

# About Song Writing

by Denise Larson

## Where do song ideas come from?

The songs are everywhere. There's almost nothing around me that does not present itself as an idea for a song. A song-writer is someone who has developed the technique to translate that energy into song form; we are people who have tuned ourselves to pick up on the rhythm and melody contained in a situation or an emotion.

## What encourages the mood that makes for the creation of songs?

For me, contrast, intensity and aloneness; those are the three most important elements. Movement and travel offer contrast, space, and often solitude, and if at this time I am feeling intensely about something — or I am in conflict about something — then I have the right setup to create a song. Often I will begin something at this point, and finish it up later at home.

Intense feeling, for me, seems often to contain its own rhythm and melody. A lyric line, with melody, will surface — and when it does you have to be completely self-centred; you must be alone and you must know that you're not likely to be interrupted. Something around you is being channelled through you, and it is essential that you have the room to feel it. In my experience, the muse is temperamental and unsympathetic and she does not stick around for long. Coffee helps give me the clarity I need to get my ideas down, but if you're not a caffeine addict at this point, I hesitate to mention this!

## How does performance help the songwriter?

I have been writing and performing hand in hand for so long that I can hardly imagine one without the other. The stage is where you try the stuff out, and it doesn't take very much time to know whether or not your new song is making it or not. The important thing, I think, is to feel really solid with a new song before using it in public; give it the best chance it can have. It's equally important to be able to assess the audience before you try new material on it — not every audience will be receptive to a soft little ballad, for instance, but that doesn't mean it won't have merit somewhere else.

Performance has always been a very important part of my music — not just as a testing ground, but also as a source of energy and affirmation. When my music is reaching people — when we are communicating and shar-

ing a sort of emotional trip together — then I know I'm doing a worthwhile thing. I am encouraged, and I continue to listen to the voices, and I continue to try and write!

## What happens to a song in the time from conception to final recording?

Many things, of course, but the most important is that it takes on definition, it crystallizes in one direction or other, it blooms and it takes on colours — but it should not lose the essence that it had in the very beginning. That essence, after all, was strong enough to allow the song to surface in the first place, and it must remain the core. What begins as a melody in my head comes to life as I add guitar, complete the music, finish the lyrics. My musician friends add their parts — a bass line, fill, a solo or two. We play it on stage for months — maybe years! — and then we tape it in a studio. The producer, arranger, myself, and a few studio musicians then go through the process of pre-production, confirm what musical direction the song should go in, and what instrumentation would best accomplish what we need. We who record on independent labels of our own remain, of necessity, part of every step of the process; we are usually the project co-ordinators as well as the artists. The process sometimes seems absolutely endless. In the end, though, there is great satisfaction in having seen the song through all its paces — while still remembering the very moment when the first line sang itself in our heads.

## What suggestion do you offer to other songwriters?

First, take yourself seriously. Women, especially, tend to have a lot of detail in their lives; lots of distractions. Try to get into a schedule of doing what must be done in the mornings, and save time in the afternoon for yourself; time to think and practice and write. I'm still trying to perfect this rhythm. Sometimes a number of days on end is needed to get something down — and you can't ignore the dirty house! Then, difficult as it may be, you should go somewhere else — I used to go to Lighthouse Park when I lived in Vancouver. Out-of-town gigs also provide a good writing situation for many people — those afternoons are uncluttered.

Don't get discouraged. Some songs take 20 minutes, and some drag on for months. Don't get so self-conscious that it interferes with your willingness to be open. Try to think of yourself as the vehicle — the voice — of the song, rather than the subject. A listener more often, I think, sees himself or herself in your song, and is not really thinking "Did you really do that? How can you say such a thing?"

## **Any other points?**

Buy yourself a cheap little cassette recorder for the car so you don't lose snatches of ideas. I used to think that if my ideas were so good, I would remember them. Well, either my ideas aren't any good any more, or I'm becoming senile, because I find myself forgetting nine out of ten of those ideas — and driving (alone) is conducive to writing.

And one last thought. Writers can be fragile types — it is absolutely necessary that we believe in ourselves so we can maintain the momentum and discipline required to keep writing. Be careful who you show your new song to, and with whom you share your new ideas — and don't share them too soon.

Let your ideas cook for a while, and know what it is you mean to say. Be solid with yourself; in touch with yourself. And finally, give yourself every chance.