

# CHAPTER THREE

# ENTITLED

**Wherein we discuss how to be halfway finished when you've hardly started.**

*"I start with the title first. From this title I work out  
the psychology of the tune."*

**—Cole Porter**

I could've put the chord progression chapters here but titles are an interesting starter for songs. Thinking up titles is useful not only for finding a song's story, but to take a quick first step into believing a new song is close to being written.

Here's the **prompt**: make a list of five titles and pick one *to start* the songwriting process.

Here's proof that thinking up titles spurs on creativity. Half an hour ago, I did the prompt. I spit-balled titles. These six came in a couple of minutes.

*Wandering Like A Mad Man (And I'm Not Even a Man)*

*Never Let This Go*

*I Like It This Way*

*You Never Knew Me (and Maybe that's on Me)*

*Anonymous (Like I Committed a Crime)*

*Taking You Down*

Cool, whatever. No, *not* whatever. You know what happened? I did the prompt and wrote a complete song in *ten minutes*, give or take. Done. With a bridge. An anthem? Okay, at least a rocker. With the title *Taking You Down*, I knew the theme. Lyrics poured out. That is rare for me. It was three chords and the truth. Well, seven chords. I am pumped up.

What triggered the flow? First, I re-jigged my brain from my usual process. Repetitive practicing is important to improve on a musical instrument. It can also bring about boredom. **Tip:** creative change stimulates the brain. Making up song titles on the spot, a few old neurons must have reactivated in my head.

**Tip:** a title brings with it a story idea and at least one big lyric before lyrics are even written. That puts positive, creative pressure brackets around your burgeoning song. With a title, the song, in a sense, has an outline.

*We Can Work It Out*. I think I know what that's about. *You Are The Sunshine of My Life*. *I Did It My Way*. Obvious. Granted, *Roxanne* could be about any kind of woman or a pet named Roxanne, but it's probably about a woman. Taylor Swift's *Fearless* could be about any scenario, but I'm pretty sure it's about being fearless. A title suggests so much. How about Mary Gauthier's *I Drink*? That's clear. John Prine's *Angel From Montgomery* is evocative to the listener, and Prine knew exactly what it was about.

In Chapter 20 of *Hey, Writer*, I talk about how structure can lessen fear and unleash creativity. The chapter title, *Structure Creates Freedom*, sounded Orwellian then and still does. Nonetheless, having some structure for the project you're working on—say, like a detailed outline for a novel—lays the writing process out in smaller sections, revealing a process more do-able than daunting, more manageable than massive. It's no longer just you and your fears staring at a blank page knowing 90,000 untyped homeless words are looking for shelter and meaning. The abyss is no longer waiting to swallow you.

So it goes for a song. The song title can play the role of an outline. A good title gives context to the listener. **Tip:** but before there is ever a listener, a title gives the writer—you—a potential lyrical story. Possibly the musical genre. Maybe even tempo. *Seek and Destroy* by Metallica? I'm going to guess it's so upbeat and aggressive it can melt your face if you're too close to the speakers.

With the title *Taking You Down*, I knew what the song was about. I knew it was aggressive. I knew lyrically I wasn't writing *The Times They Are A-Changin'* or *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald*. Punchy, straightforward lyrics poured out in the form of a bullied victim rising up to finally face the bully. I haven't been bullied much in my life except by my own voices, so *Taking You Down*, to me, refers to taking down those inner demons.

Titles are money.

If you don't believe me, how about believing Bernie Taupin, who wrote the lyrics for all of Elton John's greatest hits? "With me," Taupin says, "it's all about titles. I love coming up with titles and I work around those titles or first lines, because if you have a title, you can really build a strong chorus behind it."

**Prompt:** get a notebook and fill it with titles. Call it something cool like TITLES. Shannon Rubicam wrote the Whitney Houston mega-hits *How Will I Know* and *I Wanna Dance with Somebody* with writing partner George Merrill. She told the story about being at a Whitney Houston concert at the Greek Theatre in Los Angeles on Whitney's first tour in 1986. "After she sang *How Will I Know*, I glanced up and there was a shooting star in the night sky above the amphitheatre. *I pulled out my notebook* and wrote down: *Waiting for a star to fall*. It felt like a sign from the heavens."

My italics. Get a notebook for titles.

**Tip:** Shannon Rubicam carries a notebook so you should, too. If you're not in L.A. at a Pink concert gazing at shooting stars, don't panic. It's not the only way to get a title. Not long ago, when Lorde was fifteen, and still called Ella Yelich-O'Connor, she saw a photograph of the Kansas City Royal's famous baseball slugger George Brett on a magazine cover.

That's how she got the *Royals* title.

George Brett retired three years before Lorde was born. Lorde is from New Zealand. Does she even know what a baseball is? She read the word, made it a title, and in half an hour wrote lyrics about the insane consumerism of pop stars which became her first Billboard mega-hit.

**Tip:** listen more closely to conversations, to movie dialogue or, sheepishly, to advertisements. You'll hear titles all the time. Dave Grohl says, "...think about [a title]

like it's a bumper sticker." I assume he means memorable, catchy and evocative. Whatever he means, he's rich and famous for thinking that way.

