

CHAPTER 10:

STEAL GUITAR

Wherein we're inspired enough to make someone else's greatness our own.

"It is only natural to pattern yourself after someone...But you can't just copy someone. If you like someone's work, the important thing is to be exposed to everything that person has been exposed to."

—Bob Dylan

This is a fun chapter, open to interpretation and insult. My hope is, by chapter's end, you realize you can work alongside (and with) the best songwriters in the world, past and present, from the comfort of your own home.

The chord progressions and melodies of great (often hit) songs have qualities that get them listened to with musical, feverish joy. But in truth, the popular song has a mysterious life of its own. One thing is certain, parts of it will be borrowed, manipulated and even duplicated and stolen by other artists, many of them great, or soon to be great. Legends steal.

That's the **tip** from me to you: steal from the songs you love and let them make your creations better. Stealing in this case means *don't steal*; it means steal inspiration and borrow and manipulate parts to make your own; take the sounds, listen to the lyrics, the build ups, the progressions, the structures, the lyrics, the riffs, the hooks and the passion — and learn.

Studying the greats and actively borrowing ideas, sounds and inspiration is a crash course in the art of songwriting. It is vital. It is how all pop music is made.

How do I know this? Countless artists told me.

I'm still calculating but so far there are 429,317 admitted examples of famous artists borrowing from other artists and making magic. Sometimes artists literally take parts of a song and hope for the best in the court of popular opinion *and* the law courts. Sometimes the taking of a song is unintentional. George Harrison's *My Sweet Lord* is so similar to Ronnie Mack's *He's So Fine*, sung by The Chiffons, that I don't see how that could be intentional. It's a bad steal. The judge agreed it was unintentional, but George still got sued for \$1.6 million in 1976. Harrison is such a full-on artist, he wrote a song about being sued – getting inspiration from the ordeal. He called the song *This Song*. It included Monty Python's Eric Idle yodelling on about the song resembling Motown hits *Sugar Pie*, *Honey Bunch* and *Rescue Me*.

English humour borrowed from earlier English humour.

And now, some essential shout outs to those artists who have given so much to rock 'n roll but received so little. I'm not scholarly enough to accurately draw rock 'n roll's complex family tree, but there would be *no* American music/rock music as it is heard today – not even close – without the original blues geniuses from the first half of the twentieth century and before; legends known and unknown, paid and unpaid, revered and forgotten. I cannot make a definitive list. Send in your list of blues masters and we'll build the Blues to Rock 'n Roll Family Tree.

The remarkable and original sound, texture, emotion and swing of the rhythm and blues and its relations rose up in the Deep South after slavery, the most heinous system in human history. The blues survived the Jim Crow era and flourished to become a soundtrack for the world. The blues is its own mysterious concoction from the past – spirituals and gospel, dixieland, work songs, field hollers (call and response, shout songs), not to mention country and western music with roots in Ireland and Scotland, and Cajun and Creole music flavours. These are sounds and styles that arrived and reinvented themselves through profound struggle and heartbreak and hope in the ignorantly named New World.

The New World wasn't remotely new, obviously.

The blues, from Robert Johnson to Willie Dixon and Muddy Waters and B.B. King and Leadbelly is male dominated but the women are startling. Sister Rosetta Sharpe, as an example, advanced the sound when she sang and played gospel with an electric

guitar in the 1930s and '40s, including a Thomas Dorsey song with the aptly titled *Rock Me*. The terms *rocking* and *rolling*, descriptors for a ship's movement, came to describe a religious and sexual fervour and a yearning for freedom that the blues could interpret, hold and release. Many famous pop songs have been copped from blues legends – and I'll mention a few in a bit.

