

Creating an MA in Songwriting

Andy West, Senior Lecturer in Commercial Music, Bath Spa University

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Introduction

In this paper I will discuss some of the challenges I have faced while developing a postgraduate curriculum in a relatively undeveloped field of academic study. In my role as a Senior Lecturer in Commercial Music at Bath Spa University, I have been developing a Songwriting Master's Degree to be introduced in October 2007. The curricular design of the MA draws upon my experience, over the past fifteen years, both as a teacher of songwriting in Higher Education and also as a professional songwriter in the U.K and the U.S.A. Whilst a number of the challenges faced in developing the curriculum concerned pedagogical relevance and balance, there was also a need to the frame the provision as part of a meaningful academic progression.

During 2006 I spoke with professional songwriters, HE academics and undergraduate students worldwide in order to gain a clearer understanding of the epistemology and pedagogy of songwriting. Later that year I interviewed London-based music publishers with the aim of developing a greater understanding of the qualities they have observed, and would typically look for in a professional songwriter. Finally, to ascertain the level and nature of pedagogy they would anticipate at Master's level, I interviewed undergraduate Songwriting students currently studying at Brighton Institute of Modern Music, Liverpool Hope University and Bath Spa University. The thoughts and ideas of each of these respondent categories were instrumental in the development of the curriculum.

An Overview of Key Pedagogical Debates Around the Subject

Songwriting is often described as a 'problem solving' exercise; the songwriter has an idea they wish to express and the problem that needs to be solved is how best to use a combination of musical and lyrical language to both reflect the nature of what needs to be expressed and to communicate the idea, or expression, to the listener. The pedagogy of songwriting is concerned with the facilitation of this problem solving ability; "students are not expected to acquire a pre-determined set of 'right' or 'wrong' answers. Instead, they are expected to engage with the complex situation presented to them and decide what information they need to learn and what skills they need to gain in order to manage the solution effectively. (They can)...explore a wide range of information...link the learning with their own needs as learners and develop independence in enquiry" (Savin-Baden, 2000: 3).

Some academics refer to the importance of 'absorption' or accumulated listening, claiming that the nature of what is heard by the songwriter leads to the development of a sense of 'embedded taste', adherence to which guides the songwriting process by directing the songwriter towards what he or she considers to be 'good' and 'bad' creative songwriting decisions; in this context, good decisions are related to elements of song that the songwriter has heard and considered effective in a problem-solving sense and bad ideas are those elements, or decisions thought not to have worked.

It is argued that it is impossible to write great songs without having heard examples of great songs (Webb, 1998: 14), and that; “most successful inventions... Represent ‘forward incrementation’ which basically takes existing ideas and takes them to the next step in the direction the field is already going” (Donnelly 2004: 156). Students may be able to enhance their learning by developing listening skills; “an involved commitment to music is a necessary requirement of the best composition and performance, and is a frequent outcome of intense listening” (Swanwick, 1999: 77). For the learner then, it may be necessary to become familiar with existing ideas, or songs. From a pedagogical perspective it may be beneficial to develop a songwriting ‘canon’ or frame of reference, which can be made available to students.

A number of my own students have expressed dissatisfaction with books on how to become a better songwriter, complaining that much of what is advised does not resonate with or have relevance to their own individual aesthetic or practice. From a pedagogical perspective, it is not too much of a stretch to imagine that the more didactic the instruction, the less original the work of the reader / student is likely to be. For example, one author lists a page of clichés that the songwriter “should never use” – broken heart, moon in June, etc. Fair enough, but what if the surrounding context leads the songwriter to make a decision to use a well-known phrase or rhyming couplet and, within the context of the performance, its inclusion succeeds in communicating the essence of the songwriter’s intent? Those who have heard one of Bob Dylan’s (critically successful) last three records will be familiar with tens of examples of such a ‘transgression’.

Strategies need to be developed to teach the individual within the group environment. It follows, that to steal a march on these publications such a canon should be inclusive to the extent that its content needs to relate somehow to the idiolect sought by the songwriter; “Specific idiolects pertain to Lennon and McCartney... Paul Simon... Bacharach and David... Individuality of idiolect, then, rather than originality is what songwriters outside the academy achieve, and the particular ways that creativity is harnessed is itself a product of idiolect... But idiolect can only be erected on a secure foundation of style... Thus even the teaching of technique needs to be harnessed to an understanding of the style within which a student wishes to work” (Moore, 2004). The teaching then, needs to be ‘reactive’ to the needs of the student. Renwick and McPherson (2002: 173), indicate that there may be value in inviting students to deconstruct and conduct analysis of their own selections. Perhaps a compromise, in which a broad selection of well-known examples of good songwriting would be accompanied by a ‘revolving’ set selected by students-in-residence might be appropriate?

The teacher should formulate the pedagogy to suit the individual; “teachers should try to determine which type or types of intelligence each student has and direct the student to learning activities that capitalize on these innate abilities” (Gardner, 1989). This strategy represents “part of a co-operative enterprise in which students and teachers work with each other towards ends which both induct learners into new ways of thinking and action as well as provide the means for them to transform their practices as needed by changing circumstance” (Boud, 1995: 215). Subsequently, teachers and students may benefit by working together in ‘co-investigative’ roles (Friere, 1970) wherein two types of conversation can exist; one internally, from

within our self to our self, and another externally (Thomas and Harri-Augustein, 1985).

