



Songwriters on Songwriting

An Interview with **MARTY PANZER**, Master Lyricist

By Virginia Emrick for The Muse's Muse

September 11, 2011

How do you write lyrics that succeed and endure? Marty Panzer explains his thoughts in this candid interview, filled with the humor and heart he brings to everything he touches.

Questions	Responses
<p>If you hadn't become a songwriter, what career would you have chosen?</p>	<p>Shepard. They still get more work than lyricists. Honestly...I was Manager of CBS Air Control, when the songs broke... and, but for that... I'd still be there. It was a great job.</p>
<p>What do you see as the biggest change in the industry during the course of your career?</p>	<p>Lack of respect for songwriting. It's become a Producer's medium, more concerned with dance beats... than heartbeats. We're in the age of "Tracks," not "Songs." Barry (Manilow) says, "A song is something you can sing in the shower. If you need 50 tracks to produce your song... it's <i>not</i> a song... it's a record."</p>
<p>What recording of which of your songs means the most to you and why?</p>	<p>"New York City Rhythm" by Barry. It's been nothing but a JOY...since the day we wrote it. On the "Tryin' To Get The Feeling" album... On the "Live" album... as well as the thousands of times, I've heard him sing it on stage. It's always a joy. I'm always so proud... and I always remember, that when we wrote it... I said to myself... "Wow. We can <i>do</i> this!" My favorite <i>lyric</i> would be "I'll Love You Back To Life." Steve Dorff set it to music, and it was recorded by Davis Gaines. If you put me in a Cuisinart... that's what would come out.</p>
<p>If you could share one songwriting experience with a beginning writer (meaning they go through it with you), what would you share? What would you hope they gain from it?</p>	<p>The moment I realized the importance of developing your own voice. When I began to hear words and phrases, that sounded uniquely like <i>me</i>. When I heard the <i>real</i> Marty Panzer, in my lyrics... I happily realized that <i>that</i> was my greatest strength. Sounding... in a song.. as I do in real life. It's something every songwriter should aspire to. It's a quality that no one else has. You eliminate all competition. No one else is <i>you</i>. Just find your own voice.</p>

Questions	Responses
<p>What do you think are the 3 most important elements of a song?</p>	<p>The SINGLE most important element in a song... is that it touches you. That it makes you smile... or laugh... or cry. "To change the complexion of the day... That is the highest art."</p>
<p>What's your favorite part of teaching?</p>	<p>The apples the students bring. No... It's sharing the thing I love most... with others, who love it too.</p>
<p>What's the most common mistake you see from beginners?</p>	<p>Premature infatuation. They're often too happy to get to the end of the page, and don't take the time to refine and perfect, what they've written.</p>
<p>What do you wish every beginner knew or did?</p>	<p>LISTEN and learn... from the Great Songs. Find the words and emotions in songs... that made <i>you</i> want to write... and listen closely... Listen, so that you can hear...how it's done. We have the greatest musical heritage... Don't dismiss the past. Listen, and learn from it.</p>
<p>What musical trend do you wish would disappear forever?</p>	<p>Music made for druggies, to dance to in clubs.</p>
<p>What do you look for when you analyze a song?</p>	<p>A fee. No... that's not it... I look for the heart of the writer. I look for an eternal truth, told in an original way.</p> <p>Is it clear?... Is it original?... Does it move me?... Does it surprise me?... Can I hear the writers voice, in the lyric?</p> <p>When you hear a <i>second</i> verse, repeating the same idea you heard in the <i>first</i> verse... It's over. The writer had one idea, and after the first verse... had said all they had to say.</p> <p>Be sure, when choosing a subject, that it has enough depth, to explore and develop, so that you can create an interesting, and evolving lyric.</p>

Questions	Responses
<p>What are your thoughts about the “rules” of songwriting? Which ones should absolutely never be broken? Which ones should be?</p>	<p>There’s only one rule in songwriting.... The same rule that’s in glassblowing...Make it the very best it can be. If I’ve heard it before... and heard it done better... you’ve lost me. It must be <i>rich</i>... it must be <i>real</i>... it must be <i>heartfelt</i>. Use the language, and all its rhymes and rhythms... Use the templates of the Great Songs, as others have used them in the past. Don’t disparage them... Honor them. Use them, as all great writers have... to tell your own story. To find your own voice.</p> <p>Rules are not impediments. Rules are support.</p>
<p>What’s the most frequent question you’re asked about songwriting and how do you answer it?</p>	<p>“Does quality really matter anymore? “Does anyone... today... even <i>know</i> the difference?”</p> <p>Yes, it matters. It matters to everyone who will ever listen to your song. They might not even know it... but if you give them something <i>important</i>, something <i>beautiful</i>... something <i>profound</i>...something that <i>touches</i> them... they will respond to it.</p> <p>It’s like falling in love.</p> <p>No matter how cynical, or oblivious we are...it happens all the time.</p>
<p>What are your thoughts on the growing spread of the so-called singer-songwriter?</p>	<p>Well, I think Billy Joel could use to drop a few pounds...</p> <p>Johnny Mercer sang...Carole King, sang. The Beatles , sang. Joey the Stoolie sang.... (Oh... wrong kind of singing...) Michael Jackson sang... Now that I think of it... Doesn’t Barry Manilow sing...? Nothing wrong with that... if you can <i>do</i> both... you’re really, quite ahead of the game. You can at least present your songs to the world... the way you <i>want</i> them heard.</p> <p>So many songwriters have told me how often, when their songs <i>are</i> recorded... they barely recognize the song they wrote.</p>

