

Rewriting Songs

“Back To The Drawing Board”

by Rick Lang

One of the most difficult aspects of songwriting is trying to decide when a song is actually finished, or whether it needs more work. In most cases this needs to be done by the writer, however its not a bad idea to run your new song by other people and get some additional input. A lot of bands do this, especially if the writer wants the band he or she is in to perform the song. So sometimes a songwriter finds themselves going "back to the drawing board" to try to make changes and improvements to their song. This experience can possibly deflate your ego or hurt your feelings, but is a very important and essential part of the songwriting process.

To me the ultimate goal for any serious songwriter is to create the best quality material possible within our means and individual skills. There should be steady improvement and growth the more you write. Songwriting is a skill that is learned and honed over time and you should be able to notice change and improvement as you discover techniques that help you to improve the quality of your writing. If you listened to songs by most well respected writers, going back to their earlier works, you should be able to notice how their writing evolved.

I find it a good practice after I complete a song, to record that version of the tune and forget about it for a while. I then go back to it and see if I still feel as good about the number as I did after I first wrote it. Quite often I discover a weak line or something that could be changed. More often than not I will come up with some ideas to improve the music - including a chord change or two and maybe even altering the melody. At this point I usually experiment until I run out of ideas to improve the song any further. Taking a break from the song, and coming back to it with fresh eyes and ears, will usually be to your benefit. In general, I feel you should keep working on the song until it is the very best you can make it be. Stopping too soon will often result in a weaker song that never really had a chance to realize its true potential.

This process can produce worthwhile results. There is a number called "Lost River" that I'd written several years ago, where I liked everything about the song but the musical setting, which did not match the mood of the lyric. Over time I tried to come up with a different melody and experimented with various chord changes, but failed time and time again. I was almost ready to give up on the song when one day, out of the blue, an interesting new melody popped into my head. I first thought I would be great for a new song but remembered "Lost River" and decided to see if the new music, based on minor chords, would fit the lyrics. At first it sounded a little strange to me, but after a while I realized it was a good match and

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I was able to salvage the song. Since then, I have performed the song in concert with great responses from people. This experience reinforced the point to me that it pays to be persistent and never give up on a song.

Well that's it for now, and so I'll leave you with the lyrics to "Lost River" as well as a version of the song recorded by a wonderful Massachusetts Bluegrass band SloGrass. If there is a song that you have written that you're not 100% happy with, don't be afraid to go "back to the drawing board" and give it another try!

Happy writing!
Rick