“To be significant and enduring, learning must gradually come under the student’s control” (Regelski, 1983: 56). Those keen to set the student at the centre of the learning process endorse “the creation of a powerful learning environment, with students as active, self-managing agents therein....Students are further engaged in the learning process through reflection on what makes some organizational environments more creative in comparison with others, what factors tend to inhibit creativity, and how these factors can be overcome” (Morrison and Johnston, 2003: 151). Such an approach appears to value reflection on the process alongside actual practice of the process. Further, “for effective learning to take place, learners, whoever they may be, must develop the capacity of monitoring what they do and modify their learning strategies appropriately” (Boud, 1995: 14). This activity, which involves the student ‘thinking about thinking’, is known as ‘metacognition’; “when learners reflect on a recent experience....and when they try to identify what they are doing in that experience, they are engaging in metacognition. And when learners reflect in action, and notice, for example, illogicalities or errors in their thinking, then they are devoting time, however briefly, to metacognition” (Cowan, 1998: 147). Vygotsky (1998) seeking to combine both co-investigative and metacognitive strands of learning sees the role of the teacher as one of a guide who encourages self-reflection.

Blacking speaks of the need for analysis in study; “We may never be able to understand exactly how another person feels about a piece of music, but we can perhaps understand the structural factors that generate the feelings” (Blacking, in Frith, 1996: 97). Teachers of songwriting in HE regularly conduct analysis of ‘successful’ or known works with the aim of discovering the essence of what made those songs so significant. Given that most teachers and students agree that there is no ‘formula’ to writing songs, the aim, for the most part, is not to establish a set of ‘rules’ which can then be followed, rather the collected impressions are intended to act as a guide towards more effective practice. By de-constructing compositions, a student may gain insight into how a good song *might* be crafted. Each creative solution that is identified may be located somewhere in the learner’s developing ‘palette’, ready for future reference when required.

Teachers of songwriting in HE regularly invite students to play their compositions in a peer group environment. Students often learn in groups and this dynamic can enhance the learning process; “Assessment at seminars has improved since the introduction of peer-assessed presentations....Moreover, the level of concentration is high because each student is an active participant....Furthermore, students gain in confidence and become more aware of their strengths” (Hunter, 2006: 61). Tunstall (1979) acknowledges that artistic works are not so much free and spontaneous acts of individual creation as they are assemblages of socially meaningful signs, and “much learning occurs without any formal instruction, as a result of....interacting with the environment” (Piaget, 1970: 172). Reddington (2006) also emphasizes the value of peer group performance and discussion, in which students are invited to play new songs to the group in return for critical evaluation of the song in the form of a group discussion.

Variation of performance aesthetic and interpretive standard may render the notion of the song as an isolated artifact redundant; “Many people are going to perform it, and on some occasions it will sound like a ghost of itself, if not (worse yet) a caricature. The contrast is so great that many musicians and psychologists have maintained that there is no such thing as the piece” (Langer, 1953: 133). It is argued that song and performance are intertwined and that the nature of the song is shaped by the performance; “A song is always a performance and song words are always spoken act, heard in someone’s accent. Songs are more like plays than poems; song words work as speech and speech acts, bearing meaning not just semantically, but also as structures of sound that are direct signs of emotion and marks of character” (Frith, 1987: 97).

The performer’s interpretation of the piece may misinterpret the songwriter’s intention; “the way in which lyrics are sung, sarcastically, plaintively, etc, may belie the words on the page” (Cloonan, 2005: 79). It is argued that the same could be said of the level of compositional influence exerted by arrangement; some say a simple guitar or piano and vocal recording should be enough to represent a song, while others cite the need for a more sophisticated ensemble dynamic to emphasise mood and, perhaps, to reflect contemporary production qualities.

Academics are undecided on the level to which production skills should be included as part of songwriting assessment; some say it enhances communicability and therefore the song, while others maintain that a student of songwriting should not need to be skilled in production, and that the song performance itself should be enough to ‘communicate’ the intent. Likewise, there is a divergence of opinion among teachers on the degree to which production qualities are integral to songwriting. One explains how “I did not want the students to become involved in the technical aspects of song production unless they had decided that this was essential to what they were doing” (Reddington, 2006), whereas another claims that “The writing of a song, properly, I believe, entails the production of it as a sonic artifact... (stressing the need) to equip our songwriters not only with the creativity to determine their own niches, but also with the technical skill and competence to enter the ‘commercial world’” (Moore, 2004).

From a teaching perspective, subject expertise is given pedagogical value; “During the past decade renewed interest has been shown in what is involved in becoming an authority, expert, or competent performer in a given area of knowledge” (Lankshear, Peters and Knobel, 2000: 19). As a means of empathising with the learner’s creative journey, many academics are in agreement that it is essential to be a practitioner of songwriting to be an effective songwriting teacher. Expertise in the field of ‘known works’ is also required in order to understand new original works within the context of what has gone before; to conduct valuable critical discussion on the construction of creative works, it is argued, both the tutor and the songwriter must seek to understand the value of influences, the content of which informs the embedded taste that comes into play for the student songwriter.

Some academics, particularly those based in the US, seek to nurture commercially successful students while others view the aspiration of ‘creative self-control’ to be more important. One teaching philosophy encourages students to write about what they know about in order to develop a ‘creative voice’ (Reddington, 2006,) and

another commentator adds that most professional songwriters value the exposition of meaningful personal experience before commercial ideals (Pattison, 2006). Ironically, from the learner's perspective, the development of a means of self-expression may be a necessary component in achieving commercial success (See 'Songwriters from the Perspective of the Music Publisher').