But first, let's talk music evolution on the rhythm side. Dee Dee Chandler was a black drummer in turn-of-the-century New Orleans. As jazz – known sometimes as *jas* at the time – was taking shape, Chandler was one of the first drummers (some say the first) to simultaneously use a foot to play the bass drum while playing snare drum with his hands, holding sticks. Picture this birth. It's the beginning of the *drum set* where *one* person could play what was previously played by multiple people. Where would rock 'n roll be without the drum set? Nowhere, according to *The Police's* extraordinary drummer Stewart Copeland, who calls the drum set “uniquely American” and “the greatest invention of modern American music.”

Stuart has a bias, but he also has a point. Hey, even Simon and Garfunkel couldn't get a #1 hit until drums were (secretly) added to *The Sound of Silence*.

The cross-pollination and evolution of styles and struggles and instruments are eye-opening, jaw-dropping, heart-breaking and life-affirming.

For most people, banjos represent the twang of country music and bluegrass. But the instrument was played first in the Caribbean as far back as the 1600s, built by West African slaves, a variation on an African instrument. It crossed over, as they say, to country.

In pop music, classical music also plays a real role in melody, chord progressions and structure. The magical complexity of Bach is weaved through pop. Sting has said if he could go back and hear any performer it would be, “J.S. Bach. We sit at his feet everyday. It's all out there on the page.” Indeed, and Sting took it seriously; the complex fluidity of his songwriting is undeniable and nearly incomparable in pop music.

Czech composer Antonín Dvořák came to America in 1892 with the goal of finding “American music” while believing – get this – Africa-American and First Nation music should be the basis of it all. And of course, it was. When Dvořák used those folk

traditions and melodies in his work, he did receive some backlash—of what form, I'm not sure. But he was at least trying to be thankful for the music.

Billy Joel is obsessed with Beethoven. Joel's *This Night* credits Beethoven, taking his gorgeous *Pathétique* (*Piano Sonata No. 8*) and reworking it, as is the nature of the creative process; reworking greatness. Again, on this topic, my commentary is incomplete. It's a primer. An instigator. A nudge. My words here are a reminder to remember some of the mostly forgotten historical magic. When Billy Joel sings *Vienna waits for you* in his evocative, somewhat Kurt Weill-inspired classic song *Vienna*, he is celebrating that city's vibe and history for inspiring musical genius. "By going to Vienna, things started to make sense in the world for me," Joel says, and he is the Piano Man.

Schubert wrote three minute songs, six hundred of them, that had verses that built up to choruses and chord progressions familiar to pop music today. Only Dolly Parton has written more. That's a joke—but kinda true. Schubert's intention was to make the songs instantly appealing. Sounds familiar. ABBA did the same in the 1970s.

And then there's Franz Liszt, perhaps the world's first musical superstar in the modern sense. German poets described his appeal as Lisztomania—seriously—over a hundred years before Elvis or the four lads from Liverpool ushered in Beatlemania, let alone Tom Jones on stage being bombarded by tossed panties—the equivalent today of having thirteen million followers on some social media platform telling you how wonderful you are.

Music rewrites the human experience: joy, hope, grief, genius and power. It has accompanied tyrant-led countries into brutal war. Richard Wagner (pronounced Vahgner) wrote operas that inspired Hitler. I'm afraid so. Other music, as we have said, soothed and lifted people stolen from their homelands and treated as non-human. And it's touched every emotion and experience in between, from puppy love to trance to social protest to the spectre of death (David's Bowie's final album).

Music is alchemy of the highest order.

Forgive my historical mistakes and oversights. The point is, *all great artists steal*. Why not you?

So here's a **prompt**: listen to the music, be in a state of inspiration and awe and *constant* borrowing— with passion.

Find your own spirit and brilliance therein.

Rock 'n Roll is a melting pot, and the power of that bubbling cauldron of sounds and notes casts a spell on and becomes *reinvented* in the creations of those most taken by its magic.

Today we are all the descendants of the blues and all of its sounds and incarnations, all that came before it and since. Don't let corporations and algorithms own it all. You and I and the human spirit own it – in the sweetest sense of the word own.

So what should be borrowed? Shared? Stolen?

