

Songwriting for Geniuses

*25 Tips for
the Genius
in Everyone*

By Gene Burnett

INTRODUCTION

This little book is entitled *Songwriting For Geniuses* and is comprised of various “tips” that will hopefully help you write better, more satisfying songs. Please understand that I’m not saying that you need to be a genius to use this book; I’m saying that these tips are for the genius in you, whoever you are. I believe and experience that we all have a wealth of intelligence, creativity, and genius that most of us only tap into accidentally, if at all. This wealth of intelligence is what I call your “Genius.” It is far more powerful and wise than your conscious mind. It is sometimes called “Spirit” or “Intuition” or “Higher Mind.” I call it “Genius” and I have no idea what it is or what it’s made of or where it comes from. It just is.

My genius speaks to me in the form of sudden inspirations, as well as “right” feelings and “wrong” feelings, feelings of “Yes!” and “No!”, that resonate throughout my body. I have learned, with many years of practice, to tune into and listen to these feelings; to go where the “Yes!” feeling is and to slow down or turn back where the “No!” feeling is. I do what feels most deeply right to me, and I keep checking to see if what felt right to me once, still feels right to me now. I live this way, but you don’t have to. You can apply these principles to specific activi-

ties, such as songwriting. In this book I'll be specifically addressing people who write songs or who want to write songs, but you can apply these tips to all sorts of activities, as well as to any other art form.

My aim is not to help you write commercially successful songs. This book is not about song formulas or music theory. There are plenty of books and teachers out there who can help you with chord progressions, hooks, melodies, copyright law, publishing, and things like that. I know a bit about these things, but not enough to give you expert advice. What I do know about is how to write songs that are satisfying to me; songs that capture and express what I think, feel, and experience in my life. This is something I've been doing since 1975. I write primarily because I have to. Writing songs is just something I must do in order to feel like myself. Whether other people like them or not is out of my control.

The tips that follow will hopefully help you write songs that are satisfying to you, songs that will express your thoughts and feelings in ways that connect your life to the lives of those around you. Even if you choose not to share them with other people, my hope is that these tips will help you write songs that will be satisfying to play for yourself.

I invite you to try out some of these tips and see if they feel right, see if you like the results you get. If they do not, let them go. If they feel right and you get results you like, try some more. Experiment, live, learn, keep writing, and your songs will improve.



TIP #1

NOTICE THAT THERE IS A PART OF YOU THAT KNOWS WHEN A SONG FEELS RIGHT —AND WHEN IT DOESN'T

You can say this song is good, that song is bad, but no one really knows what a “good” song is. Everyone has their own criteria. But you do know when you like a song, when a song feels right to you or expresses something in a way that resonates with you. You can use this same sense to edit or evaluate the songs you create. In fact, I would say that songwriting is basically editing the flow of words and music that just pops into your head. No one knows where these ideas come from, they just appear. Creating is mostly editing. And who is the “editor”? Your Genius, that’s who.

So listen to some songs you like, and some songs you love, and some songs you don’t like, and some songs you hate. Notice your responses to each of these types of songs. How does your body feel when you are listening to a song you like or love, versus one you don’t like or hate? You can analyze the differences if you’d like to, but I suggest that instead, you notice the way your body feels. Where do you feel good when the songs you like are playing?

I like to think of different parts of myself either open-

ing or closing as I listen to music. For example, when I'm listening to a song with smart, funny, and poignant lyrics, certain parts of my body feel open, or like they are smiling. I usually feel this open or smiling feeling in my face or head. If a song is more emotional, I feel that open feeling in different parts of my body. An angry or energetic song might trigger sensations in my legs, back, and hands. A sad, mournful song might trigger feelings in my chest and belly. Listen to the effect different kinds of music have on your body.

My sense is that when I like a song, it's because that song has released a "charge" in me. It has found a place of suspended excitement or "stuck energy" and released it. This release can be slow and develop over time, the way some poems or novels affect me; it can also be fast and intense.

Whether the release happens slowly or instantaneously, it is unmistakable. It is not subtle. It is a strong feeling of "Yes!" If it is strong enough, I'll feel a strong sense of release every time I hear it for weeks. Eventually, this feeling of release wears off, but if the release was powerful enough, I'll always have a good feeling whenever I hear it, a kind of nostalgia for how I felt the first time I heard it.

So, listen for that released feeling in yourself when you hear a song you really like. That feeling can be your guide while you are writing or looking for something to write about. Here's a little secret: If you release a charge for yourself when you write a song, chances are, when you play it for other people, it will release a charge for them too. You'll both feel better, more relaxed, and free. If you don't release a charge when you write a song, if it's just an intellectual exercise, you can still write a song that people like. But even then, I suspect that just the act of successfully completing the exercise will release some charge.

It's a rare person who is completely cynical, writing with no joy or release, simply to make money or to get a specific response out of an audience. For most of us, the

songwriting experience is mixed: Some of what we write releases a charge for us and some doesn't. Sometimes the music will release a charge but the lyrics won't, sometimes vice-versa. My contention is that the more a song releases a charge for you when you write it, the more likely it will release a charge for other people when they hear it, and the more likely you will be satisfied with what you've written.

Be sure and pay attention also to the way you feel when you listen to something you don't like. My sense is that when I hear a song that doesn't feel right to me, that doesn't resonate, it is because it doesn't release a charge in me. My body will have a pent up or closed feeling, a feeling of something not being right. I can and do analyze why this is the case sometimes, but really, I think the best thing is just to notice how I feel when I hear these types of songs.

See if you can identify how your body feels when you listen to a song you don't like. Just get a sense of what that "not right" feeling feels like. I usually get a closed feeling in my throat, like I'm being asked eat or swallow something I don't like. Sometimes I'll get an angry feeling in my upper back, or a rejecting, disgusted feeling in my neck and mouth. What's helpful is just to feel how you feel when you don't like something.

Sometimes, a song will release a huge charge for literally millions of people and will not move me in any way. Sometimes a song that releases a huge charge for me will hardly do a thing for most other people. This whole thing is very subjective. But remember, my goal is not to please the world or help you please the world. My goal is to write satisfying songs, songs that please me, and to help you do this as well. In this ongoing process I've found it extremely helpful to develop this sense of what feels right and what does not. It's really simple. Just listen to songs and notice how you feel in your body as you listen. With practice it gets easier and easier to feel when a song is "on" for you

and when it is not.

If you are not used to doing this, I recommend you find a quiet comfortable place to sit or lie down. Have a pen and some paper nearby in case you want to take any notes. Put on some music and notice your bodily sensations. How does your body feel? It may sound simple (and it is), but it's easy to overlook. Which parts of you feel good, open, or alive? Which parts feel like moving? Which parts feel dull or tired? Write down your sensations along with the titles of the songs you're listening to.

I had a friend who did an exercise like this and came to a shocking realization: A song he had always "liked" brought only negative sensations in his body. He realized that he had always wanted to like this song because it was "cool" and he wanted to be "cool" too. But actually, he really didn't like the song. He learned this from noticing how his body actually responded to it.

When you are writing, you can use these same feelings and body sensations to help you decide what to keep and what to cut. As an artist, the way you can help other people release tension and be more themselves is to first recognize what "does it" for you and then "do it" when you write.