Some teachers encourage students to begin with a title, while others recommend the discovery of an approach that best suits the individual. Indeed, many professional songwriters begin with a musical motif that puts them in mind of a theme and then seek to add a title at that point. Some commentators link 'attrition' to progress, noting that song quality improves with practice. Pattison (2006) stresses the importance of momentum, or writing regularly, in developing as a songwriter. The relative importance of melody and lyric is a point of debate to the degree that each seem to have an equal number of supporters (with just as many ready to claim parity between the two!). Some argue that to learn 'by ear' is enough to comprehend musical and lyrical structure, while others contend that theoretical musical learning opens the songwriter to a more expansive range of harmonic and melodic options. Certainly, devotees of such well known non-readers as Paul McCartney and Irving Berlin might argue that all that is needed is the ability to play an instrument and hum a tune.

Songwriting is occasionally viewed as a complex area in terms of assessment. Reliable critical judgement based on one person's opinion is problematic, as it may be subject to an element of subjective bias, for instance against the genre of the material submitted; "when music expresses something to me, it is something I am feeling, and the same is true of you and every listener...we cannot report our precise feelings in scientific terms; we can only report them subjectively" (Bernstein, 1976 in Frith, 1996: 42). For creativity to be assessed effectively, an appropriate methodology must be employed (Csikszentmihaly, 1997).

In one possible assessment model, students may be required to deliver a "portfolio with evidence of competence at the required level...the supervisor monitors the development of the student's competencies and the recording of these developments in the portfolio...The core of the procedure is: setting learning goals, making and signing a learning contract, performing it and assessing the achieved competency level" (Nieweg, 2004: 212). Another observer advocates a means of assessment in which evidence of craft and reflective skill are given equal attention; "in addition to however many pieces of work, the student is required to observe the process of working, after the event, and from this to produce a self-evaluating narrative" (Moore, 2004).

Swanwick (1999) argues for the development, within an assessment context, of explicit criteria which is qualified to positively assess technical mastery, formal relationships, expressive character, coherency and originality. Amabile (1996) posits a 'Consensual Assessment Technique' in which an open ended task which both elicits a clearly observable response and allows, within the assessment criteria, for a variety of flexible and novel individual responses. According to Amabile's scheme, a number of judges may then be called upon to assess the work; "Appropriate judges are considered to be those who have sufficient experience, ability and expertise in the domain to be able to evaluate the work in question and to have developed their own implicit criteria for creativity and for other qualities of the work, such as aesthetic

appeal, technical merit or form and structure” (Byrne, MacDonald and Carlton, 2003: 281).

Amabile’s criteria for the assessment of creative work would appear to fit the assessment of songwriting. The initial assessor should be a tutor who gets to know the student during the course, developing an understanding of the context, aims and objectives of a student’s work. This initial tutor has a clear idea, through discussion and observation, of what the student wishes to achieve within their chosen genre, and is able to assess the level of achievement accordingly. The second marker would have specialist knowledge in the field of songwriting, but would not have taught the student in question. This second assessor could moderate the initial assessment by adding a more detached critical overview that takes into account the quality of submission as it appears to the uninitiated listener. Discrepancies between assessors could be resolved through discussion, and where necessary, through the arbitration of a further external examiner. The first assessor is most likely to be the one best qualified to provide constructive feedback relevant to the student’s aims and objectives. Within the context of this feedback, assessors are cautioned against using figurative language which falls outside of the lexicon or experience of the student; “The trouble with figurative language is also its beauty; it is often indirect, circuitous at times, ambiguous....Some terms are appropriate while others are more remote from the ideas central to meaning and may result in the obscuring of communication” (Sheldon, 2004: 367).

Songwriters from the Perspective of the Music Publisher

During Autumn 2006, I met four London-based music publishers to discuss their views on songwriting and the qualities they felt songwriters needed to write songs at a publishable level. To reflect the broad scope of music publishing, interviewees ranged in commercial nature from self-published to multi-national. All were interviewed on the condition of anonymity.

Songs are of critical importance to the music industry;

“Without them there would not be a music industry.”

“I think the industry would quite like to do away with songwriters if they could, because then they could have this totally robotic machine....But without a good song that relates to people, no one is going to buy the record, no matter how much marketing you do.”

The act of songwriting is linked to the songwriter’s experiential range;

“It could be somebody who has gone through a certain experience in life, good or bad.”

Songwriters need to write from an individual perspective;

“Certainly for me the trademark quality of a publishable song is something that’s written from an entirely personal standpoint and perspective that has the ability to mean to something.”

“I personally would look for the personal songs that might not be so obvious, that actually reveal something of the songwriter.”

“Emotional truth with the magic of a great melody. If you’ve got those two things, it’s very rarely that it goes away.”

The songwriter bears the responsibility of creating a song that communicates a feeling the listener can identify with;

“Things you don’t have the desire, or the ability to express yourself...It’s like having that mirror held up for you.”

That combines individual experience with an element of universality;

“A lyric that we all understand but says it in a very original way. Those songs that last forever say something in a lyric where someone has cared to actually pinpoint something which we all feel, but they can articulate and connect with themselves personally.”

In order to develop craft, listening is invaluable to the songwriter;

“I think you need to have listened to, and been influenced by a lot of great songwriters before.”

