape-recorder while engaged in composition.[31]

Collins[32] takes this approach using verbal protocol methodologies, triangulating real-time reporting from the composer with computer 'save as' files and interview-based verification sessions. The results provide what he describes modestly as 'moments of insight [into] aspects of creative problem-solving'. Collins acknowledges the limitations of this method but attempts to circumvent some of them with the data-driven approach of using iterative 'save as' files from computer sequencer software. This does provide a usefully different evidence base for triangulation purposes, but may generate its own attendant problem of encouraging the researcher to focus on arguably non-compositional processes. Many of the comments made by Collins's subject (and the data generated by the MIDI files) suggest that the methodology has shifted the focus of study onto *arrangement* rather than *composition*. The dividing line between these two practices in instrumental art-music is far from clear, of course, particularly when composing for a large ensemble such as an orchestra.[33] Happily, for songwriters, the song and the arrangement/recording (or at least the final manifestation of it) are often isolated from each other; this is helped in part by the legalities and economics of music publishing, in which the song and its recording are separate copyrights in most western countries. That said, the phenomenon of the performance being easier to observe and analyse than the song is not unknown to songwriters, or to teachers of songwriting such as myself.[34]

---

[31]   John Sloboda, 'Do psychologists have anything useful to say about composition?' In: *Third European Conference of Music Analysis*, Montpellier, 1995, 6.

[32]   David Collins, 'Real-time tracking of the creative music composition process', *Digital Creativity*, 18/4 (December 2007), 239–56.

[33]   Or, in the case of Collins's observed composer, a software-based virtual orchestra on a computer workstation.

[34]   Joe Bennett, 'Performance and songwriting: The picture and the frame', UK Songwriting Festival website, 2009, http://www.uksongwritingfestival.com/2009/01/22/performance-and-songwriting-the-picture-and-the-frame/.

Observing Collaboration

So, having identified the nature of the object to be studied (song as opposed to recording), the musical genre in question (commercial mainstream popular song) and the type of compositional practice to be observed (collaborative songwriting), then the final remaining question is one of methodology. What approaches can provide the most meaningful and authentic evidence of the compositional processes used by collaborating songwriters?

Related to Sloboda's dismissal of three of his four possible approaches to understanding composition, I have identified elsewhere the difficulties of using interviews with songwriter-artists as the exclusive evidence base for studies of their creative process:

> mysteriousness […] is a cultural asset i.e. it is desirable for some songwriters, particularly singer-songwriters, to shroud their craft in romance and mystery. The majority of interviews with songwriters obviously feature those who are also artists, who will have an artistic persona to sell, and therefore a motive for concealing more mundane, contrived or even random aspects of the composition process that may be perceived by fans as unromantic. Many contemporary artists, even (current UK) singer-songwriters like Katie Melua, James Morrison, Lily Allen, James Blunt and Newton Faulkner, actually use backroom co-writers, but are incentivised to obfuscate their collaborative processes because of the need to sell the authenticity of the song – and therefore their own credibility as "songwriters".[35]

One other difficulty with Collins's verbal protocol methodology is that it is necessarily interventionist, requiring the composer to pause during composition in order to communicate the research evidence. Not only does this disrupt the compositional act, it can also make the composer ever more aware of the research process and thus contributes to the 'observation effect' (of participants altering their behaviour owing to the knowledge that they are being observed). This presupposes that a songwriter has agreed to be observed in the first place. Some songwriters I initially approached for potential interview were reluctant to take part, citing busy schedules, fear of some form of 'industrial espionage' and sometimes, even in the case of very successful songwriters, a remarkable degree of self-doubt that their collaborative processes would stand up to scrutiny by industry peers. There is no precedent among songwriters (or in the field of psychology research) for thorough real-time observation of the songwriting process.[36] Compounding these problems

---

[35]   Bennett, 'Collaborative songwriting', 11.

[36]   Here, I must acknowledge the detailed work of Jeanne Bamberger, whose experiments have included amateur songwriters. This work did undertake real-time observation and used a laboratory-based methodology that successfully isolated melodic selection from the rest of the creative process, albeit by substantially reducing the creative

was the fact that, in the highly competitive and economically driven environment of the music industry, there was no incentive for these busy songwriters to participate in unpaid academic research.

The US/UK music industry famously runs on informal 'networking' relationships,[37] and it was becoming increasingly clear in my early discussions with songwriters that they liked to work with individuals who were known to them, or recommended through existing industry contacts. Therefore it became necessary to build working relationships with a number of experienced collaborative songwriters, and then to use an observational process that would generate 'real' and useful original songs that would be as resistant as possible to the observation effect.

Therefore my evidence base for the study of collaborative songwriting processes uses three sources. Firstly, I act as co-researcher,[38] writing songs with many different collaborators, recording the process in real time, and interviewing the co-writer immediately retrospectively about our shared experience of the process. Secondly, I draw upon a large number of previously published interviews with successful songwriters, together with the limited (and certainly edited) footage of successful songwriters at work,[39] balancing these artefacts' arguable status as primary sources with the risk of participants and mediators romanticizing the creative process. Thirdly, I have referenced the manifold 'how-to' songwriting texts, most of which include at least a section on co-writing.[40]

Professional Collaboration

All commercial songwriting is an economically and creatively speculative activity. The songwriter cannot know during the creative process whether the song will be successful, and even successful songwriters may create many 'duds'; not every creative idea will work every time. Ashurst asserts that he and other successful pop songwriters are highly experimental in this context, actively seeking new and innovative ideas rather than working from formulae:

---

choices available to the composer. Jeanne Bamberger, 'The development of intuitive musical understanding: A natural experiment', *Psychology of Music*, 31/1 (2003), 7–36.

[37]   Keith R. Negus, 'The discovery and development of recording artists in the popular music industry' (Polytechnic of the South Bank, 1992), 99.

[38]   The term was used in this context by Sam Hayden and Luke Windsor, 'Collaboration and the composer: case studies from the end of the 20th century', *Tempo*, 61/240 (April 2007), 32, http://www.journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0040298207000113.

[39]   For example, Linda Brusasco (director), 'Secrets of the pop song – "ballad"' (BBC2, July 2011).

[40]   Chris Bradford and British Academy of Composers and Songwriters, *Heart & Soul: Revealing the Craft of Songwriting* (London, 2005). Walter Carter, *Writing Together: The Songwriter's Guide to Collaboration* (London, 1990). Jason Blume, *6 Steps to Songwriting Success: The Comprehensive Guide to Writing and Marketing Hit Songs* (New York, 1999).

