Notes on Lyric Writing and Song Conception

BY RONDI CHARLESTON

The process of writing lyrics and music is part of my everyday existence. The ideas that fuel future songs come as a direct result of my being constantly aware of my surroundings – observing people, places and things – and taking mental snapshots of events, both large and small, as I go through my day. For example, "Land of Gailiee" was inspired by an unusual event I witnessed while visiting Israel a few years ago. During a rare snowfall in Jerusalem, people of all faiths and ages came out of their houses to play together in the snow, building snowmen and just having fun together. It was a joyous, peaceful, beautiful moment which sparked the possibility of what peace could look like in this troubled region of the world. I immediately went back to my hotel and started my writing process. When the lyrics were complete, I then brought them, along with a few notes of melody, to Lynne Arriale, who fleshed it all out and wrote the soaring chorus.

Now, turning an idea into a song isn't always an easy process. There are many steps and obstacles to be navigated – and sometimes wrestled with – along the way. The fundamental goal is to unite all the elements of a song – language, melody, harmony and rhythm. But, to do so, they must be broken down into bite-sized segments to ensure that all elements resonate at each point along the way.

One of the first technical steps in lyric writing is generating and focusing on an original idea. In addition to always having your antennae up and on alert throughout your day, there is a helpful exercise called "object writing." (For more in depth discussion, I highly recommend Anne LaMott's *Bird by Bird* and Pat Pattison's *Writing Better Lyrics*). Object writing is an invaluable tool for finding your own personal voice and vision. It involves honing your five senses as well as your kinesthetic and organic senses, in order to gain access to that treasure trove of experience and emotion inside of you. For example, "Your Spirit Lingers," which I also wrote with Lynne, was based on an object writing session I had

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using an autobiographical book written by my great–grandmother about my family's emigration from Norway in the 1800s, and subsequent trek by wagon train across the country to Oregon. I was awed by the hardships she overcame, her strong faith and inner strength and the remnants of personality traits I noticed in others and myself in my family and how they lived on through us still.

The next step is to focus your perspective – adding the elements of "who, what, when, where, how and why" to the mix. Will it be first person narrative? Direct address? Third person? This requires discipline – choosing a lane, shall we say, and sticking to it.

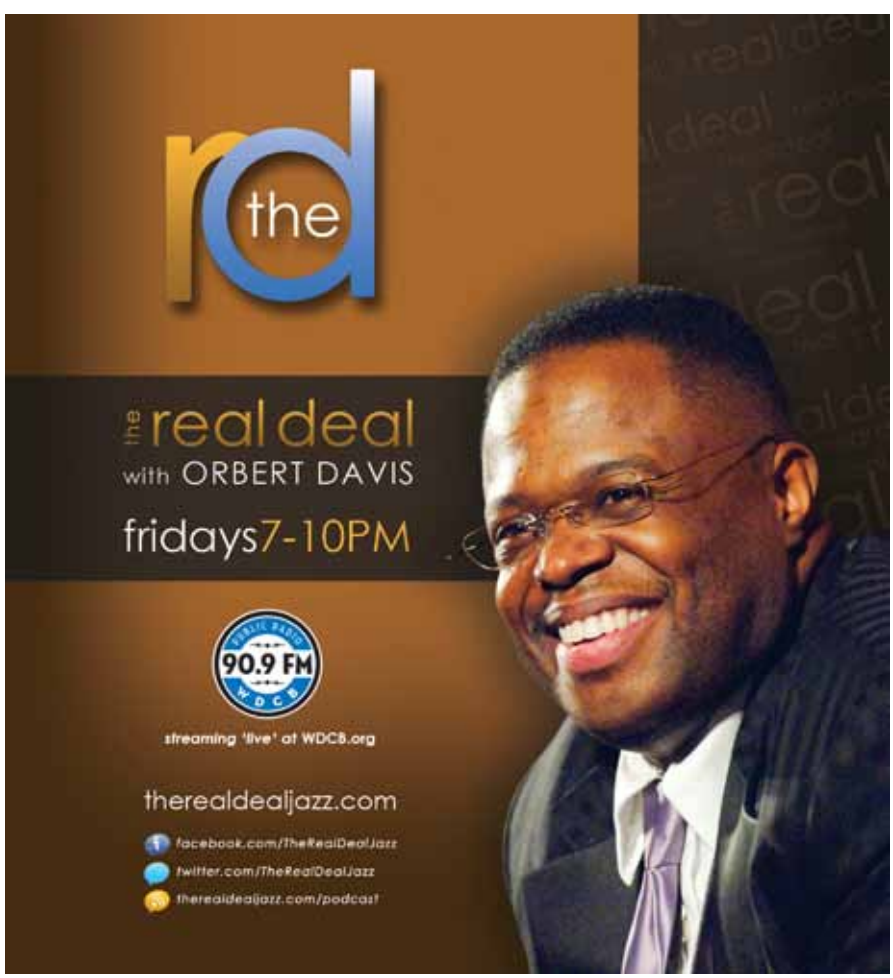
Now you are ready to start a worksheet! Again, I recommend Pat Pattison's book for this. As he puts it, you want to generate words in a specific "key" – just as you would for music. Let's say you wanted to write a song about your mother or father. You would begin by making lists of words that related somehow to them and this idea. Then group them into nouns, verbs, adjectives, and start mixing them up in order to find fresh metaphors. This is exciting stuff – not unlike juxtaposing chords to find new tonalities!!! Then it's on to short sentences and hopefully finding some new, unexpected meaning and nuance along the way.