This listening can be used to construct original works;

“Possibly take a little bit of this and a little bit of something else, then combine it and make it your own.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being influenced, as long as you put a bit of originality in there.”

‘Originality’ is key;

“As we jokingly say “cliches are very difficult”. I think it’s also very difficult for a songwriter to be original. A lot of topics have already been written about, but being unique and creative and original in your songwriting is the most important thing.”

“I’ve had a lot of writers come through my door and say ‘What Diane Warren writes, I can do that easily’. Well, I hate to break it to you, but I don’t think so. Let’s be realistic. Don’t look at what they write. You need to find it inside of you.”

It seems that, at some stage in the developmental process, analytical learning needs to be abandoned in favour of a return, to a degree, of the ‘individual voice’. Learners who are experienced in analysis but do not have access to a ‘individual voice’ may find their scope for further development limited.

On the subject of to the extent to which individuality is essential;

“I think most people like to hear the familiar with perhaps a little twist of something they haven’t heard before. So re-inventing the wheel every time you write a song isn’t necessary. I think to have a fresh angle on what you’re trying to say lyrically is more important.”

Critical reaction can help a songwriter to develop;

“I think a successful songwriter needs to be very aware of their space and time.”

Live performance is considered a meaningful way of eliciting this critical response;

“I think by performing your own songs you have an idea of what works and what doesn’t and that will improve your writing.”

“Most of the people I know who have careers as professional songwriters have nearly always started off as a performer of some kind, because they inherently know what works with an audience and that improves their songwriting. Without that, I don’t think you can be as good as a songwriter.”

Some publishers hear the melody first, and are candid about the relative importance of the lyric;

“I very much hear the melody first, then maybe I’ll pull the lyric apart and see how that works in terms of its imagery and what kind of sense it makes, but even then it doesn’t have to make sense as prose or in any kind of way at all.”

While for others, originality in lyric is more important than originality in music;

“I think originality is more important in lyric writing than in melody. I think melodies guide songs into genres, and to be honest, within the limited amount of notes in a scale, you’re going to be falling within pretty set parameters of pop, R’n’B, blues...a lot of it stems from the same root.”

“I don’t think there’s an original melody, unless you want to scream out of tune!”

A good recording, or ‘demo’ of the song should possess certain qualities;

“An amazing vocal is pretty important if you’re pitching a commercial song. The key is to get a singer who will inspire the singer it’s aimed at to want to sing it. So, either they might be an amazing singer and the artist will aspire to sing like them or they’ll deliver the song in a really emotional way which will connect with the listener. So, I think the key is a great vocal to deliver the lyric, whether it’s got a piano or a guitar behind it or the full production.”

To bring the song to the attention of others within the industry, it may be prudent to make sure the demo sounds like a master recording;

“In the UK it has become more and more important to have a really polished demo.”

“Unless it’s for Joe Cocker or Rod Stewart or someone where you can sit at a piano or on a guitar and perform a simple love song...In today’s market it would be foolish not to try and present a recording as close to what you imagine being the hit as possible.”

Publishers listed a number of qualities they felt were typical of successful songwriters;

The need to look for what is next;

“The music industry is like a big sea and it comes in waves. Everything in the music industry has a wave.”

“You listen to what’s going on in America, for example. Maybe the underground. You listen to new sounds and you don’t just replicate what you are told to do. You try and find where you think they are going next.”

Songwriters who are willing to develop collaboratively are valued;

“That’s the first thing, to know you’ve got a writer who is going to build, develop, deepen. Through experience of co-writing and through a knowledge of who they are writing for will just get better and better and deliver heartfelt, personal songs that will be universally loved, which is what a great song is.”

As are songwriters who are willing to learn;

“If it’s a new songwriter, that sense of being fresh, of being kind of wide eyed and willing to learn things and take things on, and not try and be Cathy Dennis at the age of 18, you know.”

A professional songwriter needs to develop creative momentum and should be able to discuss the nature of his or her own songs;

“You need them to everyday be learning about writing songs, through writing and discussion....That desire to wake up each morning and write songs, basically.”

To be able to accept criticism is key;

“I think you need to have quite a thick skin first and foremost.”

As is the need to be prepared for financial uncertainty;

“I’d say some kind of disillusioned optimist is probably the best person to become a professional songwriter. Somebody who actually manages to find enjoyment in the process. I think most people who have given up being professional songwriters have given up because of what happens after the song is written. And I think if you focus on ‘Have you written a good song today? Did it make you happy? Then I think you’ve got a chance of getting through.’”

A songwriter should possess a good work ethic;

“That absolute will and determination to roll up their sleeves and work at it.”

Be responsible for their own career progression;

“I think they have to be quite self motivated in getting themselves out there. I think the idea that a publisher does that for them has always been a myth. If it’s your career, it’s your life, it’s your mortgage, it’s your family, it’s you that wants to be the big hit songwriter, you need to be meeting up with other writers.”

And be skilled at dealing with people;

“I think you need to have good people skills because you’re always collaborating.”

“A songwriter with connections who pushes their way into places without offending anybody is really going to get down to the knuckle of what’s going on because they are not a suit in an office. They will be trusted.”

Publishers acknowledge that each songwriter follows a different path;

“They come in all shapes and sizes and with all sorts of temperaments.”

“I really feel that each individual case has a slightly different motive and different ways of achieving it.”