> [commercially successful co-writers] are really free to experiment and try stuff out; they're excitable about an idea that is just fresh, and who knows whether it's going to work or not? They don't say "These chords work. This melody works. I'm in this box and this is my world." […] You'd expect them to say "This formula has worked for me before", but it's just the opposite.[41]

Given the lack of guarantees of successful outcomes, the only incentive a professional songwriter has for undertaking any new collaboration is a belief, based on the other collaborator's track record or musical/literary skills, that the finished song will stand a chance of being commercially or artistically successful.

All of the songwriters cited in this chapter are professionals; I use the term literally, meaning individuals who have earned money from their songs (through the Performing Right Society[42] or other royalty collection agency income). This is partly because commercial success (or at least industry engagement) is a reliable metric for measuring whether the listening public has engaged with a songwriter's work, helping to put aside subjective debates of the artistic merits of one songwriter's work over another's. However, even more importantly, amateur songwriters[43] appear to exhibit different creative practices from professionals. This contention is the result of observations undertaken throughout my own teaching of amateur songwriters at various levels of UK education over a 20-year period, from adult beginners and young children through to aspirant professionals studying undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. The motivation for some amateurs to write songs does not necessarily require any consideration of the listener's experience – and frequently, in beginner songwriters, does not include it. A common example is the challenge of autobiographical authenticity in a lyric;[44] amateur songwriters will often prioritise this over literary issues of universality, word economy and syllabic rhythm. This may be due to the influence of media; artist-songwriters frequently focus on issues of emotional authenticity or biography (as opposed to more craft-based issues such as syllable-count, drafting and editing, imagery and metaphor, and so on) when discussing their songwriting in mainstream press interviews. Zollo's work[45] is a notable exception – among a small number of others[46] – because, owing to the

---

41   Ashurst, 'On collaborative songwriting'.

42   Performing Right Society, 'Performing Right Society (UK) – about', PRS For Music website, 2011, https://www.prsformusic.com/aboutus/pages/default.aspx.

43   Similarly, I use the term amateur in a literal rather than pejorative sense.

44   A phrase I use frequently when teaching students about this balance is that 'human relationships are more complex than songs'. This is intended to help learners to engage with two of the fundamental principles of lyric writing – clarity and word economy.

45   Zollo, *Songwriters on Songwriting.*

46   Webb, *Tunesmith*. John Braheny, *The Craft and Business of Songwriting: A Practical Guide to Creating and Marketing Artistically and Commercially Successful Songs*, 3rd edn (Cincinnati, OH, 2006).

intended audience,[47] his interview subjects are encouraged to focus on the craft of songwriting and thus concern themselves less with romanticising their own creative processes.

Additionally, there are many musical and lyric-writing traits that are common in beginner/student songwriters but appear less often in successful songs. These practices include: composing phrases that begin on the second beat of the bar and/or on the fifth note of the scale; avoiding melodic anacruses;[48] over-using the 3:3:2 rhythm in accompaniments or melodies;[49] over-reliance on unchanging chord loops; limited use of imagery; and lack of repetition in choruses. These characteristics have been observed in my own teaching of several hundred music student songwriters in the UK, and it appears that such habits can become 'unlearned' over time as more songs are written; it would be interesting to discover whether these compositional habits are particular to UK beginner songwriters or universal (and common in beginner songwriters from wider cultural circles). As one songwriting teacher I interviewed suggested, beginners are often more eager than professionals to challenge the constraints of form:

> A lot of [student] writers are really desperate to rebuild the whole house whereas an experienced songwriter is happy with the house – they just want to decorate it in a new way.[50]

Professional songwriters, as we have seen, are often difficult to contact and are certainly fewer in number than amateur or aspirant songwriters, or musicians in full-time education. The reluctance of busy creative professionals to participate in academic studies is well documented, most clearly perhaps by Csikszentmihalyi in his study of 91 'exceptional individuals'. Below is the response from the secretary of composer George Ligeti to Csikszentmihalyi's request for an interview:

> [Mr Ligeti] is creative and, because of this, totally overworked. Therefore, the very reason you wish to study his creative process is also the reason why he

---

47   The interviews in *Songwriters on Songwriting* were originally published in *SongTalk*, the journal of the National Academy of Songwriters – so the intended audience would have been almost exclusively other songwriters rather than more general music consumers.

48   Anacrusis – a musical phrase that begins before the first beat of the bar. In songwriting circles it is more often referred to as a 'pickup bar' (UK) or 'pickup measure' (USA).

49   To be fair to student songwriters, the 3:3:2 rhythm (dotted crotchet; dotted crotchet; crotchet, or put another way, a downbeat, a 'pushed quaver' before the third beat, and the fourth beat) is extremely common in popular music – see Don Traut, '"Simply irresistible": Recurring Accent Patterns as Hooks in Mainstream 1980s Music', *Popular Music*, 24/1 (January 2005), 60, http://www.journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0261143004000303.

50   Ashurst, 'On collaborative songwriting'.

(unfortunately) does not have time to help you in this study. He … is trying desperately to finish a Violin Concerto.[51]

Another of Csikszentmihalyi's potential interviewees responded,

> I have admired you and your work for many years, and I have learned much from it. But, my dear Professor Csikszentmihalyi … I hope you will not think me presumptuous or rude if I say that one of the secrets of productivity (in which I believe whereas I do not believe in creativity) is … NOT doing anything that helps the work of other people but to spend all one's time on the work the Good Lord has fitted one to do, and to do well.[52]

It is perhaps because of the elusiveness of creative professionals, and the lack of incentive for them to participate in creativity-based studies, that so many previous studies into composers have focused on music students or children, and are thus found in educational psychology literature rather than in the work of popular musicologists. Hayden and Windsor,[53] Burnard and Younker[54] and Kratus[55] all use children or student composers as their research subjects. Even studies that may appear to use professional composers have different criteria for defining their subjects in this way; Devries[56] studies a songwriting partnership that has not yet been successful; Roe[57] deals with professional composers but specifically for solo bass clarinet; Nash[58] sets clear parameters for 'successful composers', although his observations did not extend to the creative act itself.[59] To summarise the selection problem – professional composers are more authentic but more elusive and less likely to co-operate; amateur and student composers are more accessible,

---

[51]   Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (New York, 1996), 14.

[52]   Ibid.

