

SOURCES FOR BAND NAMES

Many a great band name has been born from cracking open a book and randomly pointing to a word on a page. Sometimes you need to pull from additional sources or find some other words to string together if your own vocabulary feels exhausted. Here are a few reliable sources to try.

- ★ Dictionaries of all kinds: foreign language dictionaries, slang dictionaries, a thesaurus
- ★ Online lists of portmanteau words (blended words—like spork, Reaganomics, Labradoodle)
- ★ History books
- ★ Collections of poetry
- ★ Wildlife encyclopedias
- ★ Maps
- ★ Other bands' lyrics

SOLITARY GIRL: BEING A SOLO ARTIST

Being a solo performer is just as fun as being in a band, and in most ways, it's easier. There is a lot more freedom. You don't have

bandmates rearranging your ideas or sanding them down, so your songs are a pure expression of your creativity and exactly as you envision them. There's less equipment to lug around, and you never have to deal with people being late to practice.

Most solo acts are one person singing while playing an instrument—usually a guitar, but sometimes harp, drums,

piano, accordion, banjo,

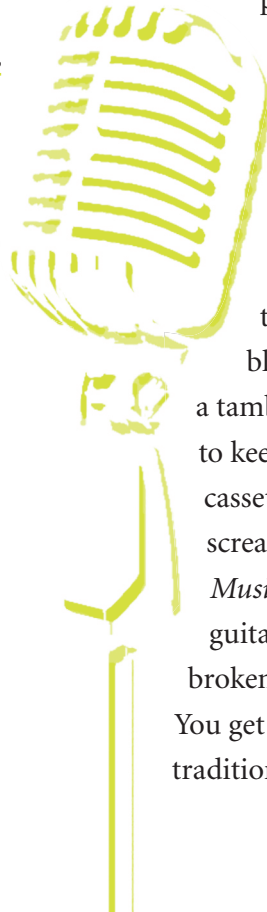
computer, or cello. Your

one-woman band can be anything you want:

You can play music on your laptop. You can do an animal dance while you play timbales. You can perform

bluegrass fiddle numbers with a tambourine attached to your foot to keep time. You can play a warped cassette through a boom box while screaming songs from *High School Musical*. You can strum an acoustic guitar and sing about how your broken heart is like a dead flower.

You get the picture: You can be as traditional or as high-concept



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FEMALE SOLO ARTISTS WHOSE LIVE PERFORMANCES YOU NEED TO CHECK OUT ON YOUTUBE

- | | | | |
|----------------------|---------------------|--|-------------------|
| ★ Cat Power | ★ Frida Hyvonen | ★ Carla
Bozulich | ★ Ani DiFranco |
| ★ Taylor Swift | ★ Patti Smith | | ★ Sister |
| ★ Feist | ★ Neneh Cherry | ★ Wynne
Greenwood
(a.k.a. Tracy and
the Plastics) | Rosetta
Tharpe |
| ★ Sheila E | ★ PJ Harvey | | ★ Cyndi Lauper |
| ★ Etta James | ★ Carole King | ★ Odetta | ★ Loretta Lynn |
| ★ Kate Bush | ★ Liz Phair | ★ Björk | ★ Nina Hagen |
| ★ Erykah Badu | ★ Yoko Ono | ★ Dolly Parton | ★ Nina Simone |
| ★ Mary Timony | ★ Diamanda
Galas | ★ Roxanne
Shante | ★ Janis Joplin |
| ★ Sinéad
O'Connor | ★ Grace Jones | | ★ Joanna Newsom |

as you feel inclined to be because you're in charge.

Being solo is the biggest vulnerability, but it can also be your biggest strength. One of the great gifts of a solo act is that there is much less of a barrier (that “I-am-the-performer-and-you-are-the-audience” mentality) between you and the audience. It's easier to have a personal connection when you are being real and bare, and there isn't the volume

and action of a full band to hook people with. People get that being solo is a brave act. It doesn't always mean they are going to be more polite, but most people will be more respectful of a solo act than a band. People sometimes assume that solo performers are solo because they want all the attention on them. But by having a clear motivation and vision, by making some honest music—you will instantly change the audience's mind.