Some songwriters are keen to pursue a path in which they themselves perform their own works. Others are happier, or more suited to, writing songs for others to perform. Those in the former category need to be cognizant that the music industry relies heavily on genre as a frame of reference;

“In the music industry, they always try to label or compare something. They say “Oh, that lead singer of the Kooks, he looks and sounds very much like Mick Jagger in his early years.”

Those in the latter category may wish to develop their songwriting across a variety of genres;

“We work with Simon Cowell. He has a group of songwriters and he says ‘write me a certain type of song’. And they know how to write it and produce it because he wants to hear it in a certain way.”

At industry level, the assessment of a ‘good’ song is evidenced by more than one reaction;

“All you can ever do is go on your own reaction to it. But certainly the idea that something by an individual can have a resonance and a relevance, even if it is interpreted in a million different ways, that to me is always something I desperately hope for when I’m listening to a song.”

In reality, all works are inevitably subject to the whim of the market; ‘publishable’ and ‘published’ are inevitably two different things;

“A songwriter doesn’t write a hit. A record label makes a song a hit. A songwriter writes a fantastic song, then it’s for the record label to make sure that everything falls into place and that it meets with the right audience.”

Proposal for Academic Progression: Undergraduate Level

To initiate an holistic sense of academic progression, it was first necessary to establish the nature of songwriting pedagogy at undergraduate level. What kinds of teaching and learning strategies are being, or could be used to facilitate development prior to MA enrolment? The following ‘stage theory’ (which takes into account both the teaching and learning practices of other postgraduate institutions and the thoughts and ideas of fellow colleagues) refers to the way in which songwriting pedagogy at Bath Spa University has developed over the past three years.

Songwriting is viewed by academics and students alike as a means of personal expression, a record of one’s own condition and a means of communication. In my experience, personal expression, the content of which is directly linked to originality, is sometimes given little value at the initial stage of learning. The learner’s knowledge of ‘craft’ is often minimal at this point, and, shy of the breadth of lyrical and structural understanding required to communicate the essence of their intent to the listener, the work can come across as naive and inward looking. However, to direct a learner away from using their own idiolect is to risk guiding them away from the discovery of their own experience and identity towards an unquestioning obeisance of lyrical and musical trends. Perhaps the student should initially be encouraged to indulge his or her own personal means of expression without being assessed for communicability?

The most appropriate pedagogical approach for developing this ability may be individual tuition, wherein the student is afforded a supportive environment in which to explore their intended means of expression. Student - teacher dialogue may be used, alongside the work itself, to assess the degree to which the student is developing an ‘individual voice’. Once it is agreed by both parties that the learner has developed an individual voice, he or she may then go on to consider how their thoughts and ideas might be communicated to the listener. (Incidentally, the first song David Byrne wrote for Talking Heads was the classic ‘Psycho Killer’; some songwriters learn to communicate very quickly!).

The aim, at this stage, is for the learner to develop a ‘creative identity’. As a critical ‘co-investigator’, the tutor may suggest contextual listening relevant to the genre in which the student chooses to work, give reasoned and constructive critiques of presented songs, highlight structural and melodic points for possible consideration and occasionally improvise tasks for the purpose of guiding the student towards a more refined ‘creative identity’. This pedagogy focuses specifically upon the establishment of a connection between the songwriter and the song. Intensity of experience may be key to swift development as a songwriter (Webb, 1998:), and students are encouraged to consider the expansive richness of their own personal experience (many known songwriters have produced resonant and lasting works at the

same age as the average undergraduate; from Carole King, Jimmy Webb and Stevie Wonder to Mike Skinner and the Arctic Monkeys).

It is hoped that, given the uniqueness of individual backgrounds, the establishment of a creative identity that has personal experience at its source will have the potential to foster a sense of expressive originality that can be built upon. Through continuous practice and refinement of craft, the learner is encouraged, through examining and discussing with the tutor ways in which their lyrics find expression within various song structures and schemes of melodic contrast, to eventually develop a template, or 'palette', within which to create. Having gained a degree of creative control, the learner is theoretically free from then onwards to 'return to the well' and write more songs within the context of further learning and development.

Successful musical works should aspire to appeal to both "the subjective and personal worlds of individuals and...to the public worlds of musical practices and traditions" (Swanwick, 1999: 81). Having strengthened the link between song and songwriter, the second stage is concerned with developing the communicative link between the song and the listener. Students are given the opportunity to consider how their work resonates with a variety of audiences, both peer and public. Reaction and critical response combine to inform the learner as to which elements of their craft do and do not work on a communicative level.

During stage three, whilst continuing to build upon the skills gained in the previous two stages by continuing to write songs and play them live, students adopt a metacognitive approach, compiling 'evaluative documents' that reflect upon their songwriting methodology. This account develops alongside the tutorial prescription of a number of 'directed study' tasks. Prior to the setting of each directed study, students are invited to attend a lecture during which the tutor conducts analysis of songs that belong to the particular theme under study. Lyrically, these themes are 'genre-unspecific' in that they represent types of song relevant to virtually all modern songwriting genres, i.e. narrative, observational, love songs, etc. Song examples are used to illustrate structural and melodic approaches typical of, but not limited to, the theme, and the group are invited to discuss and analyse the song's identifiable characteristics.