[53]   Hayden and Windsor, 'Collaboration and the composer'.

[54]   Pamela Burnard and Betty Anne Younker, 'Problem-solving and creativity: Insights from students' individual composing pathways', *International Journal of Music Education*, 22/1 (April 2004), 59–76, http://ijm.sagepub.com/cgi/doi/10.1177/0255761404042375.

[55]   John Kratus, 'A time analysis'.

[56]   Peter DeVries, 'The rise and fall of a songwriting partnership', *The Qualitative Report*, 10/1 (2005), 39–54.

[57]   Paul Roe, 'A phenomenology of collaboration in contemporary composition and performance' (PhD Thesis, York, 2007).

[58]   Dennison Nash, 'Challenge and response in the American composer's career', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 14/1 (September 1955), 116–22, http://www.jstor.org/stable/426646.

[59]   Nash concerns himself with the personality types of composers rather than their processes, and he uses 'techniques of interview, schedule, and Rorschach's Test' to ascertain these.

but potential studies may not illuminate the processes by which effective – and affective – music is composed.

The Co-writing Process

Collaborators, indeed all songwriters, consistently state that there are no rules for the songwriting process. Even songwriters who work in well-defined genres warn against using systems for composing. Notwithstanding, there are some creative practices that could be considered, if not ubiquitous, then at least commonly understood by a large number of experienced co-writers. Many of these are not necessarily exclusive to co-writing, and are also used by solo songwriters.

Writing from the title outwards is a common technique for addressing the creative challenge of framing the main lyric theme. Lydon[60] summarises this practice thus: 'Many old pros advise beginners, 'Find your title first'. These few words are the core of a lyric, the seed from which the lyric grows.'

Co-writing sessions, notably in Nashville, may begin with each collaborator bringing a small number of titles to use as stimulus material.[61] The title can suggest a core meaning and may also enable discussion about rhymes, placement of 'hooks',[62] lyric scansion or even melodic shape. This simple technique deals effectively with one of the creative challenges reported by amateur songwriters: that is, the tendency to postpone the process of identifying the literary theme of the lyric in favour of easier and more immediate processes such as providing chordal accompaniment.

> [guitarists who are new to songwriting] often try writing songs 'in the right order', strumming the intro chords and then hoping lyric inspiration will strike in the fifth or ninth bar of music. This seems perfectly logical as a method for writing a song, but in practice it is often just a delaying tactic, putting off until later the dreaded moment where you're going to decide what you want to say.[63]

I will restate at this point that the title-first technique is just one example – albeit a popular one – of a process used by co-writers to kick-start their creative processes. It is not a template for writing a song, nor is it in use by all songwriters. However, its function in the creative process demonstrates an important point – that *something* has to come first; I refer to this as the 'initial stimulus'. In the case

---

60   Michael Lydon, *Songwriting Success: How to Write Songs for Fun and (Maybe) Profit* (New York, 2004).

61   Andy West, Personal communication with ex-Nashville songwriter Andy West, interview by Joe Bennett, 2005.

62   A memorable part of the song; a hook may be a title, sonic motif, lyric line, audio sample or melodic element, and is almost always repeated more than once.

63   Joe Bennett, 'Song meaning … it makes me wonder', *Total Guitar Magazine* (July 2011), 30.

of music-first approaches to songwriting, a typical initial stimulus could be a chord sequence, melodic phrase, audio sample or drum loop; in lyric-first approaches it is commonly the title, but may be any short lyric phrase or even a visual image.[64] The source of these fragments may be internally generated by one of the songwriters through 'play' – typically improvising on an instrument – or may be chosen by the songwriter from an external source, such as a sample library or even from an existing song. The initial stimulus may be chosen/created in advance of, or at the start of, the collaborative meeting. It can then be submitted for evaluation by the collaborative team. Evaluation of a stimulus most commonly occurs in songwriting teams whose creative process is genuinely collaborative (where ideas are discussed, adapted and negotiated) as opposed to demarcated (where ideas are handed from one co-writer to another in tag-team fashion).

Although all songs necessarily start with some form of stimulus, this is not to say that stimuli only occur at the start of the creative process. On the contrary, they must recur throughout because collaborators continually generate and evaluate new ideas. Thus, the following discussion of the songwriting team's processing of stimuli, which I shall call 'stimulus evaluation', applies recurrently and sometimes concurrently throughout the song's creation, and is applied to every creative idea that is proposed during the co-writing session.

During the evaluation stage of a stimulus it can be processed in four ways by the writing team; approval, veto, negotiation or adaptation. Approval allows the idea to take its place in the song, a process that usually requires consensus from the songwriting team. A co-writer may challenge another writer's stimulus, leading to veto (rejecting the stimulus), negotiation (arguing a case for accepting the stimulus) or adaptation (changing the stimulus until vetoed or approved). A stimulus is the beginning of a creative idea's pathway through the songwriting team's filter; consensus represents a successful end to its journey.

I contend that six (non-linear and interacting) processes are at play in a co-writing environment – stimulus, approval, adaptation, negotiation, veto and consensus. One writer will provide stimulus material and the other writer will approve, adapt or veto the idea (approval can obviously lead to consensus – I include both because there may be situations with more than two co-writers where one individual approves an idea but another provides veto or adaptation). If an idea is vetoed in its entirety the provider of the stimulus will either accept this or enter negotiation to defend or further adapt it. Consensus permits an idea to survive and – temporarily or permanently – take its place in the song (collaborative songwriters frequently report agreement that 'we'll fix that bit later' – for example, in the use of a dummy lyric that will later be replaced).[65]

Stimulus evaluation is a workable description of the processes that are used to generate the song in draft form, but rarely does a song arrive fully

---

[64]   Boo Hewerdine, 'Boo Hewerdine – reflections on a collaborative songwriting process', interview by Joe Bennett, March 2011.

