

*EVERYONE HAS A SONG IN THEM. WHAT'S YOURS?*

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Seller**

# THE SONG CREATION FORMULA

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## 7 EASY STEPS TO WRITING YOUR SONG

+ Interviews With Influential Canadian Songwriters

Jim Cuddy (Blue Rodeo), Greig Nori (Treble Charger)  
Craig Northey (Odds), Luke Doucet (Whitehorse)  
Oh Susanna, Kat Goldman & Jeremy Fisher

## SIGNE MIRANDA

+ 33 POPULAR CHORD PROGRESSIONS BY TAYLOR ABRAHAMSE

FOREWORD BY CHRIS BIRKETT  
AWARD-WINNING PRODUCER, SONGWRITER & MUSICIAN

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# The Song Creation Formula

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## 7 Easy Steps to Writing Your Song

**SIGNE MIRANDA**

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# FOREWORD

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What is songwriting?

Just like painting, graphic design, poetry, architecture and cooking, songwriting is a creative process. If we do any of these things in a spirit of unconditional love then we are in the creative process.

The creative process exists throughout nature. If we stand near the ocean long enough and listen to the sound of the sea or the wind we will eventually hear melody. Beautiful music is all around us; we just have to listen carefully and bring it into our material world.

The songwriting process functions on two levels: intuitive and intellectual.

## **Intuitive:**

Our intuition, when not goal-driven, becomes a channel for the expression of beauty. When writing down your ideas, just let them flow without judgement or criticism. Try not to look back on what you're writing until you've expressed everything you need to express.

## **Intellectual:**

When you're done expressing, then it is time to edit your work. The editing process is not the same as the creative process. It comes from a different part of us. The intellectual mind multiplies, divides and analyzes. Editing, arranging and improving your song falls into this category.

As songwriters our mission is to transform fine energy in its pure form of potentiality into a medium that can be perceived with our senses. We simply allow ourselves to become vehicles for creative energy. To do this we need tools. If Mozart had not been an awesome piano player the music that came through him would not have been on the same level.

That is the purpose of songwriting workshops. To give us the tools so that we can learn to communicate our perceptions, feelings, insights and truths through the medium of song.

It is through songwriting workshops that I became acquainted with Signe's perspective on songwriting and I think that this book is beneficial to new songwriters and songwriters looking for inspiration because it includes both the intellectual tools - in Signe's seven-step guide and the chord progression chapter by Taylor Abrahamse - and the intuitive inspiration-driven aspect of songwriting, in the interviews with esteemed Canadian songwriters.

So relax, enjoy yourself, be creative, open yourself like a flower opens to the sun and allow the universal creative spirit to flow through you like a river.

Chris Birkett

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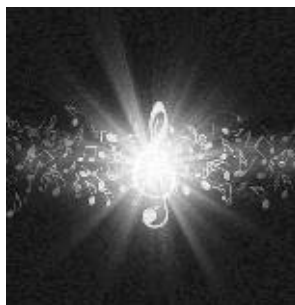
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**7 easy Steps to writing your song**

# INTRODUCTION

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You may be wondering what the “Song Creation Formula” is; that's probably why you are reading this book. You may be thinking that there is no formula; that songwriting is too subjective, too expansive and full of too many possibilities to be narrowed down to a formula. I agree: there is no one formula. There are so many ways to write a song that books could be continually written on the subject. This book provides a formula, a set of seven steps that will assist you with writing a song that is recognizable as a song if you've never written one before; or it will provide you with new perspectives on songwriting, to pull you out of a rut, break through your patterns and help you see things in a new way. Step by step, you'll have a system to follow, to test out one path to writing a song, a path that contains the basic elements of every song. I've focused on the lyrical aspects of songwriting in this book, partly because that's what I feel I understand the most about songwriting; it's what I gravitate towards. When I buy an album, the first thing I do is open up the liner notes and read the lyrics and song titles. It's that tangible, visual-kinesthetic connection to the musical creation. When I listen to a song, to understand its structure, I prefer to have the lyric sheet in front of me, to understand the overall picture of the song. Some people understand a song by focusing on the musical atmosphere that it creates. These are the people who can hear a song and instantly sing it or identify the chords. For that reason, I've included a chapter on chord progressions, written by Taylor Abrahamse, who has studied music and composition and who naturally listens to a song and can easily identify the chord progression and the musical landscape of the song. This will assist you in shaping the musical structure of your songs.

The other reason that I focus on the lyrical aspects of songwriting is that some people who write songs or want to write songs don't play an instrument. There's still the musical element of creating the vocal melody. However, often singers who use only their voice as their instrument find it easiest to begin with the lyrics, and then create a melody for those lyrics. I encourage you to create the melody and musical elements of your song as you go through the seven steps. You can do this with an instrument or with only your voice as your instrument.

You have a song inside of you waiting to come out, maybe many songs. It's just a matter of focusing your creativity and attention to sit down and get it on paper, write it, sing it and perform it. Songwriting allows you to express your inner creativity and connect with the world. Someone else feels what you're feeling and is looking for a song that expresses what they feel.

Songwriting means many different things to different people. For some it's a way of expressing inner thoughts and feelings, while for others it's a way of telling stories or exploring themes.

There are so many different approaches to writing a song. Some people start with chords, some with lyrics and some with a melody. Sometimes the chorus comes first, sometimes the verse and sometimes just one line. There's no one way to do it. There are people who write fragments of songs and let the ideas percolate and grow inside of them until the song comes out, maybe even weeks or years later. Others write their songs all in one go.

That's how I write songs: I sit down and write until it's done, which keeps me focused until the song is finished. It's a matter of what works for you. Anyone can create with enough focus and openness. If you feel stuck, just write without judgement. Ideas are always popping into your head. If you feel 'writer's block', you may just be analyzing your thoughts too much. Write anything that comes out and edit it later. Open your mind, open your heart and bring the song out. Let it flow like a river and you

can control it later, as you go through the process and come back to edit it.