Students are then asked, taking into consideration the lecture analysis, group discussion and their own creative identities, to write a song that falls within the particular lyrical theme. The directed study, or the writing of the song, takes place during the following week. Having written the song, the learner is then invited to reflect upon the process and evaluate the degree to which they were able to adapt the theme to their own creative identity. By reflecting upon the process in an 'evaluative document', students are able, via metacognition, to retrace the cognitive and experiential steps that led to the eventual completion of the song. During the first half of the next session, students perform the new song to the group, and the performance is followed by peer and tutorial critical discussion of the new song. In practice, some themes have proven difficult to incorporate, while others add new and hitherto unforeseen dimensions to the student's developing 'palette'.

The MA Curriculum

MA Creative Writing, a course which has been delivered with much success at Bath Spa University for nearly twenty years, seeks to enable the student to develop their abilities to a 'publishable' level. Given that publishable quality theoretically represents the highest level of creative work, this seems an appropriate aspiration for MA Songwriting. Because such outcomes are subject to the whim of the market, no student can be guaranteed a publishing deal for work completed during either the Creative Writing or Songwriting MA. It may be possible, however, to award a 'pass' grade to work which, in the assessor's opinion, ranks among that which has been and is being published, and therefore, it may be argued, *deserves* to be published.

The "successful music program is one that offers a balance and variety of experiences" (Abeles, 1994, P.277). Additionally, "developments in musical education in the UK, particularly over the last twenty years, have been concerned with direct experience of music, through creating (composing and improvising), performing and listening" (Durrant, 1995, P.7); the curriculum seeks to encourage research into songwriting by writing songs. These original songs are then examined by their authors (and occasionally peers) in a series of contexts: critical, historical, industrial, editorial, collaborative, practical and reflective. Some modules are student-led, requiring the learner to perform, critique and analyse both their own and other's songs, while others are lecturer, or guest-speaker based. A balance between teacher and student imposition of the learning process is sought, and assessment objects are varied to incorporate written, oral and recorded paradigms. Students are encouraged to communicate regularly with course tutors on a one-to-one basis throughout the course.

Semester One

Those who achieve a Masters award would be expected to be able to provide and interpret critical commentary on their own and other's works in the course of professional level discussion. For the MA, it seemed appropriate to extend the metacognitive reach to incorporate the disciplines of giving, receiving and reacting to peer criticism. Each week, in 'Solo Songwriting' (SW4001), following a short explanation of why and how the song was written, the student plays a new song to the group. The song is discussed by the group, and group members are asked to write a brief critique of the song before the next student performs and the cycle continues (until all have played new songs). Learners submit a 5,000 word critique at the end of the module.

In 'Historical Context' (SW4002), learners prepare and deliver a presentation that examines the cultural, structural, lyrical and melodic influences that inform their own songwriting. Using self-written songs and the songs of others, students are invited to trace their creative ancestry, and in doing so, come to understand, at a deeper level, the constructive nature of their own creative identity. Prior to assessment, this module will be teaching-led, based upon a series of lectures on the history of modern songwriting. Songs written by well known songwriters from Cole Porter to Amy Winehouse will be subject to tutor-led analysis and students will be encouraged to use examples drawn from lectures to generate ideas for their own presentation.

Students will anticipate that successful MA work will be that which deserves to be published. Consequently, each learner should be prepared for the eventuality that their work stands a reasonable chance of gaining market value. An 'Industrial Context' module (SW4003) encourages students to learn about and evaluate past and current industrial models and ask how their songs might thrive economically in a perennially competitive market. Industry speakers, including professional songwriters and music publishers will give talks and hold Q and A sessions. By means of assessment, students will be required to conduct research that leads them to make informed plans for the future financial exploitation of their own work.

Semester Two

At the end of the first semester, the tutor re-constructs the collected SW4001 critique into a new format. At the beginning of 'Solo Songwriting 2' (SW4004), each student is presented with their 'Critique Book', which contains the (anonymous) collected critical opinion of the rest of the group. Having received the collected critique, students are asked to rewrite songs based on the commentary of their peers. During the rewriting process, learners are asked to keep an evaluative account, the content of which, along with the re-written songs themselves, comprises the modular assessment object. This module is intended to reflect the ongoing process of criticism and creation familiar to the professional practitioner. The group playing and discussion paradigm that characterises SW4001 continues, with students playing re-written rather than new material.

Co-writing has a long and successful history in songwriting, and a 'Collaborative Module' (SW 4005) asks students to co-write songs with five separate collaborators. Anecdotally, many songwriters have found that the collaborators least similar to themselves have proven to be ideal writing partners, whereas a pair of apparently similar songwriters can struggle to ignite a creative spark. Many publishers claim that collaboration leads to a 'raising of the game' among songwriters, and actively encourage the process. For assessment, a CD of co-written songs is accompanied by an evaluative document that chronicles the collaborative process from the student's perspective.

'Recording Plan' (SW4006) asks the student to formulate a plan for the recording of their album (SW4007).; song choice, sequence, arrangement, production and a range of other relevant factors will need to be considered. Once the plan has reached a point where both the tutor and student consider the plan practicable and achievable, the student is cleared to proceed with the album itself. Assessment will be based upon the clarity and effectiveness of the 5,000 word plan. For learners less familiar with the technical / recording aspect, the 'Recording Plan' module (SW4006) also offers the opportunity to work with a technician who will guide the student towards an appropriate independent means of recording to a high standard.