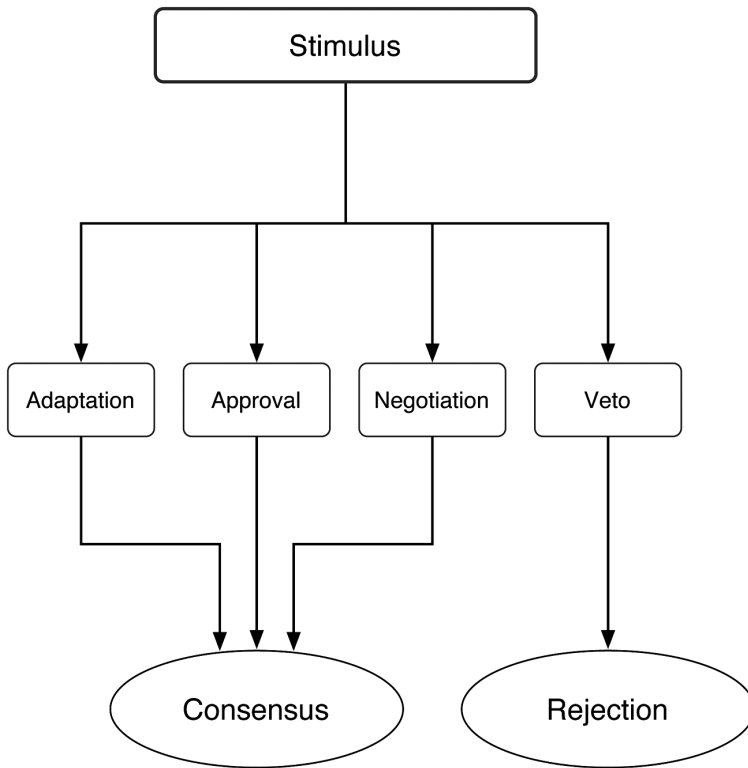[65]   Bennett, 'Collaborative songwriting'.

Figure 6.1   'Stimulus evaluation' model for collaborative songwriting
Note: This diagram represents the process by which a single creative stimulus (that is, a suggestion by an individual, or an external stimulus such as an audio sample) is evaluated by the songwriting team. Once a stimulus has been approved and the team has provided consensus, the creative idea takes its place in the song, although it may be adapted or replaced later if the team approves better stimuli.

formed in its first draft – many collaborative teams report extensive additional adaptation and negotiation even of ideas that are initially approved. Thus, the evaluative model moves from a micro to a macro function; the draft song itself, or temporarily approved 'placeholder' sections of it, can become the stimulus, and the partnership then evaluates these. I refer to this process – of replacing any temporarily approved stimuli with permanent equivalents – as the editing stage. The partnership becomes its own audience, listening to the song and deciding which elements 'work' and which need further adaptation, negotiation or veto. Or put another way, a stimulus can experience multiple adaptations throughout the songwriting process.

When the song is completed to the satisfaction of the co-writing team, sometimes in a single session, sometimes over several sessions, many partnerships will take the opportunity to reflect on the potentially finished song.[66] Sometimes this generates an additional process that is often described industrially as rewriting. Carter[67] identifies three situations in which this can occur – when the co-writers agree that a rewrite is needed; when they disagree whether a rewrite is needed; or when an external party (publisher, artist or producer) requires a rewrite. The solutions to these challenges may include additional rewriting activities by the partnership, lone work on the song by partnership members, or drafting in additional individuals in order to get the song finished. This latter approach, of cheerful promiscuity, is more likely among professional 'jobbing' songwriters who write songs for others to perform; it is less apparent or even non-existent among the many celebrated 'loyal' collaborative partnerships, particularly those where the artist is involved or part-involved (for example, Lennon/McCartney, Difford/Tilbrook or John/Taupin).

The difference to a partnership that loyalty can make demonstrates another important point about the way collaborative songwriting groups work – they are quasi-social. The relationship is dominated, necessarily, by the requirement to complete a specific task, but conversational negotiation usually occurs throughout the shared creative process, and prior learning (i.e. 'musical influences') plays an important role in the compatibility of individuals. So the group dynamic cannot easily be summarised by simplistic group-performance management theory such as Tuckman's often-challenged sequential 'Forming–Storming–Norming–Performing' approach,[68] especially when taking into account that the songwriters may or may not have co-written together before. Songwriter Boo Hewerdine reflects further upon the social aspects of the co-writing process, implying that a shared understanding of the social dynamic is an important prerequisite for productive activity:

> I love to talk [with the collaborator] before we start. And you process that information and you go into a very slight, trancelike state, and off you go. You're processing the information that you've heard and you're trying to channel it into something. You go into a little dream. [Collaborators] have to be comfortable enough to do that, and for it not to be at all an awkward social thing.[69]

Ashurst sees the social interaction as an integral part of getting the creative process started, particularly with new collaborators:

---

[66]   Two-day co-writes are not uncommon, where co-writers 'sleep on it' and may undertake 'homework' to generate additional stimuli for the following day.

[67]   Carter, *Writing Together*, 88.

[68]   Bruce Tuckman, 'Developmental sequence in small groups', *Psychological Bulletin*, 63/6 (1965), 384–99.

[69]   Hewerdine, 'Reflections on a collaborative songwriting process'.

> [We often start with] a cup of tea and some biscuits! This can take an hour, or two hours, especially if we've got a two day co-write, just to get the lay of the land. Most of the time you want to ease into it a little bit and just have a chat. One reason that I think people want to write with me is that I'm nice to be in a room with for two days![70]

The working relationship can also be mediated by environment, particularly in cases where additional music-making hardware and software tools are available. Technology-rich environments such as recording studios can provide two new opportunities for the partnership – namely, rapid recording of ideas and additional stimuli. As we have seen, a stimulus can be musicological, such as a riff, melody or chord pattern, or literary, such as a title, rhyme or phrase, but it can also be sonic – a drum loop, audio sample, synthesiser sound or guitar effects preset. Indeed, songwriters working in production-heavy genres such as hip-hop or contemporary pop often report using 'production' ideas as a stimulus. Studio environments, encouraging as they do the recording of ideas as they arrive, can blur the line between songwriter, artist and producer, and indeed many songwriters use these multiple labels to define their practice.

Models of Collaboration

I have written elsewhere about seven possible working models for songwriting collaboration,[71] using the terms Nashville, Svengali, Demarcation, Jamming, Top-line writing, Asynchronicity and Factory. The terms are not mutually exclusive and frequently overlap in practice. Nashville co-writing is perhaps the most popularly understood model of 'writing a song together', because it involves (usually two) simultaneous co-writers, often with guitar or piano, collaborating in a technology-light pen-and-paper environment, and applying stimulus evaluation in real time through face to face conversation. Svengali writing involves the artist collaborating with a more experienced professional non-artist songwriter, where the latter party provides 'craft' to help to realise the artist's creative vision, and often includes some elements of demarcation. Demarcation represents a situation where the co-writers need not meet to collaborate – the baton is handed from one co-writer to the other linearly: a common example would be where a lyricist hands their lyrics to a composer for 'setting' or vice versa. The Jamming model is where musicians create live stimuli, typically through improvisation of accompaniment, enabling other writers – usually the singer – to improvise melody and lyric atop. Top-line writing is a form of demarcation where a complete or almost-complete backing track is supplied to a singer/writer who will create melody and lyric in response to its stimulus. Asynchronicity, where co-writers work separately but without assigning roles, is essentially the demarcation model in fragmented form:

---

[70]   Ashurst, 'On collaborative songwriting'.
[71]   Bennett, 'Collaborative songwriting', 6.