Some of that decision comes down to the law, whatever that's worth. There are plenty of musical copyright infringement lawsuits out there. As chord progressions in popular music become less varied and thus more similar – which has happened since the '60s – there may be an increase in lawsuits, some real, some bogus, some unclear.

But that's not what this chapter is about. This chapter is imploring you, a creative soul and songwriter, to absorb the history and the music you love. I promise you, all legendary bands and songwriters have done the same, *borrowing* ideas *more closely* than we can ever imagine, or know. Borrowing and redistributing music in a unique way is a skill and talent both conscious and unconscious.

Led Zeppelin is known for directly lifting old blues tunes, Willie Dixon being a band favourite. The Dark Lord himself Jimmy Page admits the band took "...some liberties, I must say. As far as my end of it goes, I always tried to bring something fresh to anything that I used."

Page's caveat 'to bring something fresh' is truthful. There is *nothing* quite like the sound of Led Zeppelin.

Whatever has gone down over time, I'm talking to you about stealing *inspiration*. Use greatness like a transference of energy. Take from inspired work, let it fill you and change you, and make music magic from the experience. Scientist Isaac Newton was both an ornery virgin and a scientific *wunderkind*, yet he made it clear that we all stand on the shoulders of giants. Why not you? Some of those giants are in music bands. Krist Novoselic of Nirvana fame is 6'7" – or 201 centimetres, for my European following. Start climbing.

Here are examples of borrowing, stealing and perfected inspiration.

Johnny Cash's legendary *Folsom Prison Blues* almost put *Cash* in prison. Okay, not prison but he got sued. It's virtually a cover of Gordon Jenkins' *Crescent City Blues*, directly copping most of the melody *and* a huge portion of the lyrics. The opening line of *Crescent City Blues*?

I hear the train a-comin',
it's rolling round the bend
and I ain't been kissed, Lord
since I don't know when

Now *Folsom Prison Blues*, with a near exact melody as *Crescent City Blues*:

I hear the train a-comin'
it's rolling round the bend
and I ain't seen the sunshine
since I don't know when

The artists settled in the late '60s for something like \$75,000 dollars.

Folks say the opening riff in the Strokes' *Last Nite* sounds like Tom Petty's *American Girl*. Julian Casablancas, the Strokes' lead singer, said, "Yeah, we ripped it off. Where you been?" Tom Petty, being as cool as the real Tom Petty, didn't care.

For a lot of big time artists, that's how it works. Absorbed in music, the music inspires. It's creative reflux. It shows up unexpectedly—or intentionally. It leaks. It becomes another song.

Some songs are so close. As I finish writing this book, British pop star Dua Lipa's 2020 mega-catchy mega-hit *Levitating* is in the courts for copyright infringement of the 2017 song *Live Your Life* by the reggae band Artikal Sound System. Gotta say, identical key, similar chorus chord progression—*Levitating* is Bm7, F#m7, Em7, Bm7 and *Live Your Life* is Bm7, F#m7, Em7, Em7—nearly interchangeable chorus melody and the same vibe. *Live Your Life* has a slower tempo. I'm not sure how Artikal Sound System

could lose, except for possible law minutiae I don't understand. For example, proof Due Lipa and her co-songwriters never heard the song, which is highly possible. Or evidence both songs borrow from a previous song, also highly possible. Or that good old All-American ideal of being bankrupted in a war of attrition by powerful lawyers. Isn't that the technique Donald Trump has used when contractors have sued him for not getting paid?

Most artistic stealing is good old fashioned borrowing and inspiration, which is not stealing at all.

In a Rolling Stone interview, Coldplay's Chris Martin said, "We're definitely good, but I don't think you can say we're that original. I regard us as being incredibly good plagiarists." More than once he may have regretted saying that but I appreciate his honesty and his skill. What a voice. He wrote *Yellow* in the studio, on the spot, waiting to sing something else. He strummed yet another great Coldplay chord progression with tasteful chord inversions, imitated Neil Young's voice (that's true), and sang, "Look at the stars, look how they shine for you." How *cool* is that? And, yes, I can imagine Neil Young's voice singing that line, even if I can no longer hear it on Spotify.