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I've realized after years of attending and hosting open stages and shows and spending time around hundreds of songwriters, maybe even thousands, that anyone can write a song - not everyone can write a good song and very few people consistently write good ones, but anyone can write one. There are so many ways to write a song and anyone can do it, and do it quickly, if they focus and decide to get it done. Some people thrive creatively under pressure and some require more space and freedom. Maybe everyone has the potential to write good songs, but not everyone will tap into that potential and connect with the energy and creative flow required.

I've found that there are a lot of songwriters out there who write one good song, one that really connects with people and emotionally moves them. I've often wondered why that is. I've heard songs that I absolutely love and I want to hear more songs of that quality from that artist, because I love the song so much and they just never write another song that has the kind of energy that connects with everyone who hears it. It's an interesting phenomenon. Maybe that's why there are so many 'one hit wonders.' Maybe there is a way to tap into that brilliant creative energy consistently and some people do it. It may be any combination of awareness, practice, experimentation with different ways of writing, constant exposure to new music; it's anyone's guess.

As a songwriter, I find that my best songs come when I feel an *urge* to write a song. I may not know what the song is about, but I know that it's time. I sit down and pick up a guitar and the song flows out. Usually it's not the whole song that comes so easily; it's the first verse and the chorus. That's when I start to explore where the song is going. I used to write songs not really thinking about the meaning at all, just allowing them to flow through me. Then afterwards, I would read the lyrics and see if I could figure out the meaning. I didn't edit my early songs. That's something that came later and now I see the value of it. The key is to edit it to make it the best representation of the idea, while still maintaining that magical element that holds the emotion that came from your heart and your soul.

If you continue to write, you'll find that at times you feel stuck and don't know how to finish, where to start or how to make your songs sound different from the others you've written. That's when doing something different and learning from other songwriters is really helpful. I've found that learning new tuning, a new chord or a new rhythmic pattern can help. Co-writing is also a great way to experience other perspectives on the writing process. It can breathe new life into your songwriting. Sometimes structure helps. That's where the seven-step guide comes in. It's a way for new songwriters who don't know where to start, those who have written songs and feel stuck, to start with a pattern and break their old patterns, by trying a new perspective on approaching the song.

I took a songwriting course through the Berklee College of Music online, taught by Pat Pattison. That was after almost twenty years of writing songs. I only recently started thinking about how I write songs and how to improve them, beyond focusing on just being creative and using songwriting as an outlet. Now I think about songwriting as a craft in a more conscious way. This course opened up a whole new world for me. It was very heavy on the technical side of lyric writing, storytelling and the effective placement of words for the greatest impact. I learned so much about why some songs connect and why others don't connect as well as they could. I learned how to build the story, to create more meaning from the start to the finish of the song. These are the types of things that, when practised over and over again, become automatic. It's a matter of learning a formula that helps focus the creative energy into something tangible and understandable by others. Then, once you learn what's possible, you can branch out and flourish creatively, breaking the rules when you want to and writing



with purpose.

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The purpose of this guide is to give you a structure to write a song: a formula that produces a result. You decide how the song unfolds. This is your creation. The formula is here to guide you along a path you may or may not have been down before. After you finish this book, continue to study and search for new tools available by reading books, attending workshops, interacting with other songwriters and getting feedback from audiences. Workshop your songs in the real world and you will continue to grow and improve as a songwriter.

Whether you play an instrument or not, your voice is your instrument. Use this guide with your instrument on hand. Focus on the lyrics and melody or write the lyrics and find someone to write the melody and music with you later. This songwriting guide focuses on the songwriter as a wordsmith, one who uses tools to shape and mould creativity into a form that others can understand and be moved and inspired by. Everyone has the ability to write a song. It doesn't have to be perfect, so jump in and begin. It's easier to figure out what you want to improve on when you have something to work with. So let's get started.

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## **STEP 1: PICK A TITLE**

Do a one-minute brainstorming session. Fill your page with song titles, without filtering. Write everything that comes to mind. Time yourself for one minute. Then choose the title that resonates with you, the one that you feel compelled to expand into a song. If you're having a challenge deciding, close your eyes and point to a title on the page. Now you have your title. You can change it later if you want to. Decide and move on.

The title is often in the chorus of your song, although it doesn't need to be. The idea is to have a title that is memorable, so people can identify your song.

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## STEP 2: OUTLINE YOUR SONG

What do you want to say? How do you want to build the idea? Reveal the details of the story or theme in the verses and the main idea in the chorus. Is it a happy song, a sad song, a love song, a song of realization? What do you want to say and how do you want to build the idea? Express how the characters feel, not just with descriptions of their emotions, but with imagery that leaves the listeners with a clear picture or movie in their minds. Write down the ideas you want to include and how you want to clarify them as the song progresses. The chorus gains more meaning each time it's repeated, from the details expressed in the verses. The chorus holds the song together and reminds the listener of the song's meaning, while the verses give increasing clarity to the story or idea being expressed, as you go along from the beginning to end of the song.

Here's an example of a song outline, showing a progression of ideas. The lyrics of the verses are not written in the outline, only the summary of what those verses will express.

**Title: \*On the Other Side of Goodbye**

Verse 1: Past: Yesterday you left me lonely. You could only say goodbye.

Verse 2: Present: Today, I understand that pain is a choice and freedom comes from letting go. I'm ready to say goodbye.

Chorus: On the other side of goodbye

I shed the heavy load  
On the other side I can fly  
Love is an open road

Verse 3: Future: Tomorrow holds amazing surprises and a love that will surpass what was before. I'm so glad you said goodbye.