> The co-writers work separately and iteratively, but do not necessarily define clear or exclusive creative roles. An example would be if two songwriter-producers worked separately on a multi-track audio file, passing it backwards and forwards (typically online) and making iterative changes in one or more cycles. The demarcation model is usually implemented asynchronously, but asynchronous writing need not be demarcated (by activity or creative contribution).[72]

The 'Factory' is a physical location where songwriters collaborate using one or more of the other models, and often incorporating other parts of the song production process, including recording, publishing, A&R,[73] marketing and administration. It has a long and dignified history, from Tin Pan Alley in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century through the Brill Building in the 1950s and 1960s through to the Xenomania building in the early twenty-first century,[74] and can produce a large number of 'hits' owing to its work ethic and quality-control systems, perhaps providing a competitive advantage in our evolutionary ecosystem of song survival. Xenomania, like Motown before it, unashamedly describes itself as a 'hit factory', with co-writing processes that include stimulus (and song) evaluation by committee.[75]

Models have a relationship to genre. Production-based genres such as hip-hop or contemporary pop will often favour technology-heavy models such as Top-line writing or Asynchronicity. Conversely, genres where the song is more easily transferable between performers (often 'traditional' song types that rely more on melody, lyric and harmony than production specifics) may more commonly use the Nashville model. The Demarcated model, famously divided between composer and lyricist in many partnerships, can also be used by necessity, owing to geographical distance or timescale. Sometimes it is only needed for parts of the process – for example, rewrites or last-minute edits.

Testing the Models

One of the USA's most successful twentieth century songwriting partnerships is that of Burt Bacharach and Hal David. Bacharach wrote the music and David the lyrics; their respective roles were fully demarcated in this respect and I use them to illustrate my 'Demarcated' model. The much-asked journalist's question of whether music or lyrics comes first in the songwriting process is answered by David:

---

[72]   Ibid., 7.

[73]   Artist and Repertoire – the process of discovering new talent.

[74]   Brian Higgins, 'Brian Higgins interview – *The Telegraph* (August 2009)', August 2009, http://xenomania.freehostia.com/press/brian_telegraph_aug09.html.

[75]   Linda Brusasco (director), 'Secrets of the pop song – "breakthrough single"' (BBC2, July 2011).

> [Burt] would give me melodies from time to time – I would give him lyrics. Very
> often we sat in a room and banged out a song together, back and forth, back and
> forth. Sometimes […] I'd be working at home on some melody he gave me, and
> he'd work separately on a lyric I may have given him.[76]

Here we see very clearly delineated stimuli: lyric and music are separate, and one
is written (individually) in response to the other. In this version of the Demarcated
model, opportunities for co-writers' evaluation of the stimuli are limited because
the collaborators may work separately from each other, but there were some
notable examples of Bacharach and David using successful negotiation in the
creation of a hit, as the former recalls:

> When I'm working on [melodies], I'm making up words. And the words might
> make no sense. With "Raindrops" as an example, I just kept hearing that phrase,
> "raindrops keep falling on my head." Hal tried to change it, and go to another
> lyric idea, but that was a very good one. I will sing whatever phrase it is that I'm
> hearing with the music.[77]

This requirement to make melodic lines 'sing well' is much reported by songwriting
teams; words and music must work together because in performance they are never
heard in isolation from one another. Bacharach's anecdote shows a stimulus (the
titular melody and lyric phrase from 'Raindrops') being initially vetoed by his co-
writer, but being defended by its creator by negotiation – in this case becoming an
unassailable example of Boden's 'H-creativity' (i.e. 'Raindrops' has since become
a well-known classic). Often a lyric that sings well may be literarily banal or even
nonsensical, or conversely a powerful lyric may have the wrong syllable count
to scan well with the composed melody; these tensions are frequently part of the
negotiation and adaptation process for co-writers.

   I will now highlight a detailed example from my own co-researcher work,[78]
using primarily the Nashville model. In 2010 I undertook a co-writing session with
published songwriter Chris Turpin. This represented a three-hour co-write studio
session (including the recording of a 'guide vocal') and immediately afterwards a
retrospective discussion between us, which was transcribed to create a permanent
contemporaneous record of our thoughts on the song's creation at the time. He

---

[76]   Zollo, *Songwriters on Songwriting*, 210–11.

[77]   Ibid., 206–7.

[78]   I stress here that this example is not an attempt to define any template for writing a
song – all songwriters agree that methods can vary across individuals, genres, environments
or simply whim. Rather, I use this particular co-writing session as a framework for the
discussion of the way in which stimuli are processed and to provide examples of adaptation,
approval, negotiation and veto.

had, at the behest of his publisher,[79] undertaken several recent collaborations with other published writers, and on arrival at my studio was extremely comfortable and workmanlike in his preparedness to start co-writing. After the aforementioned tea and biscuits we began our co-writing session.

We began by looking for initial stimuli. I had (and constantly keep) a long list of potential titles; Chris had written a list of images and ideas in his songwriting notebook, of which a very small excerpt appears below. So for this session we had each independently decided to use as initial stimuli literary, rather than musical, material.

> Gold in the dirt. Born in the shadows of the corn. Whispers of home, hiss out the passing car tyres. Dirty nails and dry tears. Pick the love she need out the dirt. Shine like crushed tin, stars cut the black out of tonight, and I'm wild in her. Window lets the night into the car. Road. Numb in the dull spill of car radios, lights below like candles on a birthday cake. We're sweet on the night. Drinking in the air off the lake. Halfway to the bridge fell we're sleeping in Mexican skies, we shift the heart of this city.[80]

For my part, I had provided my title list (of around 200 possible titles) and we negotiated a shortlist of four; 'Open Doors', 'Hard to Find', 'Shallow Breathing' and 'Silver Strings'. This moment (around 10 minutes into the co-write session) represented the first example of stimulus evaluation, as it was the first time that any stimulus material had been presented for processing; in this case, stimuli were provided simultaneously by both co-writers. We both agreed that the title 'Silver Strings' and several lyric lines including 'Gold in the Dirt' would remain for the moment, and then, without discussion, we both picked up acoustic guitars and began strumming chords and singing these lines. Chris played a one-bar fingerstyle chord riff in an open tuning, providing basic accompaniment over which we could sing these phrases. The riff was implicitly approved by me (in that I did not attempt to veto or discuss it); my decision was born in part by a desire not to hold up the early musical composition process by editing ideas that may yet develop.