My truth? I didn't borrow enough. Certainly not consciously. **Tip:** be conscious. Learn and borrow from the best.

Playing in Hamburg in the early '60s (August 1960 to December '62), the Beatles called themselves the Silver Beetles for a while, a name inspired by Buddy Holly and the Crickets. Then the Silver Beatles. Silver was dropped. And voilà, the Beatles. The group played over 250 gigs in the dumpy clubs of that German port, on stage four or five hours a night, honing their craft, covering the tunes of all their rock and blues singing idols. The songs, sounds, styles and grooves of Little Richard, Carl Perkins, Chuck Berry and Elvis were absorbed into their musical DNA.

The verse of the Beatles' classic *Come Together* was influenced by Chuck Berry's *You Can't Catch Me*. *Come Together* was played at a slower tempo with a consciously different bass line from McCartney, who aired his concern to Lennon over the similarities. John didn't care. Berry even wrote this middle-verse lyric for his song: *Here come a flat top / He was movin' up with me*. John wrote *Here come old flat top, he come grooving up slowly*.

Lennon's response to borrowing is Lennonesque: "It wasn't a rip-off; it was a love-in." I always wondered how Lennon thought to write *Here come ol' flat top*. Now we all know.

Another piece of trivia: psychedelic guru Timothy Leary had been at John and Yoko's famous Montreal bed-in for peace, and John promised to write a campaign song for Leary's political run for governor of California against future president Ronald Reagan. Leary's slogan was *Come Together, Join the Party*, hence John's song title. In the end, a campaign song wasn't needed. In 1970, Leary was given a barbaric ten-year jail sentence for a 1968 marijuana possession then another ten for an earlier arrest. Leary escaped the joint—unintended pun—in September 1970 and globetrotted across the world to avoid the long arm of the U.S. criminal system. Inspiration is waiting everywhere. **Tip:** host your own bed-in for peace and see what happens.

How about Elton John's massive 1972 hit *Rocket Man*? Turns out it's not about getting high, after all. Lyricist Bernie Taupin had read Ray Bradbury's 1951 short story called *The Rocket Man*. Bradbury's sci-fi piece told the story of a kid named Doug whose old man worked in space for three-month periods. Those absences slowly destroy the parents' marriage. After all, it's lonely out in space. Just hearing that Bernie Taupin *read* a sci-fi short story, *nabbed* the title and sensibility, then penned a legendary lyric, is inspiring and instructive enough to have me reaching for my guitar. Who doesn't love Bernie Taupin's lyrics?

Steal with integrity.

Then, of course, there is Rap. Since Rap exposed itself to the world in 1979, with *Rapper's Delight*—perfect entry title—the genre has used direct samples of other songs on its tracks. Stealing? Borrowing? Sharing? Credit is sometimes shared. Rights are sometimes paid for. Whatever the process is called, however it's credited or not, the sample is a common feature and often worth the effort/risk, bringing immediate recognition to a new track—a vital key to a hit song: instant relatability. It takes great skill, as well, to turn a famous riff into a new, sampled beat that works. I've never done it. I'd like to try.

There are countless variations on this process. Ariana Grande's hit song *7 Rings* opens with a lyrically-modified *My Favourite Things* of Julie Andrews/Sound of Music

fame, written by the incomparable Rogers and Hammerstein (speaking of the power of collaboration). Grande's version has over a billion listens on Youtube. *Ten* songwriters are listed for the track. It's got five chords (*My Favourite Things'* chords) and modified *My Favourite Things'* lyrics. How that took ten songwriters, I don't know. That's a corporate team of hitmakers.