The other rad thing about being solo is that, when you're performing and the audience applauds, it's all for you. With that applause, you get to be fully aware of just how much the seven people gathered in your basement liked that Lil' Wayne cover you just did. The challenge is to be steadfast and not freak out if the audience isn't spellbound by your songs, or if they laughed during the sad one about when your hamster ate its babies. It's only natural to want people to be falling at your feet, requesting autographs and treating you like a rock goddess. But! But! But! If that doesn't happen (it might not), if most of the audience leaves during your set, if people heckle or boo you (jerks!), ignore it and go on to the next song.

A big part of performing is learning how to deal with an audience's reaction. You have to learn how to put your heart and mind into what you are doing even when the audience doesn't care. "They didn't like my songs" does not mean, "They didn't like me." You don't need to change your art to something that they can understand—just doing what you are doing over and over again will make them



"The only thing you have to learn to be a rock singer is to just sound like yourself."

**CHRISSIE HYNDE,
THE PRETENDERS**

understand. Do your thing, whatever it is, and don't worry about tweaking it to please people who didn't get it. The people who appreciate what you are doing will stick around, and the ones that don't, fortunately, will get lost.

EXPRESS YOURSELF: LYRICS AND SONGWRITING

Until 1963, when Bob Dylan changed the game with his second album, rock lyrics were very literal and clichéd. Lots of easy rhymes about love, cars, dancing, and parties. Dylan came to rock from the folk music movement, which was heavily influenced by poetry and political songwriters like Woody Guthrie (he wrote "This Land Is Your



“Music is the beat of life for me. It’s like my heart. You have to keep on going. Motivation is too light a word for it. It is life itself to me. It’s like I have to keep on breathing, it’s a way of survival, a way of being alive.”

YOKO ONO

Land”). Dylan’s lyrics were different from anything that came before. They were abstract, used complex metaphors, slang, snippets of conversation—and though he was singing about heartbreak, his friends, or politics, the words held a different meaning for everyone who heard them, not just a single, straightforward meaning that anyone would understand. Dylan was so influential, and this idea was so freeing, that many popular artists started to write songs that were real and honest, without

happy endings, with metaphor, singing in a way that sounded like how people actually spoke to one another.

Whether your song is about an actual tree or a metaphorical tree depends on what kinds of songs you want to write. There aren’t any rules to writing lyrics besides “be yourself.” How your lyrics come out has to do with what inspires you and what you want to tell the world. This section will help you find your inspiration and start writing lyrics that express your ideas.

Your favorite singers might be what’s inspiring you to start a band, so it’s natural if the first songs you write are imitations of theirs. A personal writing style is something that you develop over time as you heap your own ideas in with your influences. The more you write and play, the more your own style will come out, and you’ll move out from the shadow of your influences. Eventually getting out of that shadow is important because if you base your lyrics on someone else’s, you’ll wind up with a bunch of clichés instead of lyrics that are one hundred percent, authentically YOU.