---

[79] It is common practice for UK music publishers to 'pair up' their songwriters in this way with co-writers on the same – or other – publishing rosters. This generates creative opportunities for the writer, and new Intellectual Property for both publisher and songwriter.

[80] Chris Turpin, 'Preparatory notes for songwriting session – extracts from songwriter's notebook' (unpublished, September 2010). It is perhaps obvious from this text that Chris has a creative interest in Americana-inspired imagery. He is an extremely proficient Delta-blues style guitarist: his own vocal performance style and his commercial releases have very clear blues-rock influences.

To cross-reference my description above with the experience of my co-writer, I include below Chris's own summary of the start of our collaborative session.[81]

> We both looked at each other and said "Have you got any ideas?" Joe mentioned he had a few titles knocking around and I said "I've got some notes that I've scribbled down [in idle moments]; we can draw these if we need images and … 'smells' and 'tastes'." And we sat down and we picked up two guitars. I immediately, because of the tuning of the guitar, starting playing a lick[82] that I've played in sound check a couple of times. And thought "Ooh maybe we could use this, why the heck not." And Joe agreed that it was a decent enough lick and we could use it. So then we sat down and he handed over a list of titles. I picked out three that were interesting, to my eyes, that evoked something or could evoke something that would be quite interesting and fitted in with the chords. We grabbed the lyrics, [chose]six lines that we thought were interesting images, and started to marry them together.[83]

We spent some time (another 10 minutes or so) simply improvising vocally around these lyric ideas over a one-chord accompaniment. This period of 'play' began to create fragments of usable melody and lyric; at this point explicit use of veto was unnecessary, because approval was used positively – either one of the co-writers would interject with 'I like that' if the other created a particularly pleasing or effective phrase. In this way, some poorer ideas (those that were tried and ignored by both parties) were vetoed by the partnership implicitly and rapidly without any verbal discussion. One of us acted as scribe and noted down lyric fragments as they were approved, and at this point more rhymes, lyric images, melodic phrases and rhythmic scansions began to emerge. It is worth stating here that treble clef music notation was not used at any point in the process; its presence seems to be rare in co-writing sessions. I am personally able to read clef-based music notation but many of the experienced songwriters with whom I have co-written cannot. 'Chord sheets' – lyrics with guitar chords written above each line – are, in my experience, a more common way of notating the song than music staves. Melody is more often committed to memory or to a recording device than to the written page. There are exceptions to this practice – Bacharach[84] uses clef-based notation

---

[81]   Although the accounts mostly concur, the co-writer's summary describes the events in a slightly different order from my own account (which was based on an audio recording I made of the co-writing session), demonstrating a minor but unavoidable problem with retrospective interviews – they rely on memory.

[82]   A short musical guitar phrase – in this case, a looped one-bar minor chord played fingerstyle with melodic embellishments.

[83]   Chris Turpin, 'Chris Turpin and Joe Bennett discuss a songwriting collaboration', interview by Joe Bennett, October 2010.

[84]   Zollo, *Songwriters on Songwriting*.

extensively to keep a note of new melodies – but music staves do not appear to be common in co-writing sessions.

Frequently, every five minutes or so, there would be a lull in our semi-improvisational activities and we might stop to discuss the lyric, particularly from a conceptual point of view. We asked questions of each other to try to clarify the thematic 'lyric framework'.[85] Who was our protagonist? What was his relationship to the titular 'Silver Strings'? Where was he in space and time during the song's narrative? What could he literally see in his physical environment and what metaphorical images could he 'see' in his emotional one?[86] We did not allow our lack of immediate answers to all these questions to hinder the creative process elsewhere: if we failed to agree these elements we would work on another element of the song – rhymes or chord progressions, perhaps – and see if changes in these areas gave us a different perspective on the thematic questions.

Rarely in the co-writing session was any new stimulus vetoed entirely negatively; at most, an idea that did not appeal to the other co-writer was met with courteous phrases such as 'it's not quite right for this section – how about this?' or 'I wonder if we can try a variation on that?', or, more often, with the other writer suggesting an adaptation of the stimulus. In this way, an atmosphere of mutual supportiveness was quickly established, and new stimuli were continually and efficiently generated, adapted, vetoed, approved or negotiated. It was implicitly understood (and in my experience this is always the case) that all 'approved' ideas could be changed later, as they frequently were later in the process, but the partnership's willingness to approve ideas – even temporarily – enabled a skeleton version of the song to be rapidly constructed, and we had created three and a half minutes of performable music and lyrics within the first hour of the session.

From this point onward we began improving and replacing existing elements of the song. Individual lyric phrases were discussed in the broader context of the song's story, and the lyric framework became clearer. 'Placeholder' melodic phrases were improved upon and syllable counts edited. The listener experience came more into focus; discussion points included 'would people find it boring to have a double verse here?', 'is the title line's melody strong enough to make everyone sing it at a live show?' and 'are we making it clear why the character's leaving town?' Lyric imagery was adapted and improved, with some discussion regarding the relative merits of particular metaphors and similes, and occasional consultation of an online rhyming dictionary. Completely new stimuli became less frequent at this stage, with most of the work focusing on the adaptation of the existing song. Occasionally the partnership would temporarily separate, on one or other partner's suggestion, to allow each co-writer to work independently for a

---

[85]   By this I mean the thematic content of the lyric – the 'story' or concept that drives the song. See Sheila Davis, *Successful Lyric Writing* (1988), 17.

[86]   Turpin stated, in the interview that followed the co-write, that consensus regarding matters of theme, character and narrative is very important to him. Many other songwriters state similar concerns regarding clarity of lyric theme and the believability of characters.

few minutes (Chris worked on edits to the chord changes and phrase lengths in the chorus while I wrote an additional final verse to the same rhythmic scansion that we had previously agreed); these individually created elements were then brought back to the partnership a few minutes later for evaluation.

