



Should You Study Songwriting in College?

by Randy Klein

Do you have to go to college to learn to be a songwriter?

The answer is 'No', but I suggest you read on to see why attending college for songwriting might be beneficial.

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Songwriting is an artform. Well-written songs tell stories with emotional journeys which are heard and felt by an audience. When a song is not well-written, the audience tends to zone out and stop paying attention to the song. Unfortunately, most songs fall into this latter category.

So how can you learn to write a well-written song? Or, can songwriting be taught? To answer this question, it's important to understand how songwriting is learned.

Many say that songwriting is learned by writing songs. The more you write, the better you get.

I agree with this. But, if a songwriter doesn't know some basic fundamental rules of songwriting, they could write a thousand bad songs.

THE FIVE TENETS OF SONGWRITING

- Songwriting is learned by writing songs.
- Songwriting is learned by listening and observing songs written by other songwriters.
- Songwriting is learned by listening objectively to songs in order to recognize what is working in them and what is not.
- Songwriting is learned by taking the lessons learned from writing and observing songs, then

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applying the learned lessons to the next song you are going to write.

- Songwriting is learned through a cumulative process of exploration and creative surprises.

Which gets us to the bigger question – do you need to study songwriting in college to be able to write songs? The answer is ‘No’, and the answer is ‘Yes’.

This answer is determined by yet another question – what type of songwriter do you want to be?

There are songwriters who have limited formal songwriting education, but they have an innate knack for penning an emotion into music and lyrics. Their knowledge of how they write songs comes from imitating songs they have heard, and through experimentation using the instruments they play to write songs with.

These songwriters are commonplace, have existed since the beginning of time, and a good many have developed a unique voice for their songs in this way. I have found that these songwriters write because they are driven by their passion to do so. Some are singer/songwriters performing their own songs, and others are non-performing songwriters who utilize and rely on instrumentalists and vocalists to help interpret their songs. Many hit songs have come from writers with this background.

There are also songwriters with more advanced skill sets, who can write a song about almost anything. They may have developed their writing skills by listening and imitating songs in the same way as a songwriter who hasn't had formal training, but they have also learned the craft based on a coordinated approach to the study of songwriting, which is offered in many of the better college and university music departments.

These formal songwriting programs focus on the music, lyrics, and the business of music. Subjects typically included are:

- developing melody, harmony and rhythm
- song structure
- lyric writing
- rhyming
- the marriage of lyrics and music
- recording demos
- pitching songs to artists
- pitching songs for commercial purposes
- copyright and ownership of one's songs
- registration of songs with the Library of Congress and Performance Rights Organizations (PRO)

Songwriters armed with this body of knowledge often have the ability to write about most any subject and in most genres. Their learned craft allows them

to write about anything from an object, animate or inanimate, or for a background that fits to a dramatic action in a TV or film plot.

They have the ability to create songs on assignment that can be used in any type of situation that requires a song. These songwriters also have the ability to write for the trends, writing the next big hit with the hope that their song be picked up by a current pop star.

Regardless of whether a songwriter has taken formal songwriting training or is self-taught, placing a song into any of these professional situations is difficult. The success rate in song placement is slim, very much like playing the lottery. The success rate is low because opportunities are few and the business of music – and the politics of it – are involved.

Lastly, there are songwriters who write for musical theatre. These songwriters have a special skill set to write for an emotional moment in a scene, move the dramatic action forward, and paint the nuances of the character singing. Musical theatre songs have so many masters to answer to that most songs don't work. It is an advanced form of songwriting offered in only a few college and university songwriting programs.

DO I NEED TO STUDY SONGWRITING IN COLLEGE TO BE ABLE TO WRITE SONGS?

With all you can learn about songwriting in a formal songwriting program, you would assume that it is key to becoming a great songwriter. These programs do provide the foundation needed to write songs. They also provide an environment where a songwriter can play a song for their peers and get objective feedback, helping them become a better songwriter.

