Constraint, creativity, copyright and collaboration in popular songwriting teams


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Abstract

This PhD study starts with a single question: ‘how do songwriters collaborate to write effective songs?’ I will test several hypotheses, including ‘amateur and professional songwriters demonstrate different behaviours’, ‘songwriting represents the collision of existing ideas’, ‘song form is market-driven’, ‘songwriters learn by hearing extant songs’ and ‘process and product are interrelated and it is possible to change the latter by consciously manipulating the former’. In testing the hypotheses, I will discuss the titular ‘Four Cs’ – Constraint, Creativity, Copyright and Collaboration. The last is explained easily in the central question; the first is necessitated by the inescapable fact that popular song exhibits statistically probable norms relating to characteristics such as harmony, form, lyric theme and rhyme. The second (Creativity) obviously requires originality, which in music manifests itself as the third – Copyright. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the constraints of song, and to consider songwriters’ ability to cross the lower originality threshold of creativity defined by copyright. The research is itself constrained to a study of the work of ‘professional’ songwriters, defined as individuals whose work has generated income through royalties. I take the philosophical position that songs can only exist when there is an additional listener to hear them. Historically and culturally I define ‘songwriting’ as British and American popular songwriting as practised between 1952 and 2012 (the first 60 years of the ‘singles chart’ in the UK), although in some cases it will be necessary to make reference to slightly earlier sources. Three evidence bases are used: real-time recordings of songwriting sessions, immediate retrospective reports by songwriters, and later retrospective interviews. The first of these is auto-ethnographic; I have documented my own collaborative processes across a variety of real-world composition and songwriting projects. The research draws on existing academic literature, particularly in the fields of popular musicology and cognitive psychology, but also making reference to tertiary fields such as law, sociology, literature and philosophy. This thesis does not posit a ‘template method’ for songwriting – even a cursory examination of the evidence suggests that no such thing exists. Rather, the intention is to identify and analyse the way songwriting teams negotiate the creative and problem-solving challenges of writing effective songs.

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practical theories for teams to work better together.

outcomes of their creative endeavors any more than managers can predict outcomes for their team challenges. Management “science” is necessary and contributes products, just as artists need the tools of their work. There may be a science to orchestrating team collaboration, but there also is an art. Artists often cannot predict the outcomes of their creative endeavors any more than managers can predict outcomes for their team challenges. Management “science” is necessary and contributes practical theories for teams to work better together.