Chorus: On the other side of goodbye ...

\* The song title came from a list of titles in an assignment in the Berklee College of Music "Songwriting" course taught by Pat Pattison, in which I participated as a student. I selected this title and created the song myself

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## STEP 3: CHOOSE A PERSPECTIVE

1<sup>st</sup> Person: a) I and he/she or b) you & I (direct)

2<sup>nd</sup> Person: you and him/her

3<sup>rd</sup> Person: he and she

Be consistent, so the audience knows who's talking and to whom. Decide which approach best suits your theme and story. Are you telling your story, a story about someone else or a completely made up story? Use first or second person to bring the listener closer to the story, so they understand the feelings of the main character. You can use third person to focus more on the plot and create distance between the listener and the characters, while still drawing them into the song, like any well-told story does

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## STEP 4: RHYMING

What type of rhyme scheme do you want to use? What suits your song? Is the story expressing feelings of comfort, ease and joy? If so, you can use a flowing style of rhyme. For example, if there are four lines in the chorus, rhyme the first & third lines and the second & fourth, like in the example in Step 2. If on the other hand, your story is jarring, uneasy or expressing confusion, then it doesn't need to rhyme or you can use a less obvious rhyme scheme. If you have four lines in a verse, rhyming the first and last lines and the middle two lines will create a slight sense of unease, or you can choose to exclude rhymes.

Another way to create motion and feelings of instability in a song is to have an uneven number

lines in your verses or chorus. Many songs use three-line verses or choruses to bounce along.

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## **STEP 5: WRITE YOUR FIRST VERSE AND CHORUS**

Write the first verse.

Does it flow the way that you want it to, given the subject? Does it set the stage for the chorus to explode?

Are you using the five senses (touch, taste, smell, sight and sound) to create the scene for your listeners, in a way that draws them in and helps them really feel the song? You can do this by describing details of the scene, rather than just explaining where the story takes place. A clear picture is created by saying, “I feel the soft sand beneath my feet, as the waves tickle my toes and the stars twinkle in the clear night sky.” The listener understands that the character is on a beach at night, enjoying looking up at the stars and is engaged in a way that goes beyond the basic description of the scene.

Write your chorus.

Does it reveal the main idea or theme of the song? Does it lift up a level above the energy of your verse? You can achieve this by singing it in a higher key than the verses or using more major chords than the verses contain some minor chords. Does the song connect to the listener and draw them in? You can use repeated lines and memorable rhymes so that the listener remembers your chorus.

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## STEP 6: MATCHING VERSES

Now write your additional verses, matching the patterns of the first one, while growing the idea by bringing it through a progression to move the story along. Refer back to your outline and look at the structure of your first verse - the rhyming pattern, the number of lines, the pattern of line lengths. Your additional verses can have slight variations; nothing too drastic. That's where a bridge can be used, if you want to introduce an idea that really doesn't fit in a verse or chorus, yet adds something to the meaning of the song.

Add a bridge if you'd like. A bridge comes between two parts of a song. It usually happens later in the song and comes either after a verse and before a chorus, or after a chorus, going into a verse. It's a thought added that is often in a different key than the rest of the song or uses different chords, to introduce a new perspective or a hint to the story that doesn't belong specifically in the chorus or verses. It adds something new and interesting to the song. It's a transition that connects two ideas. A bridge isn't necessary. Only add one when it fits and adds something to the song, serves a purpose, and makes the song even better.

You can also have a pre-chorus that sets up the chorus, or a post-chorus that brings you back to the verse or to the bridge. Pre-choruses and post-choruses are often very short - one or two lines - and are used to build or decrease energy, creating a smooth transition into the next part of the song.

You can also add an intro that leads into the song or an 'outro' that leads you out of the song and closes out the idea, finishes the story, fading out at the end of the sonic movie.

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## STEP 7: REWRITE, REVISE, REVISIT

Go through the song and make sure that it flows in line with the story. Do sad lyrics feel sad? Do happy lyrics feel happy? Does the structure match the story? Is the main point clear and does it stand out? Is the progression of the story interesting and unique? Do you feel the story and connect with the song?

Revisit your line lengths, number of lines and rhyming pattern. Do the verses match each other structurally, with the same rhyming pattern or number of syllables per line? Do the verses progress the idea? Does the chorus elevate above the verses and stand out?

Go through the steps again to rewrite or edit the song so it is as strong as you can make it and the structure best supports the song ideas. Now play it and record it, so you remember the melody and chords. Perform it live. See how the audience reacts. Play it for friends. Get feedback. Correct and continue. Adjust what you need to adjust for the song to connect better with the listeners. Shorten or lengthen the song; add a sing-along part. Experiment and enjoy the process.

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## CONCLUSION

This is your guide; you can stray off the path and break the rules now that you know the path and how to get back on track. Practise following the path so you can always find your way back if you stray. Practise, play and enjoy. Rinse and repeat. Keep writing. Keep improving. Continue to grow and share your creativity with others.

This formula is in no way a replacement for workshops and coaching or writing with others. People become so familiar with their own habits that they often don't even notice them. It helps to have an outside perspective to identify what could make your songs even better. This guide is a way to get you going along your songwriting path, looking at your songwriting from a new perspective. It's here to help you write in a way that is different from your usual way. It's a road-map for your writing. I recommend augmenting this formula by attending songwriting workshops and songwriting circles, reading books and blogs, getting coaching and discussing songwriting with other songwriters, going to open stages and immersing yourself in songwriting and creativity.