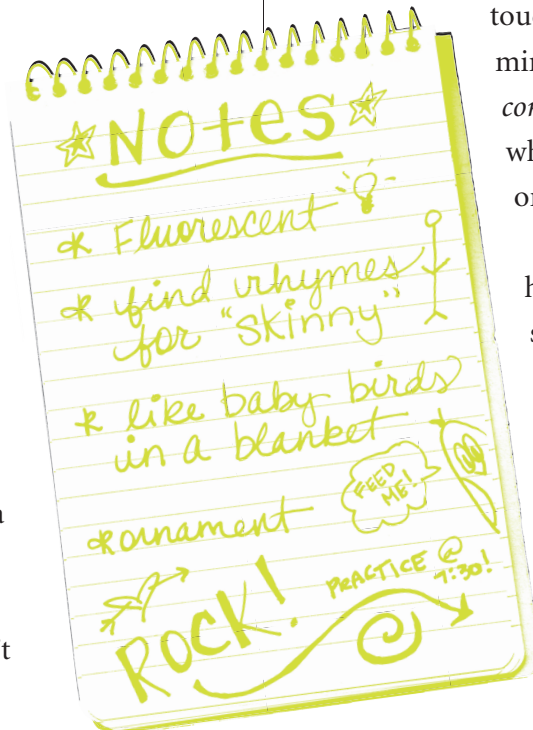
WRITING IT DOWN

Whether you've got volumes of songs in your head or one vague idea, you're going to start the same way: by getting the words out of your head and onto paper. The first step is simple and it'll run you about three bucks: Buy two notebooks, one regular size and the other pocket size. Don't skimp by getting one medium size; you'll need both. The big notebook is for writing and editing lyrics and compiling your ideas. The little one is for when you are walking to the bus or at your friend's house and you're struck with a flash of brilliance, so you can get it down while it's fresh. The rule with the little notebook is this: **KEEP IT WITH YOU AT ALL TIMES.** Even if you're going on a date or spelunking in a dark cave, it should be in your pocket or bag. The one time you don't

have it is when you'll come up with THE BEST IDEA and no one within a quarter-mile radius will have paper or a pen and you'll be forced to write it in mint lip balm on a crinkled-up napkin. Don't trust that you'll be able to remember it, don't write it on your hand, and don't keep it in your BlackBerry. Writing ideas down in the little notebook isn't just about keeping track of them, it's about developing a skill that is essential to being a songwriter: thinking about your music all the time. You have to be in

touch with your creative mind and nurture it *constantly*, and not just when there is a guitar on your lap.

Once you've handled the notebook situation, it's time to fill the pages. Start observing what happens around you and take notes. When people are speaking, listen for interesting words,



phrases, slang, slogans, and punch lines. Write down little details you notice—how things smell, look, how your sister acts when she's nervous. Paying attention to how people speak—how their voices rise and fall, the cadence and rhythms in conversation, the natural melodies of speech all can help you learn how to fit words into a song. The more you write down now, the more you'll have to pick and choose from later when you are working on songs. So, write and write and then write a little bit more, and do it every day. Pretty soon, it'll become second nature to do it and you'll reach for your notebook as soon as an idea starts to bloom in your mind.

THE WRITING PROCESS

Lyrics are a three-step process: inspiration, *then* writing, and *then* revisions. Inspiration is a matter of keeping your eyes and ears open to the world, and paying attention to your own mind and heart. Writing is simply putting that inspiration into words. Once you begin writing, you may need to keep reminding yourself that that's all



“I had a guitar and
I couldn't play, and
I'd just write lyrics
write lyrics write lyrics
write lyrics write lyrics
write lyrics.”

COURTNEY LOVE

you're doing: Just writing. Not writing *and* editing. Not writing *and* worrying whether your lyrics don't rhyme, that they might be lame, or that you've used “ocean” fourteen times. Giving yourself a hard time is not useful in the first stage of the creative process, and thus it is forbidden! You've got all the time in the world to edit and/or drive yourself crazy over the details; attempting to get it perfect on the first try (or second or third, for that matter) will only trip you up. Self-doubt is something all artists struggle with, but being self-critical *while* you are writing may stunt your growth as a lyricist, and you want to be full-size.

This is all you need to do: Put the words down as they come to you; let

them spill out in a jumbled mess. Let the words and ideas flow out freely—don't stop them up with perfectionism. Even if what's coming out is a Niagara Falls of flowery stuff that you would never in a zillion years sing aloud—it doesn't matter. You are the only person who's going to see this. You can (and will) make sense of the words later. Let the words hang out on the page for at least a day or two before you start crossing things out and going wild with the eraser. Getting a little distance from them will help you come back fresh and you'll be able to tell the difference between a usable idea and sentimental barf.