Questions	Responses
<p>What was your best collaboration experience and what made it work? (You don't have to give specific details. I'm more interested about the process.)</p>	<p>I made an apple pie once...with a Dutch woman. She had an extraordinarily hot oven. You mean <i>songwriting</i> collaboration...? Everything I've ever written with Barry Manilow, or with Don Grady. Barry and I both <i>hear</i>, and <i>love</i>, the same things. Because of that...we always know how to please each other... and we always complement, each other, perfectly. We both have the same vision. That's not easy to find, in a collaboration. My collaboration with Don Grady works... because of Don Grady. He <i>inspires</i> me, with his enthusiasm. When I think I've taken my last breath... I just have to hear his voice... and I'm renewed. Writing with Don, is exciting...and joyful. Because, he is.</p>
<p>What was your worst collaboration experience and what made it difficult? (Again, I don't need specifics. I'm looking for problems in the communication, etc.)</p>	<p>Writing with people who didn't appreciate the value of what we had written, or couldn't make the commitment to the collaboration, that I expect. For some... writing is a "job." It's producing a "product," not a creation. Those people are more impressed, by <i>volume</i>, than quality. Collaborating is like co-parenting. It comes with many responsibilities, as well as many rewards. Not many collaborators can make that commitment.</p>
<p>Is there any song by another writer that you wish you had written? Why?</p>	<p>Every song by Johnny Mercer, Jacques Brel... or the Eagles. And "Cottage For Sale." Because they're the best.</p>
<p>What's your typical writing process? (i.e.: how you choose an idea, where you start the lyric (verse, chorus, outline), how you approach the rewrite, how you know you're finished, etc.)</p>	<p>I just talk to myself... until I hear something I like. It can be a beginning... a middle... or an end. When I happen upon something <i>special</i>... I know it. It has to be something I haven't heard before... and also... it has to sound like <i>me</i>. When I feel that I've found that...that drives my writing. That gives me the momentum to <i>keep</i> writing... and <i>re-writing</i>... as long as it takes. For me... that can be a very long time. But... if I really <i>believe</i> in the specialty of the idea, or the phrasing... I have an endless commitment. I know I'm finished... when it's as perfect as I can make it. It takes a lot of writing... to get to where you know that...but, after a <i>lot</i> of writing... I do. No one ever hears a <i>word</i> of what I've written, until I'm ready for it to be chiseled in stone.</p>

Questions	Responses
<p>What's the most overused song idea in your opinion?</p>	<p>Liza Minnelli said "there are three kind of songs: Boy meets girl, boy gets girl... boy loses girl." I stopped writing those songs, 20 years ago. There are so many less-worn topics, to choose from. Writing for Disney has been a God-send. The characters very often <i>aren't</i> boys or girls. They're Lions, or villains, or <i>statues</i>... Or trees. Once someone told me..."The tree wouldn't say that." I excused myself, and left the room to laugh hysterically, for thirty minutes.</p> <p>Two years later... I realized "He's RIGHT! The tree <i>wouldn't</i> say that!"</p>
<p>Besides songwriting, what do you like to do? And, how does it impact your writing?</p>	<p><i>Listen</i> to great songwriting. It inspires me. It never threatens me. I always think... "Boy THAT'S GREAT! I can do that. Sure... I can do that. Now let's see...<i>How do you do that...?</i>"</p>
<p>What should writers do to make sure their ideas are fresh, interesting, unique? (practices to follow, techniques, books, etc.)</p>	<p>LIVE the fullest life you can. READ... I read voraciously. Be AWARE. Listen to the world around you. What people are thinking... what people are <i>feeling</i>. Do your homework... check the idea against the universe of music, that's available to everyone today. Remember... the Eagles thought of <i>Desperado</i>. Bruce Johnston thought of "<i>I Write The Songs</i>." Michael Jackson thought of "<i>Billy Jean</i>." And... <i>oh.. yes...</i> Yip Harburg thought of "<i>Over The Rainbow</i>."</p>
<p>Anything else you'd like to share?</p>	<p>Can I have a piece of that cake you're eating...?</p>