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## INTERVIEWS WITH CANADIAN SONGWRITERS

Now that you have an idea of a structure for writing a song, it's important to talk about inspiration. Songs are a creative art form. Yes, it's important to have a structure and know how to have the song flow, but it is also important to forget structure and allow the creativity to flow. Chris Birkett, a ver-

successful producer, songwriter and musician, said that when it comes to writing a song, it's important to allow the song to flow through you, without thinking too much about it. Afterwards is the time to go back and edit the song. This is a great approach to take, to really feel the song and express the emotion. The energy and emotion of the song comes from your unconscious; and the editing comes from your conscious decision to mould the song into its final form.

Inspiration comes from many places, including from other songwriters. Our musical environment shapes how we connect with songs, how we create them and how they manifest themselves. After writing the seven-step guide, I realized that there's great value in exploring the source of creative inspiration, the songwriters that have shaped my perspective, some consciously, some unconsciously. So I chose to interview some of my favourite songwriters, many of whom happen to be Canadian. I started out contacting songwriters who I greatly admire and ended up interviewing some of my favourite Canadian songwriters. Since songwriting is such a subjective art and different genres and artists influence different people, it's important that I give you a bit of my background and why I chose to interview these songwriters.

I had my first taste of songwriting when I was about six years old. I had just started piano lessons and I guess I always had a creative spirit. I learned a few notes and created a simple, one line song called "The Trumpet Song." I have no idea why I wrote about the trumpet on the piano. I guess that's what a six year old does, connects ideas that make sense to them. I didn't make another attempt at songwriting for another three years. I wrote a short melody with lyrics, a capella and never sang it for anyone. It was called, "We'll Always Be Friends" and I wrote it about a friend who moved away. It was six more years before I wrote another song.

At age fifteen, I started writing poetry and lyrics and creating vocal melodies. Then I learned to play the guitar and had no idea where to start with songwriting. I was still studying piano, but it was classical music and I didn't know how to be creative and write the style of songs that I was listening to, on piano. I knew so little about the guitar that everything was an experiment. It was this wide open field of creative joy. I made up chords and found out what they were afterwards. This was after I learned a few chords. Armed with my brother Lars's guitar and two chords that my other brother, Jason, showed me (neither of whom actually played instruments) I started experimenting on the guitar. Then my mom hired my brother's friend Rob Smith to give me guitar lessons. He showed me a few chords and one of the most important yet simple things I ever learned about songwriting.

I was eager to write songs on guitar and had no idea where to start. I had never thought about the structure of a song or how to write one. I had learned so many classical pieces on the piano, but those songs didn't have lyrics and didn't seem to have the same structure as the pop/rock songs that I was listening to. So, Rob asked me to pick a song that I really liked and wanted to learn how to play, then he would show me the structure of a song. I chose "Heaven" by Bryan Adams. Rob identified the chorus and verses and said that it was easy - just write a verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, verse and chorus and you've got a song. It all sounded so simple; everything clicked. Why didn't I see that before? It just wasn't on my radar. By the next week I had written a love song with an intro, three verses and a chorus. I then knew how to write a complete pop/rock song.

We learn from everyone around us and our environment. I grew up listening to the music that my brothers listened to – Phil Collins, Genesis, U2, Sting and The Police. There was also the music that everyone listened to in school – pop, rap and later, grunge. It was at age 14 or 15 that I really got into discovering music for myself, buying albums and watching music videos and interviews of

MuchMusic, being in awe and inspired by all of this new music that I was hearing – Bryan Adams, Blue Rodeo, Crowded House, Nirvana, Treble Charger, Green Day, Odds, Sloan, Oasis, Chris Isaak, Barney Bentall, then Gin Blossoms and later on Jeremy Fisher. This is where my inspiration came from. A whole new world opened up.

Then when I moved to Toronto, I was introduced to the indie music scene, open stages (where people can sign up to perform), songwriters' circles and tons of concerts every night of the week. I saw indie artists performing live, like Danny Michel, Luke Doucet, Bob Egan and Oh Susanna. I got to see some of my favourite artists perform in clubs, where they would interact with the fans – Blue Rodeo, the Jim Cuddy Band, Greg Keelor, Zuckerbaby and Treble Charger. I also started going to festivals like the Stardust Picnic, Summersault and Edgefest, where I saw bands like Green Day, Our Lady Peace, Sum 41, Smashing Pumpkins, Great Big Sea and so many more that I had seen on MuchMusic. There were festivals where popular bands would play unannounced sets in small clubs, like NXNE and Canadian Music Week. This was an eye-opening experience and creatively stimulating. There was a period of a few months where I was going to shows and open stages every night of the week, playing five open stages a week and writing two or more songs per week.

Whether you're just starting out as a songwriter, or if you've been writing for years, there's always more to learn. I've met experienced songwriters at workshops who are there because they're committed to always improving as songwriters and they take every chance they get to learn more and grow. You can either grow and develop as a songwriter or stagnate and lose inspiration and motivation. Choose growth and you will connect with the passion that keeps you going and allows your creativity to expand.

These interviews are here to inspire you, show you how other songwriters got started and developed their craft, what they do when they feel stuck or in a pattern with their songwriting and what advice they have to pass along to new songwriters or those looking to grow and develop their art. Enjoy the interviews as I did, where you'll get a peek into the creative minds of some influential songwriters respected by their peers and able to express the emotions of their songs to inspire and move audiences and listeners. They have all had success as songwriters to various degrees and have fans who love their songs. All of them have inspired me as a songwriter and as a person and I highly respect them and appreciate having had the opportunity to interview them.

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# Jim Cuddy

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Blue Rodeo was one of the first bands whose music really moved me in a way I hadn't felt before. I think that maybe people gravitate towards a certain style of music that really connects with their soul. For me, that's alternative country or country rock. It's like my heart melts and I get this warm feeling of being home, when I hear a song that I really connect with. The first Blue Rodeo song I heard was written by Greg Keelor, the other half of Blue Rodeo's songwriting duo. "Hasn't Hit Me Yet" (from the album *Five Days in July*) drew me into the alt-country world, and then when I heard Jim's songs "Bad Timing" and "Five Days in May," I was hooked.