When you come back to your notebook with a clear head, page through your little notebook and look for bright spots. When you spot words you like or feel moved by, copy them into the big notebook. Look for themes you can weave together and ideas that you want to expand upon. Play around with it, add to it, stare intently at it for a few minutes. When you are reading over what you've written, what jumps out at you? You might not know exactly what kind

MARY HAD A LITTLE SONG

One of the best ways to learn how to put words to music is to practice writing new lyrics to a song you already know. It can be "Mary Had a Little Lamb" or something by your favorite band—it doesn't matter so long as you are familiar with the tune and don't mind listening to it or humming it a bunch of times. This way you can get started even if you don't have a band or are starting with your instrument and not quite to the songwriting stage yet. By turning The Beatles' "Yesterday" into a song about how your sister's obsession with the Jonas Brothers refuses to die, you'll discover:

1. What it takes to fill a three-minute song.
2. How to write the verse, chorus, and verse structure.
3. Your own songwriting process.



"I like being tough on stage. I don't like being sweet. I can't sing about love in the afternoon among the flowers and the sunshine. I like to sing about things that make me mad."

PAT BENATAR

of song you're cobbling together until you start digging into it. Listen to your intuition and wander around some, and keep trying out different ideas until you find the ones that work.

When you begin fitting lines together, they will probably be a little wobbly. Like newborn-pony wobbly—you know, kind of cute and funny but topples over as soon as it tries to go anywhere. Be patient with the wobbly pony in your writing. Yelling at the pony does not help it learn how to trot any faster. This is just how baby ponies do it, they nosedive into a hay bale a couple of times until they understand how their knees work. You might have to stare at

the page and wobble for a while. You may have to try eleven or a hundred rhymes before you find the right one. Even if it feels fruitless, the stuff that doesn't work out is still teaching you. What isn't right for this song might be perfect for the one you write next month. Get the little ideas down and expand them into bigger ideas, turn the two words that sound cool together into a phrase, and then flesh that phrase into a section of the song. Do that again and again and again and eventually, you will wind up with a song.

WRITING WHAT YOU KNOW

Whether you think so or not, you already have plenty of life experience to base your songs on. Even if the life you lead feels unworthy of song, your friends/city/school are totally boring, and the most exciting thing you've ever done was fall out of a tree house when you were seven, right there, in all that restlessness, injury, and boredom, you've got at least three songs—maybe even an album if you are especially clever about it. By developing your writing and observing skills, you can turn anything into a song.

Yes, anything. The Flaming Lips' singer Wayne Coyne wrote a pop song about a spider bite (appropriately titled "The Spider Bite Song"). Joanna Newsom wrote a song about not being able to write a song ("Inflammatory Writ"). Whether your songs are reactions to a war, are based on your fantasy life, or are telling a true story, there is really only one rule: *Write what you know.* Here are some questions to help you unearth what you know and chronicle it in song.

1 How are your feelings feeling? What's making you happy? Are you joyous and free? Anxious? Satisfied? Grateful? Are you a girl on the verge of an emotional meltdown?

2 You can't hide from love: Are you in love? Are you running from it? Toward it? Are you tortured by a crush on someone who isn't aware of your existence? True l-u-v is a many-splendored thing, but there's nothing like a painful breakup to help you summon up a few dozen songs. I'm not suggesting that you dump someone for the benefit of your art, but just remember that

blistering heartache is a powerful creative force if you harness it correctly. So if/when your heart is a mess, *milk it for all it's worth.* Chronicle the highest highs, those happy times when you had it all, the moment when that all changed, the sorrow, disgust, elation, and awful text messages that followed. Now, a note for those who haven't experienced romantic love: You can still write love songs. You don't have to lie, you just have to use your knowledge of other things you love (your pet/grandma/BFF). You can sing your heart out about how much you care, and unless you throw in lines about their shiny fur or start crooning "Ooh, Mittens, you're mine till the end of time"—no one will know the difference. It's not about the object of your affections; it's about the feeling.

3 What do you want? Total freedom? Better parties to go to? World peace? For every girl in the world to start a band? A black leather prom dress with your name airbrushed on it? Desire, like romantic pain, is easy to channel into songs—strong feelings usually are. What

HIT THE
BOOKS:**THE WRITE STUFF**

Here are two great books to get you primed for songwriting glory.