**Tip:** keep your TITLES notebook close. Why? Because if you're uninspired, you can open your nearby TITLES notebook and get inspired. Read a few titles. Stories will materialize in your mind.

I was driving while listening to rock legend Randy Bachman (The Guess Who, Bachman-Turner Overdrive) on his CBC radio show Vinyl Tap. Randy was waxing on about his musical heroes. I started going over the names of his hit songs. Listen to Bachman's titles or, should I say affectionately, these clichés full of information for the listener and the songwriter?

*Taking Care of Business.* Who hasn't said that? And what sports arena hasn't blasted the chorus out of thirty foot speakers? *You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet.* *Hey You.* *Looking Out For #1.* *Let it Ride.* *Roll On Down The Highway.* A few clichés bordering on bumper stickers. How about one of his biggest hits with the Guess Who? *American Woman.* Or *Undun.* As in undone.

**Prompt:** forget what Bachman and Turner or Burton Cummings were actually writing about. Make up an original story around two (2) of those titles. Take one minute for each title. You will experience the power of the title. I just said *Power of the Title* out loud like I was introducing a steroid-sweating WWF championship fight.

Whatever stories you come up with, pick the one that most excites you and write a new song using the title.

Let's say you chose *Taking Care of Business.* There are a lot of ways to take care of business. For example, just ask Don Corleone—you know, from *The Godfather*—how he takes care of business. If you chose *Looking out for #1*, there are a lot of ways to look out for #1, too (hey, ask Don Corleone again). Or ask a parent desperately trying to take care of their family after being laid off.

There's a song right there. Springsteen's probably already written his own version.

**Tips** For Gathering Titles: look outside your window or go for a walk—forest or city. Those are healthy pastimes, mostly, depending on which city and which forest. Feel titles come. Making them up while you're out there and put them in the notebook: *Step by Step.* *So it Goes.* *Stronger than the Street.* *Nature Girl.* Moving on, *steal* titles from

novels you're reading. While you're at it, steal evocative sentences for your lyrics. I rarely have but I should do, more. You think Springsteen hasn't done that? *The Ghost of Tom Joad*? Tom Joad is the fictional lead character from John Steinbeck's epic *The Grapes of Wrath*.

If you don't find lyric possibilities in a novel, at least borrow ideas for your songs. Back to *The Grapes of Wrath*, legendary folk singer Woody Guthrie wrote twelve Steinbeck-inspired songs for his 1940 Dust Bowl Ballads album, whose theme was the farming drought of the 1930s. When Guthrie wrote the song *Tom Joad*, John Steinbeck supposedly muttered, "That son of a bitch wrote my book in seventeen stanzas. It took me two years."

One could surmise if there was no Woody Guthrie, there would be no Bob Dylan, who early on copped Woody's look and worshipped his work. If that's not true, we can still unquestionably say, if there was no Woody Guthrie, there would have been no Arlo Guthrie. That's just science.

It's important to steal.

**Tip:** keep a notebook for ideas and images and thoughts you take from novels, poems, non-fiction books, films or documentaries. Could be the same notebook you use for jotting down titles. Remember, you are a deep-thinking writer of grand creativity, passion and discipline—or at least moving in that direction.

Another example of using literature for your songs: David Bowie's 1974 *Diamond Dogs* album (when albums mattered). Bowie wrote songs based on George Orwell's seminal novel *1984*, including the track that Bowie called, uh, *1984*. I rest my case about borrowing. Here's a lyric.

They'll split your pretty cranium, and fill it full of air  
And tell you that you're eighty, but, brother, you won't care.

Bowie's song had a disco string intro that even got George Orwell grooving, and he'd been dead from tuberculosis for a quarter century, and even alive wasn't known for his dance moves.

**Prompt:** wander through a library and borrow creative book titles. I don't mean *The Atkins Diet*. Although if do you use *The Atkins Diet*, riot is a good rhyme for diet. I mean, for example, *Everything I Never Told You* by Celeste Ng (I just saw it and said: That's a damn song title!). Book titles are created to be catchy, evocative and memorable. It turns out song titles, at least in the business, demand the same potency. Until you find a few titles and some flow, tell yourself over and over: *I Won't Back Down*. The key is, *Don't Stop Believin'*, I'm serious, *Never Surrender*.

And *Listen to the Music* that *Sparks* your dopamine and opens your heart and any other part of your body: rock, soul, country, gospel, blues, funk. To awaken more senses, watch the videos of songs, too, and write down ideas from the feel and the images and the lyrics.

**Tip:** now look at your own life. Happy, sad, in love, rich, broke, jealous, scared, fearless. It's a smorgasboard. In no time you will have a list of workable titles that inspire your writing, or at least *By The Time I Get To Phoenix*. I'm not actually going to Phoenix. How can I, I have a bunch of songs to finish? And possibly a documentary about Sir Anthony Hopkins, but I digress.

Find titles that make you chuckle, cry, yearn, wonder, hope, or encourage you to the point that you *Feel Like Makin' Love*. I know, cheap. Get inspired by your titles.

**Prompt:** write a song right now based on a title you stole or conjured, filled with your creative passion.

Here's *your* new title: big-hearted songwriter, inspired by life.



