



PUTTING THE "WRITER" IN SONGWRITER

by Phil Houseal

Have you ever listened to a song by an aspiring songwriter, and realized it sounded amateurish, but not sure why?

Successful songwriters know why. And one of the unexpected pleasures of interviewing legendary music artists is discovering their unabashed respect for high quality writing.

Larry Gatlin put it best: "One night a good old boy came up after a concert and wanted me to listen to one of his songs. I asked, is it as good as those 15 I just sang? He said no. So I said, why would I want to sing it?"

Ouch. Painful, but truthful.

"Overnight successes" have careers that were actually built on many days of study and skill. That should give us gratification that quality and content matter, even when the arena is a bar filled with smoke and honky-tonk music.

Here are the powerful perspectives of six artists who have played in the Hill Country, explaining the crucial role that writing plays in their art.

Marty Haggard said that any singer—even his dad Merle— "is only as good as his song." He considers himself a country artist, but he is a fan first of "the song."

"Someone said my dad could sing the phone book," the younger Haggard told me. "That's not true, I don't care who you are. Are you singing a song or telling a story? A lot of singers get a lot of credit, but the truth is, a singer is only as good as his song. That's all there is to it."

Marty believes in "keeping it simple" when writing. During his final edit he goes through line by line to see how many words he can remove without changing the story. Less is always best.

"A song has to say what you want it to say, but don't keep resaying it." He goes on. "I think it is a real gift to find words that rhyme and flow as if they fell out of mouth during conversation. That's easy to do if you're telling a story. It's really difficult if you're telling the truth. You cannot be a lazy individual and tell the truth

and make it flow, too."

Austin jazz musician **Kris Kimura** cites a quite different source in affirming the importance of writing.

"According to Mel Torme, my hero, the most important part of any music is you have to be true to what the composer originally intended," Kimura said. "Otherwise you are doing an injustice and disservice to this wonderful art. We should be proud of it; we should be coddling it; we should be nurturing it. That's what I plan on doing the rest of my life."

Thomas Michael Riley - Many of these singer/songwriters have backgrounds in English and literature. Texan Thomas Michael Riley holds a degree in English ("I crammed four years of school into six and a half years"), and sprinkles quotes from Thoreau and Emerson into his conversation. His stint teaching English did not hamper his songwriting ability.

"I was always going to write the Great American Novel, but I couldn't focus long enough," he said. "So then I went to short stories. I always enjoyed playing and singing, so that's when it hit me—it is songs. For me, that's the ultimate short story."

Michael Martin Murphey was an English major before he topped the charts with such hits as Wildfire, Carolina In The Pines, and Cherokee Fiddle. Behind that "aw shucks" cowboy image stands a man who studied his craft.

"If you want to be a writer for a living, it's a good idea to study music, literature, and read a lot," Murphey told me. "If you don't want to read the classics, there is plenty of other stuff. That's where you learn phrasing and rhyme schemes. I strongly believe in taking courses in college in poetry, and creative writing courses. Then write, write, write."

Mike Blakely perhaps most exemplifies the "writer" in songwriter. He has published 18 books. So it is obvious Blakely is

an avid student the language, as well as western history. Blakely got hooked when he started reading J. Frank Dobie books as teenager working the family ranch, and still aspires to that model of story telling.

"I enjoyed the way he could tell Texas history as a story," Blakely said of the western writer. "It's easy for people to understand. They lived a simple lifestyle that was all about hard work, not giving up when things get tough, and getting the job done no matter what."

He likes to weave that storytelling into his stage shows. In fact, the words are more compelling than the music.

"Writing is the most important thing to me," he said. "I approach music as a writer first, a vocalist second, and a musician third."

Finally, **Larry Gatlin** admits he is "in love with the English language." He believes that anyone can be a songwriter; but only a dedicated few earn the designation of song crafter.

"I'm not saying people can't write a song," Gatlin said. "When I lead a writing workshop, I explain that you all are songwriters. But I'll bet you aren't all song craftsmen. There is only one in here, and that's me. But let me help nudge you gently along that path to beginning to learn the art and craft of writing songs."

There is no shame in "learning as you earn." You are in elite company.

"Kris Kristofferson, Roger Miller, Willie Nelson, Mickey Newberry, and John Cash... those were wordsmiths," Gatlin said. "None of them were born writers, but they got better as they went along."

So to all you aspiring songwriters—listen to what these guys are saying.

Then go out and write. Really write.

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