I first got to meet Jim at an outdoor Blue Rodeo festival, the Stardust Picnic, an annual event that they used to organize in Toronto, before the annual summer show moved to the Molson Amphitheatre. One thing that I really admire, besides his amazing ability to write songs that are so moving and tell such great stories, painting a scene in your mind, is how down-to-earth and welcoming he is with his fans. He has a way of making those around him feel just as important as anyone on the stage and he makes an effort to connect with his fans. The rest of the band is like that, too. They welcome fans and appreciate those who enjoy their music. I think that it says a lot about someone, that not only are they committed to the craft of songwriting, but they take on the responsibility of everything that goes along with it, too.

Blue Rodeo has been an inspiration to so many bands and songwriters. They take it upon themselves to mentor new artists and have developed a music scene around them, bringing younger bands on tour, and having bands open for them, like Cuff the Duke, Matt Mays & El Torpedo, Justin Rutledge and Jim Keelor's band, the Devin Cuddy Band. Blue Rodeo are known for touring across Canada in the dead of winter each year and I've found when travelling in Canada that I come across places they've written songs about, whether it's Blue Rodeo songs or Jim's solo songs - "Whistler," "English Bay"; there's mention of Pyramid Lake ("Cynthia"), Golden and Lake Louise ("Maybe Sometime"), the Rocky Mountains, Halifax, St. John's and PEI ("Countrywide Soul"), and a song called "Mattawa" on the new album, *In Our Nature*. They are truly a Canadian band.

Jim also fronts his own project, the Jim Cuddy Band. I love their music just as much as Blue Rodeo. There are some shared members between the bands and yet the Jim Cuddy Band has a distinct sound that is different from that of Blue Rodeo.

Jim Cuddy is a songwriter whose talent runs deep and he continues to have a major impact on the Canadian music scene. You'll notice in some of these interviews, other songwriters talk about how his songwriting has influenced them or how they admire or were inspired by him and what he has accomplished.

**SIGNE: Do you remember the first song you ever wrote?**

**JIM:** When I was younger, about 12 or 13, I wrote some songs that were imitative of songs that I was learning. I kind of rewrote [Gordon Lightfoot's] "For Lovin' Me," that kind of thing. The first real song I ever wrote was when I was about 15 and it was about high school anxiety. I played it at parties.

**SIGNE: Who are your favourite songwriters?**

**JIM:** I think there's a difference between being a huge music admirer and being a songwriter admirer. So, I started out as a huge music admirer, a fan of The Beatles and the British invasion. I loved

that music, but that wasn't the kind of music that necessarily made me want to write songs. It was the singer-songwriters that made me want to write songs. Bob Dylan, Kris Kristofferson and Gordon Lightfoot; their songs really resonated with me. Then I discovered Jackson Browne, when I was about 18. His songs had an emotional component and a melancholy that really resonated with me. I've kind of followed that muse ever since.

**SIGNE: Have you ever met any of your favourite songwriters and what did you say to them?**

**JIM:** Well, I have met them. I've met Neil Young and I've met Kristofferson, Jackson Browne and Paul Simon. I expressed my admiration, but I asked them questions about themselves and tried to get them to talk about the details of their lives. I never really had the chance to sit down and say, "What were you thinking when you wrote this?" I'm not sure that that would be of value to me. I'm not really looking for another voice. I listen to Jackson Browne songs or I listen to Neil Young songs and I have extracted everything I possibly can from those songs. I don't really need to know what they are about. I want to enhance the songwriting appreciation and appreciation of who they are, what kind of people they are and whether I then believe what they are writing in their songs. I mean, I was a big Replacements fan and I went to see The Replacements and it was kind of weird when I met Paul Westerberg. I thought, "You aren't this character in your songs." It's a bit of a pose. So, that changed my appreciation of that. I think with these other guys, they are the people in their songs and so getting to know them just even briefly reinforced my ability to believe in their songs.

**SIGNE: What's the song that you have written that you are most proud of and why?**

**JIM:** Well, that's a really difficult one to answer, because every song has a reason for being written. I'm proud when I've written something that's clear. I was just driving with my daughter and a friend and her boyfriend and "New Morning Sun" came on the radio, and I had just been trashing somebody's lyrics (laughs). So, they started trashing my lyrics. I thought, okay, as I was mocking, praising myself, "I did get this song right. This is what I meant ... if you stand still, you will miss out on opportunities. You do need to rise up and take the sky like a new morning sun." That one I got right.

I appreciate the sentiment of "Bad Timing". I appreciate the crazy happenstance of "Five Days in May." Every song, for me to be able to inhabit it every night I play it, has to have some really high level of believability for me. So I can recall what I wrote about and go there for four minutes with the song.

**SIGNE: Do you approach songwriting differently now, than when you first started?**

**JIM:** Well, I think I approach it with higher standards. When I first started, I was looking to use my voice and use a style and if the lyrics didn't entirely make sense, there was sort of an abstract enjoyment to that. After a while, I realized, I didn't want to do that anymore. I want the songs to be clear and if there's an abstract moment, then I want to mean that. So, I think I approach it now with greater demand for clarity.

**SIGNE: There seems to be a common theme, with clarity.**

**JIM:** I'm not looking to be didactic and I'm not looking to have a story narrative. I like twists and turns in a song. I love the abstraction of Neil Young, the imagery that means something, or one image against another image that means something. I'm looking for all ways to communicate, but I want to be clear on what I am doing. I don't want to just throw something in because it fits rhythmically

because it sounds good. I want there to be a reason.