Semester Three

Kelly's developmental planning model "...sees the individual as an active being, who is entitled to control over his or her destiny, and consequently sees education as a process by which the degree of such control available to each individual can be maximised" (Kelly, 1999, P84). SW4007 (Album Recording) aligns itself to a model

that “has the minimum control over student outcomes...the teacher serves as a facilitator and guide. The student is the centre of decision making...” (Abeles et al, 1994, P.275). In this instance, the student chooses his or her subject matter and works almost entirely autonomously towards a stated goal. The MA culminates in the recording of an album of songs, 75% of which must have been written during the course. Students who complete this (double) module by submitting at least 40 minutes of ‘publishable’ material, will have undergone a process that exists at the core of professional songwriting, that of demonstrating creative control over the initiation, analysis, arrangement and recording of a full length album of songs.

What Students Expect from a Master’s Degree in Songwriting

Students currently studying songwriting at three separate HE institutions were asked what they would expect from MA Songwriting. Again, respondents were guaranteed anonymity.

Comment on Course Philosophy;

“Any course on songwriting, especially a postgrad. Should really push people to the limits of their ability”.

“The idea is to broaden people’s musical palette”

“Tell people that the mainstream is a crowded place!”

Comment on Teaching Quality;

“Constructive feedback by demonstrably capable tutors”

“Talented songwriters who can teach!”

Comment on Pedagogy;

“Tutorials with teachers to have songs criticised”

“Specific goal setting with support and monitoring”

“I would expect my own work to be listened to and criticised”

“Collaborative feedback and measurement”

“Study the effects you can create (musically and lyrically) on the listener”

“How to connect to people”

“Learn from others, how they write”

“Peer assessment as well as tutor so you can get feedback from the people”

“To perform your own songs so you can hear them live”

“Case studies of different approaches to how a song works and more importantly why they don’t work”

“Different writing approaches – studying artists in depth”

“Analyse songs in their structure and format and analyse why they are so successful”

“Learn what makes a song good – why did it sell millions?”

“Workshops from songwriters with different styles”

“Talks from people making a living from their craft would be good”

“Meet working successful songwriters in order to understand the means of being a professional songwriter”

“To be able to collaborate with songwriters who are one step higher up the rungs of the songwriting ladder”

“Work alongside professional songwriters”

“How to work with other artists/lyricists/poets”

“Exploration into what you are feeling and how you can order and therefore write your feelings into a song”

“Measurability of improvement”

“Maybe do a study abroad month within the course where students from Bath Spa University go on an exchange with students from another University in a different country to write a song about the experience, in the style of the culture they have encountered”.

Comment on Course Content;

“Balance between lyrical and musical composition”

“How to use different instruments which I perhaps haven’t used to write with to develop my songs – something to take me out of my comfort zone”.

“Writing songs”

“New aspects on lyric writing so you don’t sound like everybody else”

“Accessing your feelings can be quite difficult sometimes, so it would be helpful knowing how to do this”

To write in the style of different genres/bands/artists”

“Performance – voice training to improve composition of melody”

“Modules for associated aspects like performance”

“Different genres and topics”

“In-depth look at many styles”

“Study classic or successful albums in great detail”

“Conventions and breaking them”

“All styles of music”

“Marketing – Promotion and distribution”

“Copyright and publishing law”

“Ways to get work published”

“What to do with your songs”

“Classes on the business side of songwriting”

“Songwriting as an art and as a commercial product and if and where the two meet”

“Thinking about instrumentation”

“Instrumental arrangement (strings, etc)”

“Recording techniques”

“Recording should also be a part of it”

“Recording studio supplied to demo songs”

“Production skills – working in a studio”

“An aspect of music technology would be useful to enable the recording of songs as well as the experimentation of using different sounds”

How the Curriculum Meets FHEQ Guidelines

Level M is academic work achieving Master’s level. These accreditation levels are nationally recognised through a common Framework for Higher Education (FHEQ).

Public confidence in academic standards requires public understanding of the achievements represented by higher education qualifications....The main purposes of the framework are...to enable employers, schools, parents, prospective students and others to understand the achievements and attributes represented by the main qualification titles...to maintain international comparability of standards...to assist learners to identify possible progression routes...to assist the Higher Education institutions, their external examiners and the agency's reviewers by providing important points of reference for setting and assessing standards" (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 'Framework for Higher Education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, January 2003, P.2).

Below, FHEQ framework definitions of Masters level study are *italicised*. The following commentary seeks to illustrate how MA Songwriting seeks to incorporate those definitions;

"Much of the study undertaken at Masters level will have been at, or informed by, the forefront of an academic or professional discipline".

The award seeks to combine opportunities for both academic rigour in the subject of Songwriting and student engagement in professionally related disciplines. To be at the forefront will mean producing original new songwriting that challenges the limitations of genre or extends the repertoire of an existing genre.

"Students will have shown originality in the application of knowledge and they will understand how the boundaries of knowledge are advanced through research".

Students will be required to produce original works and investigate at a deep level the mechanisms involved in their own and other's creative processes. A considerable amount of knowledge will be applied to original works, the developmental and inductive nature of which constitutes research in itself.

"They will be able to deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, and will show originality in tackling and solving problems".

Songwriting is widely viewed to be 'problem-solving' in nature, and students will be expected to realise creative aims by formulating lyrical and musical 'solutions'.

"They will have the qualities needed for employment in circumstances requiring sound judgement, personal responsibility and initiative, in complex and unpredictable environments".

Students will undertake a variety of roles that will not only exemplify professional qualities but also facilitate the acquisition of an experiential range that will further serve to increase 'adaptability'.