Although our process most closely followed what I have described as the 'Nashville model' of co-writers working simultaneously and face-to-face, our environment for this particular co-write was technologically mediated; we had available a music computer with drum samples and the ability to record live guitars and vocals as needed. As the song began to take shape, some ideas (for example, the fingerstyle riff, the underlying chord progression for each section, and the chorus in its entirety) seemed to be achieving agreed permanence, so they were laid down 'on tape'. This had the effect of pushing the co-writers towards working on not-yet-fixed stimuli, such as, in this case, the verse lyrics. It also, owing to the fact that we were recording live instruments, committed us to a working tempo, at least for the 'demo' recording we intended to complete by the end of the session. To this end, a simple one-bar bass drum and hi-hat pattern was established on the computer, to provide more idiomatic (and hopefully inspiring) timekeeping than a metronome click.

By around two hours into the session, the boundaries between 'writing a song' and 'producing a demo' were becoming blurred. Lyrics were still being refined and melodies slightly edited, but as guitars and vocals were laid down it was clear that the partnership was starting to commit to chord progressions, melody and lyrics. Owing to the way music computers allow non-linear editing (even of completed audio takes), song form remains adaptable throughout the recording process; choruses, verses or even single beats can be moved, added or removed at any point. Thus, sections were moved around and auditioned through playbacks several times, with extensive negotiation regarding the listener's aural journey through the song's structure. Editing song form is of course equally easy – perhaps easier – when no recording has taken place, so this option (of making last-minute changes to the song's section-by-section structure) is by no means confined to technologically mediated songwriting environments.

It is unknown whether my own 'lab-based' co-write as described above will lead to an audience engaging with the song. Indeed, it is probable that the song will never be commercially released; Marade et al. state the unfortunate truism that 'failure and rejection are highly likely across every aspect of the songwriting process'.[87] However, owing to the co-researcher role and the extensive data collected, this observed co-write does provide us with a level of depth that is perhaps unattainable from existing hits, because any analysis of their creation would be necessarily retrospective.

For my final example, I shall discuss a collaboration demonstrating the substantial overlap that can occur between the process models, featuring two of the UK's most celebrated contemporary songwriting collaborators – Guy Chambers

---

[87]   Marade et al., 'The role of risk-taking in songwriting success', 128.

and Mark Ronson.[88] There are very few available recordings of real-time co-writing sessions, apart from my own primary research, against which to test process models, but the 2011 BBC TV mini-series *Secrets of the Pop Song*[89] provides a rare opportunity. Chambers and Ronson are filmed co-writing a song for – and with – new artist Tawiah, and although less than 10 minutes' worth of songwriting footage is shown (edited from a two-day co-writing session), there are many useful insights into process. The co-writers mainly use the Nashville model, in that they co-write together live in the room using guitars and voice, but include elements of the Svengali, Top-line and Demarcated models. The artist is the least experienced collaborator (Svengali model) and writes most of the lyric and melody (Top-line writing); Tawiah and Ronson are seen undertaking independent work on the lyric and backing track, respectively, and Ronson and Chambers are known for writing music rather than lyrics (Demarcated). Because the song is intended to be a pop single, the environment and process are both technology-rich (notwithstanding a brief acoustic guitar session in the park!), with a Pro Tools[90] operator on hand during the writing process. Detailed production work (e.g. Ronson supervising the recording of live drums) is undertaken even before the song is finished, blurring, as in my co-researcher example, the distinction between 'song' and 'track'.

All three co-writers provide stimuli throughout, including audio samples, chord sequences, lyric fragments and guitar riffs, and these are seen to be evaluated by the group. Veto, where used, is dealt with courteously and professionally (quasi-social), and frequently becomes adaptation. So we can infer from this example that the models can overlap substantially and that co-writing teams may select them opportunistically and instinctively as the song develops. With this overlap in mind, perhaps 'technique' might be a better term than 'model'.

It appears, then, that the stimulus evaluation framework may maintain its integrity when tested against interviews with successful co-writers, songwriting literature, my own co-researcher sessions, and broadcast footage of songwriters at work. The 'models' (Nashville, Svengali, Demarcation, Jamming, Top-line writing, Asynchronicity and Factory) overlap heavily in many situations, but appear to be experientially understood as working methods by a large proportion of active songwriters.

Conclusion

The qualitative evidence – of observed sessions combined with songwriter interviews – suggests that popular song is a tightly constrained form, and that

---

[88]   Both well-known for their collaborations with, among others, Robbie Williams and Amy Winehouse, respectively.

[89]   Brusasco, 'Breakthrough single'

[90]   Pro Tools – one of the 'music industry standard' software applications for digital audio recording.

experienced co-writers are comfortable with this notion. The quantitative evidence – statistical norms in Anglo-American mainstream hits over many decades – suggests that the constraints themselves may have evolved through the application of Csikszentmihalyi's 'Systems Model' in the form of the free market of song consumers. In copyright/legal terms, all new songs, however (un)successful, are examples of Boden's 'H-creative' process. In cultural terms only 'hit' songs[91] can be considered in this way.

In my 'stimulus processing' theory I have posited a model by which the negotiation between co-writers may occur. There are opportunities here for further research, particularly into the quasi-social nature of the co-writers' relationship and how it affects decision-making. Csikszentmihalyi uses the term 'Flow'[92] to describe a trance-like state where creative individuals lose track of time and become more productive because they are 'in the zone'. We can speculate that the co-writing process helps individuals to achieve this state through a mutually supportive but workmanlike creative environment. Certainly my own experience as a songwriter, composer and teacher suggests that co-writing provides productivity advantages over solo songwriting for some individuals.

The collaborative songwriting process seems, to the casual observer, to contain many contradictions. It is highly professional and businesslike, but also social and informal. It has a significant economic imperative, and yet may not generate income. It creates a unique artistic object but stays within a constrained and evolved form. The song and the recording are different objects in law, but are often merged in creative practice. A co-written song may be first-person confessional, but is not necessarily autobiographical. Collaborative songwriters understand, manage and embrace these tensions, which have defined songwriting practice for more than a century. In the context of popular song creation, the co-writing partnership survives because, like any evolved organism, it inherits characteristics from previous generations whilst adapting continually to its environment.

References

Adorno, Theodore W., 'On popular music', *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, IX (1941), 17–48.

Amabile, Teresa M., 'How to kill creativity', *Harvard Business Review*, 76/5 (1998), 76–87.

