



Jamie Hartman's five top tips on songwriting

As part of the Abram Wilson Career Development Programme, internationally acclaimed songwriter and producer Jamie Hartman delivered a masterclass with some of the emerging artists on our Career Development Programme, to take their questions and offer some fantastic advice on songwriting and collaborating.

Ivor Novello Songwriter of the Year 21-22, Jamie has also been nominated for a Grammy, shortlisted for an Oscar and a multiple-time winner of awards including Brit Awards and Music Week Awards. He has worked with a wide range of major artists including: Jennifer Hudson, James Bay, Kylie Minogue, Calvin Harris and Rag'N'Bone Man.

Here we share some of Jamie's top tips on songwriting.

1. Don't write songs every day

Don't write songs every day, is the first piece of advice I can give you.

I would say that a lot of the biggest songwriters - by which I mean the people who have done it over a long period of time - take time between ideas. Some of them write three days a week at most, and then spend two days of the working week working on demos and revisiting what they've done.

I would say three to four sessions a week is absolutely plenty.

There are some songwriters who will just tell you it's like a muscle you have to exercise every day. But for me, I can tell you that I get burned out very quickly if I try to write more than three really good original ideas in a week.

I think there's got to be a balanced approach to it that works for you.

Some of the best songs I've written have been done in an hour. And then sometimes you have two thirds of a great song: for example, you need three ideas, maybe two of the ideas come super quick and then the other one comes months later. But hold on to the good ideas, and revisit them if you're not there yet. If it sounds as if it's getting boring, and you need a minute, again, take a minute, come back the next day. Perspective is truly important.

If you're uninspired and you're in the wrong headspace, don't push it, give yourself a break. Go and do something completely different.

2. The structure of a hit song

Each song itself has to have a central theme but it also has to have at least three separate, great melodic, original ideas in it.

For each one the verse and melody has to be original and new. The pre melody has to be original and new, the chorus melody has to be original and new.

And I believe that ideally, in an ideal world, you have four which includes the bridge, which actually takes you somewhere else.

3. Mistakes cause ideas

Songs do genuinely come to you from the ether sometimes, so be ready to receive. And when you have an idea, don't get distracted by other things, put it aside, sit down and work on it. Because they are gifts and they are sent to you. You have to be able to know when they're being sent. I wrote the chorus to "Giant", which is a song I wrote for Calvin Harris and Rag'N'Bone Man, on the train on the way to the session. So it doesn't matter where you are.

I look for little signs in the room. I pick up an instrument that I've never played before, and go and make mistakes on it. Because mistakes cause ideas. That's really important. Don't play the same instrument you've played forever. You know, all the chords, you know, all the sequences you're used to doing, you're not going to find something new there. Play a different instrument, put yourself in a different room.

4. How to open up a songwriting session

When somebody walks into a session, what they say to me in the first 25 minutes of that thing usually creates the song. I will sit and I will wait. I will talk to somebody for 25 minutes first.

If I'm working with somebody, for the first time, I'll say, 'Can you maybe play me a couple of things that you love that you've been doing recently?' so that you get their head, you get a little bit of their soul into you, musically.

Often I start with a question like 'how are you? What's going on in your life right now?' I know that sounds like the most obvious thing in the world but 'how are you doing? What are you thinking about?' I mean, it's as simple as that because we're all just trying to get simple ideas, expressed in a new way. That's all music is, right?

5. Collaboration is powerful

Everybody has a power. And some people don't reveal those instantly in a room and it can take two or three hours to find out what that is. So being in the right headspace and finding flow is truly important. And you will receive brilliant ideas from people, as long as you're open to them. Be humble and hardworking, these are just truly important things for finding your place and having your voice heard. And by the way, I am not for a second saying you shouldn't be fearless. Be fearless.

I'm very used to writing three quarters of a song and only getting a 30% cut because there are two other people in the room. That's okay with me: we're all in there for a reason, everybody contributes in their own way. There can often be two or three conflicting ideas about a top line, or what was the best hook, because you might be coming up with 15 vocal hooks in a couple of minutes, which is when sitting with one other person that can identify and help structure things is truly important to have.

Write with one other person rather than three other people: lessen the amount of people involved, find people that make you happy and comfortable, and allow you to speak. And when you're in a room with people, like any situation, be confident in what you can do. I just feel like you have an underlying instinct for what's working and a gut feeling of what feels right.