Masters degrees will be awarded to students who have demonstrated:

"a systematic understanding of knowledge, and a critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of their academic discipline, field of study, or area of professional practice".

Course materials, both paper and electronic, are drawn from current popular and academic discussion on songwriting. Further, course content is evaluated by the MA Songwriting 'Steering Group'; academics and professional practitioners with ongoing experience that purposefully informs the currency of the curriculum.

“a comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship....originality in the application of knowledge, together with a practical understanding of how established techniques of research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge in the discipline... Conceptual understanding that enables the student to evaluate critically current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline, and to evaluate methodologies and develop critiques of them and, where appropriate, to propose new hypotheses”.

Students gain a comprehensive understanding of their own research through metacognition and self-reflective documentation. Modules SW4001 / 4004 provide for both critical evaluation and the proposal of new hypothesis to occur.

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

“deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgements in the absence of complete data, and communicate their conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences”.

Songwriting involves the making of sound judgements in the absence of complete data (the complete data being the solution of completing the song itself). During the presentation, industrial Q and A and recording modules (SW4002 / SW4003/ SW4007), students are given the opportunity to communicate their ideas and conclusions.

“demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems, and act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level”.

Many of the tasks in MA Songwriting are based upon practices that occur regularly in professional songwriting practice; the performance, recording and critical discussion of songs (SW4001 / SW4004), re-writing (SW4004), collaboration (SW4006) and the recording of an album (SW4004).

“continue to advance their knowledge and understanding, and to develop new skills to a high level” –

Students advance their knowledge and understanding of ways in which their own work might gain commercial currency in SW4003. Songwriting skills are developed to a 'publishable' level.

And will have:

“The qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercising of initiative and personal responsibility, decision making in complex and

unpredictable circumstances and the independent learning ability for continuing professional development”.

Collaboration (SW4005) occurs in an environment in which the outcomes are subject to the malleable nature of creative synthesis. Initiative is required in writing songs, developing song performance and engaging in song discussion. Since the nature of the listener / audience response is, at the time of the performance, unknown, the act of writing and performing songs takes place under complex and unpredictable circumstances.

The Curriculum (Summary)

SW4001: Solo Songwriting 1 – Students play new original songs to the group (one new song per week is required of each student). The song is then discussed within the group, and each student writes a short ‘song critique’ in their personal journal. This critical commentary, which develops over 10 weeks, forms a 5,000 word ‘critique book’ that serves as the assessment object.

SW4002: Songwriting in Context – Lectures on and discussion of known songs from the western canon circa 1920–2005. Drawing reference to musicological developments within the relevant genre, students are required to evaluate four of their own songs within the context of existing repertoire. The object is a presentation in which students place their original work in context, illustrating and discussing resonances between their own work and the work of others.

SW4003: Industrial Landscape – An initial series of lectures delivered by key UK industry figures leading to a student-led research project examining ways in which their own creative work might gain currency within an industrial context. The object is a 3,000 word essay.

SW4004: Solo Songwriting 2 – The group continues to write and perform new songs as in SW4001, but this time each student is invited to respond to critiques of earlier songs as provided by the rest of the group. The object comprises a 2,500 word critical ‘response’ and a 4 song audio CD of songs re-written as a result of having incorporated the group critique.

SW4005: Collaboration – Students are asked to co-write with a minimum of 5 collaborators. The object is the submission of a 5 song CD with a 2,500 word accompanying evaluative document on the process of collaboration.

SW4006: Recording Plan – With specific reference to SW4007, students agree a plan of action with the tutor. Once the 2,000 word plan has been agreed, the student is free to begin work on the album itself.

SW4007: Album Recording – Students record a CD of original songs, at least 75% of which must have been written during the course. The album must be at least 40 minutes in duration. The object comprises of the CD album plus printed lyrics accompanied by a 2,500 word essay on the origin, analysis of and market potential of songs recorded on the album.

All modules are compulsory but allow for complete creative freedom in terms of song material and artist/analysis choices.

Appendix - The Process - Practical Considerations in Curriculum Design

The provision should comply with the school's strategic plan, in this case The School of Music and Performing Arts Strategic Plan 2005-2008. This document identifies departmental aims, and the planning process starts with an update to the school strategic plan which states the intention of the school to examine the feasibility of a Songwriting MA.

The Bath Spa University 'Course Planning and Approval' guide sets out a timetable for the completion of design and implementation stages. First, an 'Outline Plan' which details the proposal for new provision needs to be prepared by the course designer. This process begins 12 months prior to enrolment with a series of meetings with institutional personnel who will be directly affected by the provision. The date, nature and outcome of these meetings is recorded later in the Outline Plan. In this case, meetings with departmental representatives were scheduled concerning library and information services, marketing, registration, electronic requirements and curricular content (with the Head of the Graduate School).

The Outline Plan, which details rationale, institutional benefits, outline of modular content, effects on existing provision, market analysis, project milestones and risks, projected student intake, staffing, material, equipment and accommodation needs, start-up costs, fees and funding concerns, is then prepared by the course designer in collaboration with the head of school and the head of department.

10 months prior to enrolment, the Outline Plan goes to the Directorate and the Dean of Academic Development, who advise the Vice-Chancellor as to whether the plan is acceptable. 3 months later, the course designer completes a 'Student Handbook', which has been compiled in association with stakeholders. This document, which must have been reviewed by an External Subject Specialist, then goes to the AQSC for final approval.

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