

In General

Which writer was it who complained of agonising for weeks over one sentence? Was it Brahms who wrote standing up for five hours every morning then spent the rest of the day pottering and the evening playing in a drinking joint? Some of my sons' best songs began in the studio with a drum track, followed by a pattern of guitar chords. (Brainstorming would produce an idea, then some lines and gradually a song would materialise while the record company shelled out hundreds of pounds an hour on studio costs!)

People have different ways of working. These two chapters, "In General" and "In Particular," are about the ways in which I write songs. They are not meant as a comment upon other writers' methods or their work. My songs tend to be rather formal, tight, and structured. The same applies to my writing and speaking styles when it comes to discussing work. I may adopt a *teaching tone*, a preaching manner. I think I began holding forth like this when I became a mother—I transferred the method to stagework when trying to give coherent introductions to songs. One had to sound purposeful and concise, with a minimum of pauses, *ums* and *ers* and *wells*. This stood me in good stead when I began lecturing on nuclear power for BANG but it may be disconcerting on paper.

Two traditions were ever-present and interlaced throughout my childhood: the formal and the traditional. They presented me with a vision of music that is wide and elastic.

Formal Music Training

I am glad to have had it. It lets me know in theory what I am doing in practice. It encourages me to see the relationships between the kinds of music that I enjoy. It got my hands and my stamina into shape with endless scales and arpeggios. Participation in Dio's projects gave me an invaluable skill which I have used ever since: the ability to hear a tune and write it down on paper.

In songwriting, my training was especially helpful in constructing (and I choose that word carefully!) Brechtian pieces like "The Plutonium Factor" and "R.S.I." Knowledge of harmonic progressions helped in songs like "Nine-Month Blues" and "Gonna Be an Engineer." My love affair with the Lydian mode has consciously led to songs like "Four-Minute Warning" and the cross-relations I often use. My classical training has helped me to seek out different modes, formats and meters: "Emily," for instance, has been cast into $\frac{3}{4}$ for unaccompanied singing because the subject cried out for an uneasy meter. (I recently re-recorded "Emily" accompanied and the song slipped into $\frac{3}{4}$.) Knowing how to read music helps me to grasp a tune quickly and makes it easier for me to pitch unaccompanied songs before opening my mouth to sing. Charlie used to say he could hear me thinking when I sang and played folksongs. He did not mean it as a compliment. He felt it deprived me of the ability to really let go and sing "from the heart." Maybe he was right. Is it really a blessing to close your eyes while you sing and, if you choose, see the notes skipping across the staff lines? On the other hand, when I hear a tune or get an idea and am nowhere near a tape recorder I can just write it down. This has made my tune-memory lazy—but what you gain on the Ferris wheels you sometimes lose on the merry-go-rounds. Instinct is of paramount importance in the arts: there are elements of instinct that—paradoxically—I may have to relearn—or that I may have lost forever.

Traditional Music

... gave me an approach to language and a knowledge of the tunes that had developed along with that language. It introduced me to a variety of forms and subjects. My mother learned from listening to traditional singers and musicians that music can be simultaneously skilled, informal, and improvisational. Above all, it is obvious that folk traditions have unique survival qualities. Like a beneficent virus, the folksongs I grew up with not only permeated the society of my time (a horizontal spread) but they had penetrated the generations before me (a vertical spread). Logic tells me that they will continue *ad infinitum*.

Words and Music

For four decades I have sung traditional songs in concerts, clubs, and pubs; schools, street fairs, meetings, festivals, telethons, conventions, trains, and planes ... I even sang once in a circus tent. And it still intrigues me when, for instance, a group of teenage secretaries in Harlow (England) listen entranced to "Barbara Allen." Is this the kind of music they normally listen to? If not, what is it that holds their attention? As a child, I felt that the folksongs always seemed to fit in the mouth so easily. You didn't have to work to learn them the way you did the hymns at school. They kind of drifted in with the tide and fastened themselves to rocks on the shores of memory. Embedded in the form and content of the songs are codes that are the same as (or similar to) those buried in speech—and these codes, along with other linguistic factors, are highly particular to each language. Why is it that one language (Scots Gaelic) has more than two dozen words for "rain" and another language (English) has very few? Codes. How is it that two dissimilar languages can produce the same thought in very different words? (In "Union Woman II," Mrs. Desai used the phrase "born rich in the womb" ... English-speakers usually refer to the privileged citizen as "born with a silver spoon in the mouth.") Codes.