The ability to play one's song in a nurturing environment is invaluable and is found in the better formal songwriting programs. The unparalleled experience of song feedback, song analysis, and song critique is most essential to a songwriter.

But please remember, these formal learning experiences do not provide the songwriter with the main ingredient that all songs need to possess – passion and truth. These qualities must come from the individual songwriter.

Songs that translate best to the listener are usually well-written and come from a songwriter who is being true to his or her heart.

When I went to college, there were no formal songwriting programs. I learned by writing, listening and being overly passionate about writing songs, and I also started writing songs in my late twenties. Prior to that I was a keyboard player and musician. I became obsessed with songwriting.

I also wrote many bad songs along the way. I'm not sure if I would want to have learned any other way, but it would have saved me a lot of time if there was a course I could have taken.

IF YOU'RE THINKING OF STUDYING SONGWRITING...

Steve Lipman, founder of Inside Music Schools, here!

It appears the question of whether you should study songwriting in college is a question of personal preference, along with some mining of what you want to get out of music school.

I've put together a list of several schools that offer all ranges of songwriting study, from full-fledged songwriting programs to schools with courses to supplement your education.

BEST SCHOOLS WITH SONGWRITING PROGRAMS OR DEGREES

1. **University of Southern California** – Ranked number two last year for songwriting schools, the USC Thornton School of Music offers a Popular Music minor in songwriting, along with songwriting classes incorporated into their Music Industry program. There's also a venue – Thornton's Songwriter's Theatre – where aspiring songwriters studying at USC can hone their skills.
2. **New York University Steinhardt** – NYU's composition major offers a concentration in songwriting. The campus features many award-winning songwriters as faculty, and students embark on a course study that explores their genre of choice. Through several enrichment programs students have the opportunity to meet producers, record executives, and more who can weigh in on your talents.
3. **Berklee College of Music** – Berklee's program is a full-fledged degree program that has brought many alumni to award-winning success. Songwriting for all mediums – from theater and film to contemporary pop writing – are all covered in Berklee's program. This program also specializes in helping students find their own

particular voice, a crucial aspect of getting ahead of the game in professional music.

4. **University of Miami** – The Frost School of Music offers a minor in Creative American Music – which you must audition for – that helps to open up the world of American pop songcraft. You develop a portfolio, learn about American song traditions from an African-American and traditional folk perspective, and can incorporate your studies into your current work as a songwriter.
5. **CalArts School of Music** – For those studying Music Composition at the Herb Alpert School of Music at CalArts, their “Singer-Songwriter Project” is a full release of songs from students. While there is no coursework per se surrounding songwriting, you are put into a supportive environment with other songwriters where you can garner advice, new perspectives, and valuable critiques of your work to make it on the annual release.

If you're ready to talk about how to get into the best music school for you, contact IMS today.

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I am...

- ☐ a parent
- ☐ an educator
- ☐ a music student (inquiring for myself)
- ☐ a counselor or consultant
- ☐ none of the above

How may we help you?



Submit

Randy Klein



Randy Klein is an award-winning composer, pianist, author, and educator, with four Emmys and two Gold Records to his credit. He is also the author of Quickstart Guide To Songwriting. He is a recipient of the Simons Fellowship of the Hall Center for the Humanities at the University of Kansas, and the BMI Foundation Jerry Harrington Award. Klein has composed for such artists and projects as Millie Jackson (R&B Hall of Fame), Candi Staton, Lil Kim, Black Sheep, IRT, Savion Glover, and Sesame Street. He has also written theatrical scores for Fancy Nancy: Splendiferous Christmas, Flambé Dreams, Ever Happily After, Twinkle Tames A Dragon, and Move! Choral Works include For My People, Facing It and Dear John, Dear Coltrane. He is president of the Jazzheads Music Group – an independent music label based in NYC. He is also a member of the BMI Lehman Engel Musical Theatre Workshop, The Dramatists Guild, NARAS, and APME. Randy is an Exclusive Steinway Artist.