Bamberger, Jeanne, 'The development of intuitive musical understanding: A natural experiment', *Psychology of Music*, 31/1 (2003), 7–36.

Bennett, Joe, 'Performance and songwriting: The picture and the frame', UK Songwriting Festival website, 22 January 2009, http://www.uksong

---

[91]   Not necessarily 'chart' hits – I use the term here more broadly to mean 'having engaged a large number of listeners'.

[92]   Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity: Flow.*

writingfestival.com/2009/01/22/performance-and-songwriting-the-picture-and-the-frame/.

Bennett, Joe, 'Collaborative songwriting – the ontology of negotiated creativity in popular music studio practice', *Journal of the Art of Record Production 2010*, 5 (2011), http://arpjournal.com/875/collaborative-songwriting-%E2%80%93-the-ontology-of-negotiated-creativity-in-popular-music-studio-practice/ or http://tiny url.com/jarp-bennett-2011.

Bennett, Joe, 'How long, how long must we sing this song?', *Joe Bennett music blog*, 2011, http://joebennett.net/2011/05/03/how-long-how-long-must-we-sing-this-song/.

Bennett, Joe, 'Song meaning … it makes me wonder', *Total Guitar Magazine* (July 2011), 30.

Blume, Jason, *6 Steps to Songwriting Success: The Comprehensive Guide to Writing and Marketing Hit Songs* (New York: Billboard Books, 1999).

Boden, Margaret, *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms*, 2nd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004).

Bradford, Chris and British Academy of Composers and Songwriters. *Heart & Soul: Revealing the Craft of Songwriting* (London: Sanctuary in Association with the British Academy of Composers and Songwriters, 2005).

Braheny, John, *The Craft and Business of Songwriting: A Practical Guide to Creating and Marketing Artistically and Commercially Successful Songs*, 3rd edn (Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2006).

Brusasco, Linda (director), 'Secrets of the pop song – "ballad"', BBC2, July 2011.

Brusasco, Linda (director), 'Secrets of the pop song – "breakthrough single"', BBC2, July 2011.

Burnard, Pamela and Betty Anne Younker, 'Problem-solving and creativity: Insights from students' individual composing pathways', *International Journal of Music Education*, 22/1 (2004), 59–76.

Burnard, Pamela and Betty Anne Younker, 'Mapping pathways: Fostering creativity in composition', *Music Education Research*, 4/2 (2002), 245–61.

Carter, Walter, *Writing Together: The Songwriter's Guide to Collaboration* (London: Omnibus, 1990).

Chambers. 'Chambers Free English Dictionary', *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary* (Chambers, 1996), http://www.chambersharrap.co.uk/chambers/features/chref/chref.py/main?query=song&title=21st.

Clydesdale, Greg, 'Creativity and competition: The Beatles', *Creativity Research Journal*, 18/2 (2006), 129–39.

Collins, David, 'Real-time tracking of the creative music composition process', *Digital Creativity*, 18/4 (2007), 239–56.

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, 'Society, culture, and person: A systems view of creativity'. In: Robert Sternberg (ed.), *The Nature of Creativity: Contemporary*

Psychological Perspectives (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 325–39.

Davis, Sheila, *Successful Lyric Writing* (Writer's Digest Books, 1988).

DeVries, Peter, 'The rise and fall of a songwriting partnership', *The Qualitative Report*, 10/1 (2005), 39–54.

Ellis, Shaun and Tom Engelhardt, 'Visualizing a hit – InfoVis final project', *Can Visualizing 50-Years' Worth of Hit U.S. Pop Song Characteristics Help us Discover Trends Worthy of Further Investigation?* 2010, http://sites.google.com/site/visualizingahit/home.

Hayden, Sam and Luke Windsor, 'Collaboration and the composer: Case studies from the end of the 20th century', *Tempo*, 61/240 (2007), 28.

Higgins, Brian, 'Brian Higgins interview – *The Telegraph* (August 2009)', August 2009, http://xenomania.freehostia.com/press/brian_telegraph_aug09.html

Kratus, John, 'A time analysis of the compositional processes used by children ages 7 to 11', *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 37/1 (1989), 5.

Lydon, Michael, *Songwriting Success: How to Write Songs for Fun and (Maybe) Profit* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

Mann, William, 'The Times: What songs The Beatles sang by William Mann | The Beatles Bible', *The Times*, 27 December 1963, http://www.beatlesbible.com/1963/12/27/the-times-what-songs-the-beatles-sang-by-william-mann/.

Marade, Angelo, J.A. Gibbons and Thomas M. Brinthaupt, 'The role of risk-taking in songwriting success', *The Journal of Creative Behavior*, 41/2 (2007), 125–49.

Nash, Dennison, 'Challenge and response in the American composer's career', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 14/1 (September 1955), 116–22.

Negus, Keith R., 'The discovery and development of recording artists in the popular music industry' (Polytechnic of the South Bank, 1992).

Noys, Benjamin, 'Into the "jungle"', *Popular Music*, 14/3 (1995), 321–32.

Pettijohn II, Terry F. and Shujaat F. Ahmed, 'Songwriting; loafing or creative collaboration?: A comparison of individual and team written Billboard hits in the USA', *Journal of Articles in Support of the Null Hypothesis*, 7/1 (2010), 2.

PRS for Music, 'Performing Right Society (UK) – about', 2011, http://www.prsformusic.com/aboutus/pages/default.aspx.

PRS for Music, *PRS For Music (UK Collection Society) Database Search Results*. Performing Right Society, 2010. Available to members via www.prsformusic.com (as at October 2010).

Roe, Paul, 'A phenomenology of collaboration in contemporary composition and performance', PhD thesis (York, 2007; British Library).

Sloboda, John, 'Do psychologists have anything useful to say about composition?' In: *Proceedings of the Third European Conference of Music Analysis*, Montpellier, 1995.

Sloboda, John, *The Musical Mind: The Cognitive Psychology of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

Traut, Don, '"Simply irresistible": Recurring accent patterns as hooks in mainstream 1980s music', *Popular Music*, 24/1 (2005), 57–77.

Tuckman, Bruce, 'Developmental sequence in small groups', *Psychological Bulletin*, 63/6 (1965), 384–99.

Webb, Jimmy, *Tunesmith: Inside the Art of Songwriting* (London: Hyperion Books, 1999).

Zollo, Paul, *Songwriters on Songwriting* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 1997).