

FEATURES

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What makes the perfect pop song? From Phil Collins to Jarvis Cocker, stars tell the stories behind their hits — and why musical ability is overrated

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'It helps to be in tune'

By his own admission, Jarvis Cocker isn't the world's greatest musician. He can't read music, nor does he have any knowledge of formal composition. And, while we're on the subject, he's not a particularly gifted singer. "My mother is tone deaf," he says. Yet, alongside these apparent drawbacks to a career in music, he has an ability few possess: to write brilliant pop songs.

What makes the perfect pop song? That's the question I've been putting to British songwriters, including Cocker, for a TV series called *Songbook*. I've talked to household names who have fallen out of critical favor (Phil Collins, Mick Hucknall of Simply Red); songwriters to the stars (Albert Hammond, responsible for such standards as *The Air That I Breathe* and *When I Need You*); and singers resentful of the success they had with their old bands (Hugh Cornwell, formerly of the Stranglers, who almost stormed out after one question too many about the punk years). Charismatic frontmen such as Pulp's Cocker and Echo and the Bunnymen's Ian McCulloch have also mulled over how pop works. So how do you write a classic hit? The only thing everyone agrees on is this: nobody has a bloody clue.

"It helps to be in tune," says 1960s pop minstrel Donovan. "And to be able to count to four. A lot of songwriters don't know how to count to four."

"I take a Dictaphone everywhere I go in case I have an idea," says the million-selling star David Gray. "Once you've captured an idea, the song builds up from that."

For McCulloch, songwriting is not a choice, but a therapeutic necessity. "When I'm not writing songs, it's cryptic crosswords and *Countdown* on the telly. Everything gets a bit fuzzy, a bit bleak."

A pop song does, however, follow certain rules. It is generally around three to four minutes, has a verse and a chorus, and uses a bed of chords to support a melody, with words that convey some sort of sentiment that an audience can relate to. Most of the songwriters I spoke to start with a melody. But these rules only serve to get a song written in the first place. They do nothing to give it the rare magic that great pop possesses.

For Cocker, the key to writing successful songs is not to aim for lofty artistic heights, but to look at what's around you. "I fell out of a window and was in hospital for a while," he says, on the formation of his technique of using local detail and observation to write songs that have the descriptive power of good fiction.

"I was sitting in a convalescent ward with all these [coal] miners, and I realized that there was more material in looking down at the ground than up at the stars."

Such an ethos produced *Joyriders*, from Pulp's 1994 album *His'n'Hers*. Soon after getting out of hospital, Cocker was driving one night when his car broke down.

"These kids came up in a posh car," he says. "They were only about 15 so I didn't think it was theirs. I thought I was going to get mugged, but they were very nice, driving me to the nearest station and giving me chocolate limes, which I'm sure just happened to be in the car when they nicked it."

Real incidents do seem to form the seed of many classic pop songs. Just as there really was a rich Greek girl at St Martin's (art) College in London, who inspired Pulp's 1995 anthem *Common People*, so all the international hits written by Albert Hammond come from the songwriter's own life. The son of a fireman, British-born Hammond grew up in Gibraltar but came back to London in the late 1960s to make it, supporting his young family by working at a shoe polish factory by day and washing dishes by night. He finally had a hit in 1972, with *It Never Rains in Southern California* — a song that had nothing to do with US weather, but rather hard times in Europe.

"It was written on a piano on a rainy day in Fulham [southwest London]," says Hammond. "There's a line, 'Will you tell the folks back home I nearly made it/ Please don't tell them how you found me' — that was based on the time I was actually begging in Madrid. I bumped into my cousin, who was on honeymoon there, and I pleaded with him not to tell my dad about seeing me begging. But he told him anyway."

But a pop song also needs a hook, a melodic idea or motif that won't let the listener go. Take the sad, lilting hook to Hammond's *When I Need You*, a No. 1 for Leo Sayer in 1977. However crassly sentimental the song may seem, there's an emotion in the melody that digs in. "You have to have it in you," says Hammond on creating hits. "I wouldn't know where to start teaching somebody else. I can hardly play an instrument. I don't even know the names of the chords. I just know that my songs have an emotional story behind them and that comes out in the music."

Actually, a lack of musical knowledge seems to help. Italian movie soundtrack maestro Ennio Morricone once said the Beatles would have been a lot better had they studied classical composition, but judging by the paucity of great pop songwriters emerging from the classical world, it seems unlikely. Mick Hucknall wrote arguably his best song, *Holding Back the Years*, one afternoon in his bedroom at the age of 16, when he had only learned to play two chords — E and A — on a guitar. "I lifted a finger off the A to create some other kind of chord," he says. "It sure sounded pretty and soon these words came out. The song took under an hour to write."