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**SIGNE: What inspires you?**

**JIM:** Everything. I am inspired by conversations. I am inspired by the lives that are lived around me. I am inspired by the life I lead. I'm inspired by my relationship with my wife and the kids and my family and my friends. I am inspired by things I read and witness in the street. I am inspired by my travels. I walk around and absorb; then when I go to write songs, something comes up.

I can remember in New York one time, we ate at a restaurant, an Algerian restaurant and the woman who owned it was cooking. She was so beautiful, but it looked like she had a hard life. The image of her, when she smiled, has never left me. I know that sometime I will use that image. I may even write that story. That's the kind of thing that I think you take with you, just being impressed by something and having questions about how this image came to be. How did this woman come to be in New York and have a restaurant and why is it so difficult? Why is there that look of pain on her face and why is there such a beautiful contrast between the pain and the beauty of her face. So, I think that everything inspired me and I'm not really able to write about it all, but it comes back at some point.

**SIGNE: What do you do when you feel stuck when you're writing a song? How do you get past it?**

**JIM:** I do feel stuck sometimes. I think everybody does when they write songs. My process is much different than when I was first starting to play guitar. I sit in isolation with my guitar or with the piano, and I just start playing. I start singing and playing. I try to make it play, not work. Sometimes I have to tell myself to just write a song without thinking about it being for Blue Rodeo or for my own solo stuff. Just write a song to write a song, because it's fun. Sometimes that will loosen things up. I have to have a couple of songs on the go, so that I can move one forward and then if I get stuck, I will move to another song and just work at it. I take the time. When I am actually writing for either of my projects, I go to the studio, I lock the door and don't come out for three hours. I stay in there and sometimes it's hard and sometimes it's easy.

**SIGNE: Do you usually finish the song in one sitting or do you come back to it?**

**JIM:** Very rarely do I finish songs in one sitting. It has happened occasionally, but more often than not the songs sort of possess me for a while and they germinate for a couple of weeks, sometimes a month. I have to stay working on them, because I really am possessed by them. I hear them in my sleep. I can't get them out of me until they're done. So, that's why I always have five or six songs on the go and maybe one I will get into and take around with me, and I will try to finish it. Sometimes I have to just force myself. With this last record, I was a little behind by the time we were recording. So, I'd go early. I'd drive to a place by some water, near Greg's place and just sit there. I'd say, "You have to finish this song before you go to the studio." I'd sit there with my guitar and finish the song. I'd get it to the studio and then do the final touches. Sometimes I'm putting my nose to the grindstone and sometimes it's just for inspiration.

**SIGNE: What's the song that you've written that has the most unusual story connected to it?**

**JIM:** It was unusual for me to write a song about the royal wedding. I didn't think that was something I was going to write a song about: "Everyone Watched the Wedding." I was kind of taken by the fact that so many people were going to watch it. I wondered what that was all about. That created a bit of a scene in my mind. I was a little bit surprised that it became a bit of an emotional song about having

grown-up kids and watching them from a distance, instead of watching them as if you're watching over them. So that one took me by surprise, the subject matter and what went into it from my own personal life.

**SIGNE: Do you have a piece of advice for new songwriters?**

**JIM:** I talk to a lot of people about this. I think that even though you start out as a songwriter imitating the people who you admire, you write in their way, the thing you have to strive for is to be your own songwriter. It's originality. Originality doesn't have to mean that it's never ever been written in the world. It just has to mean that it matters to you, that this is what you want to say, and it's your own personal originality. The world needs more songs, but the world doesn't need more songs exactly like other songs. It needs more songs that are unusual. So I think that striving to be original is everything. I didn't know how to write songs when I started, but I wanted to learn. You're not born knowing how to paint, knowing how to play an instrument, knowing how to write songs. It's a process. So, don't get discouraged.

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**Luke Doucet**

Luke Doucet is another great storyteller, whose songs are evocative. He creates a clear scene for the listener and brings out the emotion of the song, so you can really picture how the narrator feels.

I first heard Luke Doucet at a songwriters-in-the-round showcase, Radio Monday, hosted by Jason Collett at Ted's Wrecking Yard, on College Street in Toronto. It was a hub for the indie music scene in Toronto in 2000-2001 and this weekly songwriters' series brought in amazing talent. I remember one night they had both Jim Cuddy and Greg Keelor. Andy Maize from Skydiggers also played that night. Other members of Blue Rodeo would hang out there too. I remember meeting Bob Egan and Baz Donovan there on a few Mondays. They are also very talented songwriters. There were usually five or six songwriters on stage and they would each play a song and tell a story about the song, taking turns and sometimes jamming or singing with each other. On that night that Luke Doucet played, Dan Mangan and Michel also performed. That was a great night for discovering new music. I proceeded to buy their albums and I've been going to their shows ever since. They just keep getting better.

Luke fronted a band called Veal in Vancouver in the 90s, then in 2001 he released his first solo album *Aloha, Manitoba*. This was the first album of his I heard. When he came out with *Broken (and Other Rogue States)* in 2005, I was blown away. This is still one of my favourite albums ever. It's the perfect break-up album.

Luke has played guitar with other artists as well, including Sarah McLachlan. Now Luke plays in band, ~~Whitehorse~~, with his wife, Melissa McClelland, and they recently released their second album *The Fate of the World Depends on This Kiss*. They both front the band and write the songs. Melissa also had a solo career prior to forming the band with Luke.

I had an amazing opportunity to see Jim Cuddy perform with ~~Whitehorse~~ at the Legendary Horseshoe Tavern in Toronto recently, during the NXNE festival. It was an awesome super-group. They played songs from Jim's solo albums, Blue Rodeo, Luke's solo albums and ~~Whitehorse~~ songs. It was a beautiful sonic mix that fit so well together.