So why did the Harlow office workers respond to forms of speech they themselves would probably not use, like "it was in the merry month of May," and "the rose hangs round the briar"? They are urban English people and the song is rural American (albeit from British roots). It is the 1990s and the songs were made, as far as they were concerned, in the Dark Ages. I am convinced that even if we believe we are "with it," "right on" and that "advertising lingo rules, O.K.?" there is, deep down in all of us, a wellspring of traditional words and usages that we all hold in common. "Once upon a time" and "they all lived happily every after" are more than just the top-and-tailing of fairy tales. Each society has a water-table, a race memory of experiences and expectations that we all recognise, so that "Barbara Allen" can seem *déjà vu* to English-speaking people of almost any musical persuasion. Thousands of years of speaking, singing and telling stories has given us a set of what might be termed "cultural genes" that help to set the parameters of our cultural identity. It sounds high-flown and is surely not an original theory, but it should be explored and employed more by artists, writers, and singers, to say nothing of architects, road-makers, and builders of societies.

I have therefore used traditional models as a jumping-off point many times in songmaking. You can jump off at several stages in this process:

1. I began in 1956 by making ersatz folksongs (“When I Was Young,” “I’ll Never Go Back to London Again”). These pieces seem gauche to me now, as they employed language that I did not use in my own everyday speech (like *lad* and *O, sorrow be to me*) and outdated concepts like “I knew no greater pleasure than to follow where he led,” *etc.* But then I was rather gauche myself at the time, so the song was an honest representation of that point in my development.
2. I put new sets of words to folk tunes (“Better Things,” “Sentimental Journey,” *etc.*) It is an easy way to write songs—half of the job has already been done by someone else. It is also easy for people to learn your song if you put it to a tune they already know (“Votecatcher in the Rye,” “My Old Man’s a Dustman,” *etc.*).
3. I graduated to making better songs in the folk idiom; that is, songs that *sound* like folksongs (“The Ballad of Springhill,” “The Lifeboat *Mona*”).
4. I have occasionally used the old tune *and* the old form and just changed the words (as in “N is for Nobody,” “Housewife’s Alphabet”).
5. I have used a folk tune as a starting point only. You use the first line or phrase as a basis then take off into your own tune (“My Son,” “Different Tunes,” *etc.*). Only trouble with this is that often you don’t really know if the tune is yours or not. But then, does it matter?

Not everyone needs to enter the songwriting process so gradually. Courageous songmakers just jump in the deep end. I copied and borrowed by default because I lacked confidence. Later on, I copied and borrowed confidently, but I had to write several dozen original songs before I regarded myself as a *real* songwriter.

Content

Folksongs cover so many subjects! The battle of the sexes, class, children, racism, incest, strikes, murder, love, war, history, religion, *etc.* And in so many ways! (They can also perpetrate unconstructive ways of thinking.) They can be humorous, tragic, trivial, and earth-shaking, ranging from songs about the loss of a goose to epic laments on the fate of Napoleon. Anglo-American folksongs tend to convey information as well as atmosphere and emotions. The words are of paramount importance. There was a time when songs were printed on broadsheets and sold by the yard in the city streets. The longer your song the more money you’d get for it—so broadsheet pieces were notoriously tautological. The seasoned traditional songs are more economical. They have been honed by generations of singers, who added to (but mostly subtracted from) the original text. The fewer words there are, the more important each word becomes, and these processed texts can be wonderfully sparse. Much of the background information is implicit. Because many of the folksongs were made at a time when a songmaker could count on listeners having a stock of community experience in common, there was much information that was left out because everyone already knew it. So you are often given a skeletal story and expected to flesh out the details from your own imagination.

This often allows the writer to operate outside of a strict chronological or literal framework. The old songmakers could skip years between verses or leave out several links in the chain of cause-and-effect. They would switch abruptly from dialogue to description, from the present tense to the past tense (see “Emily”). They’d begin the song right in the middle of the action (see “Song for Calum”). “The Judge’s Chair” was consciously patterned after traditional ballad forms, which use a number of these features (see “In Particular” for an analysis). It is quite common for a song to be moving sensibly along when all of a sudden a seeming *non sequitur* is thrown in to provide a new insight into the situation, to turn the action in a new direction, or maybe to check if the listener is still awake. I used this technique in the first verse of “Woman on Wheels.” In line 1, you are an able-bodied listener. By the end of line 3, you have a set of brakes. By the end of the verse you are directly included through the use of the pronoun ‘we’. The real turning point is line 7, which is a total *non sequitur* but which assumes that you were present at a crucial time, pushing the wheelchair. So by the end of the first verse you, the listener, are totally involved.