Songwriters on Songwriting, revised and expanded by Paul Zollo (Da Capo Press, 2003). 750 pages of interviews with the world's best songwriters of the last fifty years explaining how they compose, where their inspiration comes from, and all their songwriting secrets. Even if you don't care about Carole King or people who wrote

songs for The Supremes, the interviews are fascinating and super useful for any songwriter.

Classic Rock Stories: The Stories Behind the Greatest Songs of All

Time by Tim Morse (St. Martin's Griffin, 1998). Paul McCartney, Alice Cooper, Rod Stewart, and others spill the beans on classic jams.

you want from the world and what kind of life you want to lead aren't too big to tackle in a song.

4 What don't you want? Resistance is a strong feeling—it's desire in reverse. You can be serious and heavy and write about things close to your heart: your parents' divorce, sexism or other forms of injustice, how sad you feel when you see stray dogs eating trash. Pen an ode to your hatred of both mimes and pork chops—yes, in the same song! Channeling

your anger, aggression, frustration, revenge fantasies, and loathing into song is really gratifying. (Just wait until you get to perform it!)

5 What have you read/seen/heard lately? Is there a story in the news that you're obsessing on? Did you read a book and wish you had the protagonist's jet-set life? Did you watch *The Sound of Music* and now have the urge to turn your bedroom curtains into a dress? It's possible to write about what you

learned from a movie, a book, or the news without it sounding like that report you did on a Conestoga wagon train in third grade—you just have to make it personal. You can write about how it inspired you to change your life, or just your reaction to seeing it.

6 Something I learned today. High school is an evergreen topic for rock songs. Loving it and hating it, the friends and the feuds—all you have to do is come up with creative rhymes for “graduate” and you are halfway there. (P.S. The best time to write songs about high school is while you are still in it, since writing songs about how high school was the best time of your life is a cliché best left for cheesy classic-rock ballads.)

7 That’s life. Write about your memories, what you do every day, where you hang out, where you go to get away, family, neighbors, your old house, your first friend, strangers you see around. Take it all apart, and then put it back together in a song. The Beach Boys’ “In My Room” is a perfect example of turning a seemingly mundane,

everyday-life subject (being alone in your bedroom) into something special.

8 The song that won’t exist until you write it. I started writing about music because everything I read about my favorite band was sexist and totally missed the point. I wanted someone who appreciated them like I did to put my feelings and fandom into words, but that seemed unlikely, so I had to do it myself. You are the only person who can write that song about your life, about some specific experience you had that you wish there was a song about. The responsibility is on you to fill that void.



“My whole purpose
with this thing is
to communicate. What
I sing is my own reality.
But just the fact that
people come up to me
and say ‘Hey, that’s my
reality, too’ proves to me
that it’s not just mine.”

JANIS JOPLIN

Just so we're clear: Writing what you know doesn't mean that your lyrics have to be strictly autobiographical. There is no song law that says you have to put it all down exactly as it happened in real life. After all, Johnny Cash never actually shot a man in Reno just to watch him die. This is why being a songwriter is a more exhilarating prospect than being a court reporter. You only have

to put down *your* truth, as it exists for you. You can embellish it, make it fantastic, and leave out the boring parts (you should). Dig deep into your imagination and subconscious and get as weird as you want. The only thing you need to consider is what *you* want to say. As the box below explains, you can apply your life experience to other stories.

ROCKING A MILE IN SOMEONE ELSE'S SHOES

You can write a song about a situation that you haven't actually gone through, like seeing a ghost or being a samurai trapped in a Dutch prison, if you weave your own knowledge of fear or sadness into the experience. Writing about a parallel situation can even be easier than writing about your own life, especially if you are writing about something that's personal and private or you don't feel comfortable making a song that is all "I, I, I, me, me, me." You can project your situation into someone else's life, another time,

or another place. Instead of writing a very direct song about how you and your best friend are no longer best anything, you can turn you and her into brothers who work as security screeners at the Pittsburgh airport, and one of them is jealous of the other because he gets to run the X-ray machine all the time. Or you could write a song from her perspective, apologizing to you. It's just a matter of digging into the guts of the situation and feeling around for something to hold on to, making it real for you.