For all Hammond's assertion that songwriting comes from within, there are cases when a cataclysmic event (a divorce, say) can spur a hitherto non-songwriting type (a drummer, perhaps) into action. Phil Collins spent close to a decade in Genesis before he started writing songs in 1978, to fill the void created by the collapse of his marriage. "My wife had gone. My two children had gone. My two dogs had gone. I had nothing to do. So I started to fool around on the piano and write these messages to the ex-wife. You know — if she hears this, she'll understand how hurt I am. Funnily enough, the original lyrics were written on the back of the decorator's notepaper — who ran away with the wife." So why does Collins still write songs, given that his divorce was long ago? "Three divorces, mate. Three," he replies, holding up that many fingers.

Given that pop songwriting appears to be something that can't be taught, what advice can these grand practitioners of the mysterious art give? Perhaps the best insight of all came from Cocker. "The beauty of songwriting is that any human being can do it," he says. "And they learned how to do it their way. One minute someone was sitting in the living room, having a cup of coffee. The next they picked up the guitar and wrote something from nothing. That's a miraculous event. That's what keeps me going."



Mick Hucknall of Simply Red, right, with singer Bobby "Blue" Bland. PHOTOS: AGENCIES

PLANET POP

Britney Spears has obtained a restraining order against former pal Osama "Sam" Lutfi and one-time boyfriend Adnan Ghalib, court records show.

Attorneys for Spears and her father, who is her legal conservator, received the order on Friday. The documents state that Lutfi, Ghalib and attorney Jon Eardley have been trying to gain control of Spears' affairs.

"On the first anniversary of the establishment of the conservatorship, the co-conservators are informed and believe that these three figures are working in concert to disrupt the conservatorship, with an utter disregard for Ms Spears' health and well being," the documents state.

Lutfi was a manager and friend of Spears, whose mother once accused him of grinding pills into her food to control her. Ghalib, a paparazzo, had dated the singer.

The documents, released late Friday, claim that Lutfi tried to contact Spears in late December by sending text messages to her hairdresser. The documents state Lutfi later started sending text messages to Spears and one of her attorneys, Blair Berk, trying to arrange a meeting.

The order, first reported by the celebrity Web site TMZ, alleges that Lutfi has also sent "anonymous, harassing and threatening" messages to Spears' father.

This week, the documents state, an attorney sent a proposal to remove Spears' court-appointed attorney. He later told Spears' attorneys that he had been contacted



Above: The Boss regrets his deal with Wal-Mart. Right: Britney's back on track. PHOTOS: AGENCIES

by Eardley and Lutfi, according to the filings.

Eardley once claimed to be Spears' attorney and tried to get her conservatorship case moved to federal court. A phone message left at Eardley's office was not returned on Friday.

Spears and her father agreed not to renew a temporary restraining order that was issued against Lutfi last year when it expired in July.

At the time, Spears' court-appointed attorney Samuel D. Ingham III issued a statement renouncing their friendship.

"Britney has made clear to everyone that she does not want to be further harassed or contacted in any way by Osama 'Sam' Lutfi, now or at anytime in the future," Ingham said in a statement.

Lutfi at the time declined to comment, saying only that he and Jamie Spears had reached an agreement.

Spears was placed under the conservatorship a year ago yesterday.

The arrangement has been expensive — her estate has paid out hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal fees — but since her father took control of her life, the pop singer has not had the bouts of erratic behavior, including two hospitalizations, that led to his intervention.

She released her newest album, *Circus* in December on her 27th birthday and is preparing for an upcoming concert tour.

The Boss is owning up to a mistake.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, **Bruce Springsteen** says he shouldn't have made a deal with Wal-Mart. This month, the store started exclusively selling a Springsteen greatest-hits CD.

Some fans were critical because Springsteen has been a longtime supporter of worker's rights, and Wal-Mart has faced criticism for its labor practices. Springsteen's team didn't vet the issue as closely as it should have, and he "dropped the ball on it," he told the *Times* for a story published in yesterday's editions.

Springsteen went on to say: "It was a mistake. Our batting average is usually very good, but we missed that one. Fans will call you on that stuff, as it should be."

"Millions of Springsteen fans have counted on Wal-Mart over the years to deliver his music into their lives, and

we will continue to offer those fans this *Greatest Hits* exclusive and his other popular albums at unbeatable prices," Wal-Mart said in a statement, adding: "We are proud of the good jobs, benefits and career opportunities we provide to more than 1.4 million US associates who choose to work at Wal-Mart and serve our customers every day."

Springsteen released his new CD *Working on a Dream* this week and was scheduled to perform during the halftime show at the Super Bowl.

An attorney wants Bridget Jones' diary. Allen Michel told a judge in Los Angeles on Friday that he wants **Renee Zellweger** to turn over her diary, give a deposition and provide any other documents to explain how she spent her time during a seven-week delay in the filming of 2005's *Cinderella Man* in Toronto.

Zellweger's agents had negotiated a US\$3 million payment for the *Bridget Jones' Diary* star because of the delay, caused by **Russell Crowe's** dislocated shoulder.

Michel represents an insurer that says it's already paid nearly US\$6 million for the delay, and wants to detail Zellweger's actions during that time. The insurer claims it shouldn't be liable for the money paid to Zellweger, who isn't named as a party to the lawsuit. — AGENCIES