**SIGNE: When did you first start writing songs and how did you get started?**

**LUKE:** I started writing songs when I was a little kid. I started playing guitar when I was about 11 and I started writing songs immediately. I mean they weren't very good, of course, but it struck me that that was probably something I wanted to do and I didn't think of it as something I would need to do for any kind of career aspirations. Of course, I wasn't thinking about career at all, at that point. I was just writing songs because I thought, "Why not? It's fun."

**SIGNE: Did it run in your family? Were there other songwriters in your family or was something you started on your own?**

**LUKE:** Well, my father was a musician. He is still a guitar player, jazz musician, and plays blue folk and rock 'n roll. He was living in New Orleans most of my young life and then he moved to Winnipeg when I was 13. So, as I started playing music, he sort of showed up in my life, and so was able to be a really great mentor and a friend to me as a musician, for sure. He wasn't really a songwriter and there was nobody else in the family who was writing songs per se. My mother was a writer, a creative writer. She was a nurse and she was raising six kids, so she didn't have a lot of time to do that as an artist, but I think if she had had time she probably would have been very much inclined that way.

**SIGNE: Who are your songwriting influences?**

**LUKE:** That question about influences is always a tough one, because I think we don't choose our influences. I can tell you who I want to sound like. I can tell you who I would like people to think I'm influenced by, but the fact of the matter is, you're influenced by your surroundings and you don't necessarily choose your surroundings. So I would love people to say, "Oh, wow, he sounds like John Lennon," or, "He sounds like Bob Dylan," or, "He sounds like Neil Young," or, "He sounds like Tom Petty," or, "He sounds like Tom Waits." I could go on and on. There are lots of people who I really love. I love Randy Newman. I love J.J. Cale and I love Willie Nelson. I could list 300 people that I like. In the last five years I've listened to more Sloan than anything else. That question about influences has always been a really challenging one, because like I said, I don't think we choose our influences. If you live in a neighbourhood and your next door neighbour blares Metallica day in and day out, that's going to influence you. It doesn't mean your music is going to sound like Metallica, but it means maybe you're going to be influenced not to sound like that. Maybe you really don't like that and so you are going to make a specific, concerted effort to never play heavy music. Your environment influences you a great deal and you don't really choose your musical inspirations.

**SIGNE: Is there a songwriter who you admired a lot and you got a chance to either meet or work with them and what was that experience like?**

**LUKE:** Actually I've worked with a lot of songwriters over the years. I spent so much time as a young person in clubs. I started hanging out and playing music in bars when I was 15 years old. I remember when I was 15, at The Pyramid, in Winnipeg (it was called The Spectrum at that time), I would see Crash Test Dummies, who were just breaking [out]. I would see Brad Roberts [lead singer of Crash Test Dummies], who was an ambitious writer, and I found him inspiring. Then I'd see Crash Vega (Colin Cripps and Michelle McAdorey) as they came to town to play. They were really inspiring. I saw Jerry Jerry and the Sons of Rhythm Orchestra and they were really amazing. Then Rheostatics, I got to hear Martin Tielli, Dave Bidini and Tim Vesely's songwriting and they were really inspiring. I've had a chance to meet all those people. In many cases I've worked with them in different capacities.

**SIGNE: What's your favourite song that you have written or the song that you felt the most joy or accomplishment from writing?** **LUKE:** I don't know that I have one. Songs are like your children in a lot of ways. You care about them a great deal at very specific times, like when they are at a young age, when your songs are brand new, they're these fresh new ideas and that's exciting. I have songs that I just keep playing again and again, that never seem to go away. I would say that "Broken One" is one of those songs. It has a couple of different versions. That one seems to stick around and always finds its way into a set list.

Melissa and I are really enjoying playing "Devil's Got A Gun" these days. That's a fun one. In many cases I enjoy old songs that I wrote, that may be more obscure and I think, "Wow, that was a nice one." There's a song called, "No Love To Be Made Here Now" - off *Broken (And Other Rogue States)* and I really like that song. I don't play that song anymore because it tells a story and speaks to a part of my life and my background, but I don't really need to tell that story anymore.

"Broken One" was spawned off that record as well. Melissa and I kind of reconfigured it and now it means a slightly different thing than it used to; the context has changed.

**SIGNE: "Broken One" is my favourite song of yours. I have a question about another song on *Broken (And Other Rogue States)*, called "One Too Many." I find that the lyrics are so beautifully crafted in that song and the lines that really stand out to me are, "It takes a uniquely fucked up man to break his own heart and the right girl at the wrong time to make him do it. So, if I am the guy and you're the girl and the time is now, I'm as broke as any man could be." Those lyrics stuck with me since I first heard them and I'm wondering when you craft lyrics like that, is it something that just flows out of you or is it something that you're carefully thinking about?**

**LUKE:** Well, I'm always hoping to write something that people will laugh at or that will give people a pause, whether it's humour, heartbreak or something more interesting. Sometimes they [lyrics] just fall in your lap, but you can only try so hard to come up with little witty quips. You always want to have them; they're great, those little turns of phrases and couplets that make people stop in their tracks. That's kind of what the whole job is about as a lyricist, but it's easier said than done. It's easy to say I want to have that. It's kind of like when somebody comes up to you and says, "Hey you should write a song that everybody sings along to." No kidding, that's what I've been trying to do my whole life; thanks. You really want to have a line in a song that makes everybody laugh or that everybody quotes to their friends. That's the whole name of the game. Sometimes you're successful and sometimes you're not.

**SIGNE: What do you do when you feel stuck with your songwriting?**

**LUKE:** I guess I just try and think outside the box, change my paradigm. It depends on what you're stuck on. If you're stuck on lyrics, stop thinking about lyrics, think about the group, think about the guitar part, think about the melody, think about the flavour. Then maybe that will inspire a lyric. I really like something that John K. Samson said once. He was quoting somebody else and I can't remember who. He was talking about writer's block and he was saying that artists always complain about writer's block, but it really is essentially a First World problem, because bus drivers don't get bus drivers' block and plumbers don't get plumbers' block, school teachers don't get school teacher block. You just do your job. As a songwriter, I think it's kind of the same. You have a job to do and you've got to write songs.