The folksong traditions that I grew up with are largely narrative and rarely deal in generalisations. The detail that is given is important. The hero or heroine are recognisable figures—they are often named and they are not there just so that things may happen to them. They are working, doing something, or going somewhere. They have family connections. Their economic status is important, as is the time of year and the place. As the “folk” made music not for a commercial market but for their own pleasure and that of their communities, the local features of the song were vital and helped to reaffirm the community identity (see “Abbey Wood Roads”). The texts often contain time-honoured traditions and assumptions, instructions as to acceptable behaviour, pointers to social expectations. All of these things contribute to cultural continuity and can be powerful props for the status quo. On the other hand, oppressed groups can give voice to their feelings either subtly or blatantly through the songs. These are just a few of the messages carried in folksong. Decoding them and learning how to use the methods in which they have been musically and linguistically packaged can be of invaluable use to a songwriter who wants pers (see “Glossary”) creations to stand the test of time.

Form

What a treasure-chest of types and formats the folk tradition holds: catalogue songs, riddle songs, narratives, lyric songs, historical, funny, solemn, short, long, philosophical, nonsense songs . . . patient Griselda, the biter bit, the surprise ending . . . parody, satire, joke songs, riddle songs . . . the ABCB quatrain, the rhyming couplet, the repeated burden . . . you could go on forever. The old songs have given me so many ideas for new songs! “Hey Ho, Cook and Rowe!” was originally entitled “The Landlord’s Nine Questions” and was based on “The Devil’s Nine Questions.” The idea for “Bush Has Gone to Rio” came directly from a children’s scatological piece. “Can’t Pay, Won’t Pay” is the same format and tune as “Pick a Bale of Cotton.” “Enough Is Enough” was written after reading an Elizabethan catalogue song.

I try to write different *types* of songs. If I wrote totally out of feeling and in character with my own body-rhythms and emotional leanings, I would probably only make slow, lyrical songs. But three of those in a row and the audience (see “Glossary”) is asleep. Also, there are subjects I wish to tackle that would be ludicrous in a slow, lyrical style. When I was evangelising on the subject of nuclear power, I needed songs that would appeal to different types of people. I wrote five contrasting pieces, each effective in its own way. Because they are so different, you can even sing several of them in a row.

Consider: A cat peeps round a corner at a mouse. Write about it in the first person singular, from the point of view of: (1) the mouse, (2) the cat, (3) yourself as spectator . . . and so on. From there you can go to a projected scenario and write in the first person singular from the point of view of (a) the dog that is about to chase the cat; (b) the driver who is about to swerve to avoid the chase when it starts; (c) the canary, watching from the safety of the cage in the kitchen window; (d) the hungry kitten awaiting its meal . . . and so on. Or you can approach it from the first or third person and write (a) a sad song about the cat's deprived kittenhood and the emotional importance of food; (b) a bawdy song about the cat's love life and why it is ravenous all the time; (c) a dialogue song between the cat and the mouse; (d) a catalogue song about all the things the cat would like to eat or catch, ending with the mouse; (e) a descriptive song about the cat's present home life; (f) an anti-advertisement for canned cat food; (g) a philosophical song about the theory and practice of hunting . . . and so on. The mind boggles at the possibilities.

A song can be any length. The Elizabethan song "Constance of Cleveland" lasts twenty minutes. The following gem from the U.S.A. can last from twenty to thirty seconds, depending on how you milk it:

Meet me tonight in the cowshed,
Until the cows come home.
O, I know it is only a cowshed
But to me it is home, sweet home.

I had a broadsheet mentality for several decades. Many of my songs were very, very long and included every single thing I wanted to say on the subject (see "Talking Matrimony Blues," "I'm Gonna Be an Engineer," "Different Tunes," *etc.*). I have recently been trying my hand at musical squibs and songs of no more than three or four verses. These require much more self-discipline as you cannot afford to waste a single preposition. They often take longer to write than a song with a plethoric, tautological overabundance of superfluous words, but they are wonderfully satisfying. I have starred these shorter pieces in the "Subject Index" so that they may be easily located.

Generally Speaking

I have put the songs in chronological order because I was interested in the *process* of songwriting. The notes benefited from this sequence, and as I wrote them the book began to be an historical as well as a personal document. A number of the songs are so particular to their time that they needed a long note to explain them. But even if a song is out of date, it can be interesting as an expression of its time and it can show how a particular writer tackled a particular subject. Such songs can also contribute to the huge ideas pool that I myself fished in. I couldn't cope with the idea of living in an ivory tower, smiting my brow for inspiration. I stole ideas from almost anywhere—cartoons, newspaper articles, people's conversations,