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PROMPTS (AND IDEAS) TO LIVE BY

INTRODUCTION

Wherein we begin by basking in the glory of song.

*“Nothing’s important in music other than
doing what you want to do.”*

—Jacob Collier

I am obliged to come clean. Never had a hit song. Never charted. Barely been on the radio. I mean *barely*. So why read my **tips** and **prompts** and ideas on songwriting?

Counter question: Did Vince Lombardi, legendary coach of the Super Bowl winning *Green Bay Packers*, ever play in the NFL? No. Not even high school football. He was a lousy athlete, had poor eyesight and wanted to be a priest.

You see? Lombardi didn’t know Bo Diddley about songwriting. But he knew football. And why am I talking like Ted Lasso?

Anyway, I’m the Vince Lombardi of songwriting except I never wanted to be a priest. Not even a Judas Priest.

So what have I done other than *not* write hits? I’ve made films, documentaries, written novels and screenplays and interviewed hundreds of people, from Noam Chomsky to actor Ed O’Neill to Pulitzer Prize-winner Samantha Power to Kobe Bryant to George Foreman. I once opened for the southern rockers Little Feat with only my acoustic guitar (and clothes). I taught screenwriting at college. I water-skied with Antonio Banderas off the Israeli coast which actually took no talent. In 2009 I sat in a theatre next to Muhammad Ali, his body gripped by Parkinson’s syndrome, as he gazed at a film about himself that I wrote and directed.

The moment was surreal.

And then Ali stood up and put his fist in the air.

I was even short-listed for an Oscar.

And in that collage of relative success, I've written a lot of songs, had songs on film and television, toured as a musician and I am addicted to the process of songwriting.

A talented singer-songwriter friend of mine was in a band in his younger days. I asked him once, "Do you still hope to write that pop song that hits some mainstream tipping point and thrills a great swathe of the human species?"

"No," he said, void of emotion or elaboration. Like *my* question was weird.

Is he an android? I wondered.

That desire haunts me. The haunting part I have to let go of. But I long to write better and better pop songs; a melody or groove or sound so evocative and truthful it causes dopamine to trickle out the ears of listeners as they sing along in precious moments of their lives. That description sounds like a head injury but you get it, right? Spontaneous list, top of my head: *Maybe I'm Amazed*. *Ramble On*. *Bridge Over Troubled Water*. Joni Mitchell's *River*. Marvin Gaye's *What's Goin' On*. Bob Dylan's *Like A Rolling Stone*. *Superstition* and all Stevie Wonder's Songs in the Key of Life. *Free Fallin'*. Phil Collins' *In The Air Tonight*. Pharell William's *Happy*. Glen Campbell singing Jimmy Webb's *Wichita Linemen* or Johnny Hartford's *Gentle on My Mind*. Gladys Knight singing Jim Weatherly's *Midnight Train To Georgia*. Gordon Lightfoot's *Early Mornin' Rain* and fifty-seven others, Bowie's *Changes* and every one of his theatrical masterpieces right up to the Black Star record. *Ain't Too Proud to Beg*, *My Girl* and most everything Motown. *I Can't Make You Love Me*. *Good Vibrations*. *Here Comes the Sun*. John Prine's *Angel From Montgomery*. Eddie Vedder's *Big Hard Sun*. Adam Duritz's freedom on Counting Crows' *Round Here*. Peter Gabriel's magical *Solsbury Hill*. Aretha's rapturous King/Goffin/Wexler classic *(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman*. Elton John and Bernie Taupin's celestial *Rocket Man*. *Tiny Dancer*? Neil Finn's *Don't Dream It's Over*. Sam Cooke's *A Change Is Gonna Come*. Hey, it doesn't end there. I'm teary right now knowing I won't see my dad again as I listen to John Denver's *Sunshine on my Shoulders*.

That list was all ad-lib. I left out legendary favourites. James Taylor. Ani DiFranco. Nora Jones. Paul Simon. The Stones. Hugh Masekela. Miles Davis. The Beatles, together and solo. Prince, for god sake. The list rotates hourly and goes on for at least

another nine hundred and twelve thousand songs and songwriters. Then there are the thousands of less famous songs I can't live without and so many Canadian songwriters I actually know a lot or a little. Paul Hyde. John Mann. Bill Henderson. Sarah McLachlan. Dan Mangan. Legends in my eyes. I have to stop. There are too many to mention. And then there are all of you and your musical landscapes.

Aaah...the musical rush of dopamine...

Even in my songwriting process, the stringing together of related melodic notes across a challenging chord progression? A thrill. Finding a chorus that makes me fist pump the air? Writing a lyric that wells me up, even if I cringe later? Celestial. If you write songs, you know what I'm saying. A creative flow and joy seldom encountered anywhere else.

With music I become beautifully lost. My main nemesis is self-criticism. So whatever level you're at, the first **tip** is be kind to yourself, please, on your songwriting journey.

Flow generally flows better when you're kind to yourself.

As difficult as songs are to finish (and start), and challenging as they are to record—let alone make soar and be heard—I love writing songs. I love deconstructing songs. I love song trivia. I love songwriters.

My goal is to not only teach songcraft and inspire you and prompt you but give you a stream of ideas for new songs. We will write songs here. And song trivia will travel with us. If you don't like song trivia, I can't help you.

Are you ready? What? Still not sure I can help?

Okay, uh...I once had an ending-credits song placed on a big Hollywood film with Kevin Costner, Robin Wright and Paul Newman. Yeah. Actually, not *on it* on it. After months of waiting I got a call from an Oscar-winning producer, Jim Wilson, at Abbey Road studios saying it wasn't going to happen. Abbey Road. Remember that musical run on *Here Comes the Sun*, right after George Harrison sings, *It's all right...?* You know, capo seventh fret, key of A, the run starting in a modified G Major formation with an open high E, kind of a G6? *That* was recorded at Abbey Road studios. *That's* where my song was rejected. So don't question my cred. And if you read on, I'll tell you the rest of that story

It will take three short paragraphs and involves a focus group.

Oh, and wherever I don't feel I measure up in this book, I replace myself with a mega-music-star as an example of how to work this songwriting craft. Smart, huh? Did I mention the trivia?

Okay, let's write some songs. Simplify that. Let's write one new song and never look back.