Now obviously, there's not necessarily somebody sitting there watching the clock going, "Hey, you are not producing," but in some cases that's actually going on. Sometimes we'll be working on a record and we've got studio time booked. We have a producer hired and it's time to have songs. You like to think that songwriting is more spiritual and creative, that the muse is a responsive lover and that whenever you decide you're ready, she is ready. That's almost never the case. There is something to be said about sitting down with a piece of paper and a pen and a guitar in your lap and going, "Okay, today I'm going to write a song." I would say that 50 percent of the time I do that, I get something that I like, whether I use it or not, I get something.

**SIGNE: What have you learned as you've grown as a songwriter? What are one or two of the key things that you've learned?**

**LUKE:** I used to be really hung up on telling the truth and my definition of truth has evolved. I think you can tell the truth and still lie through your teeth as a songwriter. I think your job is to be a creative writer. Listen to Tom Waits or Elvis Costello or Elliott Smith, who write really evocative, visual stories and I don't think for a second and I don't think anybody else should think for a second that they are telling you what actually happened in their lives. I think what they are doing is watching the world around them and embellishing on the things that they see. You see a guy crossing the street. What's he wearing? What's the look on his face? Where is he going and how fast is he walking? What time of day is it and what part of town is he in? With those pieces of information you make something up and that doesn't mean that you are dishonest as a writer. Honesty doesn't mean literally saying what's happening or what's not happening. It's interpreting the world around you in an honest way. We are creative writers; that's our job. I used to be more of an autobiographical writer and now I've realized that my only job is to create something that moves people in whatever way. That's what I've learned.

**SIGNE: Do you do a lot of co-writing and do you co-write with Melissa when you are writing for Whitehorse?**

**LUKE:** I do a lot of co-writing with Melissa, but the kind of co-writing we do is maybe not the kind of co-writing that people expect. It's very rarely the two of us sitting with a bottle of wine and candlelight and composing music together. Usually Melissa writes a song and sends me a GarageBand demo and on my own time I listen to it and I go, "Hey, this is cool, what if we change this to this?" And she goes, "Yeah, okay, let's change that, but I don't want to change that, because that's really the core." "Okay!" I say, "I understand now. So what about this?" Therefore we end up writing together. Now that's not to say that we don't send each other songs and they're perfect and they're done. Sometimes we send each other songs and in the end, it doesn't require a co-write.

I have co-written with other people. I've actually written a few songs on the new Sarah McLachlan

record [*Shine On*] and some of those were co-writes. That was a combination of what I'm describing sending songs back and forth to each other until we thought they were finished. We did also spend some time sitting together at Sarah's place, working on piano and guitar to figure out how to finish things up.

**SIGNE: I think that it's important to encourage people to find what they love to do and to have ambition and set goals, especially at a young age. So, I'm wondering, as a child, did you have somebody encouraging you to pursue songwriting?**

**LUKE:** I had people encouraging me to do whatever it was I wanted to do, but to do it well. I remember my mother clearly saying to me, "I don't care if you want to suck latex for a living as long as you're good at it and you enjoy it." Now that's pretty crass; it was meant to shock me. The point she was making is, "I'm not going to tell you what to do with your life, but I do think whatever you decide to do, you should do it really well and you should pick something that you like."

For example, when I was in high school, I was playing music sometimes four or five nights a week and I was making a living at it, even when I was 15 or 16 years old. My mother saw that my school work was sliding and she encouraged me to drop out of school, which as you can imagine came as a pretty big shock to me. My family has always really valued learning. What she was saying to me was "You have this thing that you care about, that you're working really hard at," (and that was my music) and her point was, "If you're not going to work hard at school, then don't waste your time doing two things half way; pick the thing you care about and do it really, really well."

Now, I didn't drop out of school. As it turns out, I found myself an opportunity to go to University of Winnipeg Collegiate, which is sort of a private high school within the university and by going there I was able to graduate early. So in a lot of ways what my mother was doing was she was kind of bluffing. I think she understood I wasn't going to drop out of school, but she was just trying to make the point that, "Look, don't waste your time, don't waste my time, just do the things that you care about and do them well." So, as it turned out I graduated early from school and ended up pursuing music full-time earlier than I had anticipated. That was the kind of encouragement that I got from my family.

I really value that and I tell my daughter that. I think time is precious, especially when you're young because you have opportunities when you're young that you don't have later on, and what I mean by that is you have time. Young people have time. When you're in your 20s, all of a sudden you have to make a living and pay the rent. Those things are time consuming and all of a sudden you find yourself doing a job that you may not care about as much. You can't practice your piano or your guitar or your songwriting for six hours a day if you are washing dishes in a restaurant. The time that you have to practice six or seven or eight hours a day is when you are a kid. Then when that time goes away, all of a sudden you have to be responsible for your life and you don't have that opportunity anymore. So, I'm constantly telling young people, "Now is the time to get really good at something." Whether that's songwriting or skateboarding or whatever it is that you want to dedicate your time to, you have an opportunity to get amazing at something and that is now.

**SIGNE: What would be your main piece of advice for a new songwriter, whether they are young or whether they are older and just starting out with songwriting?**

**LUKE:** Learn as many songs by other songwriters as you can; that is the most important thing. Ron Sexsmith is one of my favourite songwriters in Canada and we were on tour one time. It was a Blue Rodeo and Friends tour. It was myself, Ron Sexsmith, Oh Susanna, Justin Rutledge and Blue Rodeo.



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