After paring down your word choices, you can add rhymes to your worksheet. It's helpful to think about rhymes in the same way you think about chords. Landing on a solid rhyme is like landing on the tonic after a series of changes. Sometimes you want to land squarely, but often, you have a more interesting story to tell that benefits from the element of surprise or the unexpected. You might want to unbalance the rhyming scheme and take the listener on a different journey! This is where skill plays an important role. Don't be afraid to experiment.

Ultimately, we unite words and

melody emotionally in addition to syllables and notes. The natural shape of the melody and the language must be integrated. Rhythm is then united with meaning. It's a thrilling and intoxicating process and when it works, there is nothing more exciting in the world – well worth the hours, days and weeks of time and effort that go into creating it!

I also truly love working with students privately and now in workshops. Every student comes with their own unique set of gifts and challenges. I try to assess them in the first few sessions and then tailor an approach that will work best for them. For example, one student came in with a naturally beautiful



voice, but her original songs were clichéd and derivative. I encouraged her to do some object writing, and to explore her own unique identity. (Her background was Indian and Swedish, and she was trying to copy American pop songs. It was inauthentic and she had so much more to offer). Now she's writing music that incorporates sounds from her native country, and telling stories no one else can tell! She has grown enormously as an artist!

As a writer, over time, you develop a sort of sixth sense that tells you when a lyric is fully baked – or when more work is needed. The rule of thumb is being specific by avoiding generalities and clichés.

Guiding collaborators to melodies is also a very delicate process. You want to give just enough of a suggestion – a few notes and a rhythmic motif – to generate a spark, and then let them take it from there. In my case, working with two great musicians, Bruce Barth and Lynne Arriale, all that was needed were a couple of bars from me and they took off on their own, creating gorgeous melodies and multi–layered harmonies that fit the lyrics perfectly. They are both such sensitive listeners, and each put in the time to really think about the meaning of the songs in order to conjure up the right tone and feeling.

I'm often asked about my storytelling and how I create lyrics that somehow touch listeners in a personal way. Actually, I really don't think about appealing to a universal audience when I write. I just trust my own instincts, and hope that the things that interest me, will also interest others. Without this organic approach we lose our authenticity. It's been a wonderful surprise to see how audiences and critics have resonated so personally and emotionally to my original tunes. Even though the details and actual events differ, many of our stories are much the same. It's an interesting testimony to the shared life experience.

Jazz singer/songwriter Rondi Charleston holds a BM and MM from Juilliard and is an Emmy and Peabody Award recipient for her investigative reporting as a producer for Diane Sawyer at ABC's "PrimeTime Live." *She conducts vocal and songwriting workshops privately in her NYC studio and in colleges and universities, at NJPAC for several years and, most recently, at NOLA and NOCCA during her U.S. tour promoting her critically acclaimed Motéma Music debut release,* Who Knows Where The Time Goes. *Praised by* Hot House Magazine *for "the most memorable new songs to come from a jazz singer since Abbey Lincoln," she has integrated her journalistic and musical skills and emerged as a gifted storyteller of indelible, poignant originals.*