



Play Nicely

A Songwriter's Guide To Collaboration

By Martin Sutton

As a child I used to go camping with my Mum and Dad and at some point after breakfast on the first day my two older brothers and I would be hustled through the giant-zipped nylon door and told to find new friends and “play nicely”.

I still remember the awkward feeling standing on the edge of a football match waiting to be invited in. There would eventually be a few cursory nods between myself and some of the players, mumbled introductions, then I would join the enthusiastic kick-around. The remainder of the game would be spent having my football skills (non-existent) assessed, doing my best to be liked and trying to bond with relative strangers. More often than not I would leave the campsite at the end of the week with a bunch of brand new best friends.

Mum and Dad were spot on.

Except for the couple of times I'd meet a complete asshole who made me feel like a talentless idiot who couldn't play football for toffee, and whom I'd spend the whole week trying to avoid.

Seems like things haven't changed that much. As with camping, so is life...and songwriting. As part of my journey as a songwriter, I can say hand on heart the one thing that has propelled me fastest through the business is collaboration. Collaboration rocks and it's more than just about sharing ideas.

When you write with someone else you suddenly have another pair of ears in the room that can hear things you can't. They can hear when your lyrics don't really work, when your melodies could be more hooky, but also when your ideas are awesome! And that's what you bring to the room for your co-writer too.

Your co-writer can also bring introductions to other writers, information about which artists might be looking for songs and, when you've written your masterpiece, help pitch the song. Remember, networking is essential to success in the music business.

Sounds great doesn't it? But it is also a bit like campsites...you do get the occasional asshole. Don't worry though, try these guidelines and if you and your co-writers are all on the same page things should go just fine.

Here are my golden rules for successful collaboration.

Don't stand on the sidelines

Get out there and introduce yourself to other writers, you might be just about to meet the one you're destined to write a global hit with.

Be confident

Don't feel intimidated by writers with a better track record or judge yourself by other peoples success. We're all as good as our best song and as bad as our worst!

Don't worry about assholes

You will work with some. Just notch it up to experience, move on and don't work with them again.

Leave your ego at the door

It's not a competition to see who's the best, it's a collaborative effort. You should all go into the room with the aim of writing a great song and you should all come out of the room punching the air.

Put everything on the table

No matter how dumb you think your idea might sound, one of your collaborators might turn it into a killer idea. Just say it!

Listen to everyone in the room

You never know when the quietest person in the room is about to deliver the most amazing hit idea or hook you've ever heard. Make sure you're not talking so much and so loud you don't hear it! Include everyone.

Respect

No one comes out with great ideas every time they open their mouths so if you're going to act superior you have no place in the room. Encourage and be positive. If you don't like someone's line...come up with something that everyone thinks is better!

Keep the energy up

Take regular brain breaks to avoid things going stale. Get everyone out the room, have a coffee and switch off for a bit, things will be much fresher when you all come back.

Don't feel you have to finish in one day

Sometimes songs fall out of the sky and write themselves in 10 minutes, others can take weeks, months or even years. You haven't failed if the song decides it's going to take more than one day to be born.

Don't be afraid to move on to another song

If the song you're working on isn't really happening, don't panic...sometimes the real star of the show is waiting in the wings. When you feel you've hit a wall, give your first song ten more minutes and if it's still not happening make sure you record what you have so far then try something new. Chances are your next effort will be much easier to write.

Have fun!

Songwriting is the best job in the world. Do it because you love it and make sure you enjoy every minute.

Most importantly, don't forget collaboration is a delicate social interaction between creative souls. It's easy to be both offended and offensive, no matter how unintended, so if you want to be recommended to other writers and artists and gain yourself a good reputation. Do what Mum and Dad said...*play nicely!*



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