Some folks have suggested the opening riff in Olivia Rodrigo's 2021 hit song *Brutal* (written by Rodrigo and producer Dan Nigro) is a "direct lift" of the great Elvis Costello's opening descending riff in *Pump it Up*. I can hear the similarity.

In defence of Rodrigo, Costello said (via a hashtag) inspiration for *Pump It Up* came from Bob Dylan's classic *Subterranean Homesick Blues* and Dylan's song hinted towards Chuck Berry's *Too Much Monkey Business*. "It's fine by me," Costello said. "It's how rock and roll works. You take the broken pieces of another thrill and make a brand new toy. That's what I did."

So that's how Elvis Costello sees it, which is honest, cool and full of truth—and it was his riff. Remember, even Elvis Costello's name is borrowed (born Declan MacManus), as is Dylan's. So yes, individual genius is real, but only in an illusory kind of way, all joined by eternal time and different names.

Okay, too deep.

Less deep? Song similarities can be traced from forever. The '60s opening riff feel of Green Day's *Warning* sounds like a remake of the Kinks' cool intro for their 1968 song *Picture Book*. Maybe they made a deal. Maybe they didn't. Maybe it's not close enough to worry about it.

Whatever the answer, here's my two cents on it—which is worth a fortune: unless songwriting credit is being shared, *don't steal*. But...

Tip: be inspired and borrow cool and great ideas and remix them in your own way. Borrowing is how human life progresses. It happens with genes. It happens with memes. It's built into the creative process. There is no *now* without before. There is no tomorrow without now. The reality of creative cross-fertilization is precisely why T.S. Eliot and others say, 'Good artists borrow, great artists steal.' Picasso was more blunt saying, 'Art is theft.' Even that line is likely lifted from French anarchist Pierre Proudhon, who in his 1840 book *What is Property?* replied to himself, 'Property is theft!'

It never ends.

One thing I know: when music moves me, it lubricates my songwriting process. I celebrate those artists who tap into my brain and inspire it to spill back something different.

It goes like this. I'm listening to music. My brain or heart kick in. I start playing the guitar, rarely the piano (a rare piano song of mine is called *Little Dreamer*). Ideas unfold. I cobble together what I like and keep going. My track record of non-hits proves the songs bear no discernible relationship to songs that may have inspired them.

The truth of the creative process comes straight from the mouth of *The Weeknd*: "For the chorus of *Secrets*, we used The Romantics' *Talking in Your Sleep* and *Pale Shelter* by Tears for Fears. It's like hip-hop: just grab it."

Just grab it, he says, comparing it, basically, to stealing a sample.

Ed Sheeran is notorious for borrowing—and has been accused more than once of going too far. With his hit *Bad Habits*, check out the similarities in the riff—the progression *and* the sound, melody and phrasing in the intro and beneath the chorus—to the 1980s' band Bronski Beat, and their song *Smalltown Boy*. It's not identical and could be coincidental. But couple the similarities with *The Weeknd's* honesty about his songwriting process, and *The Weeknd's* lesson is clear: learn from the greats, and borrow hard.

There are some strange techniques to inspire songwriting as well. Legend has it Tom Waits would play multiple radios at once—five even—and listen for whatever compelling melodic overtones would squeak out from the mix. He'd hum that and let it be his inspiration for his own songs. I haven't tried five songs at once, and knowing Tom Waits, he could be having us on, which would be terrific. A bit like being insulted by Don Rickles—people feel good when it happens. If you try the multiple radios, let me know the result. I've tried two songs at once, and there are tones and melodies that rise above the confusion.

Here's a straightforward **prompt**: open a songbook of either your favourite or not-so-favourite songs, or go online, pick a chord progression from some song, known or unknown, play the progression and sing over it. Doing this can shorten the step of

finding an inspiring chord progression to get melodic and chordal ideas flowing. Bring in your own variations to the progression.

If you use, say, a Paul Simon, Joni Mitchell, Stevie Wonder, Elliot Smith, Ron Sexsmith or Kurt Cobain progression—and countless others—you will chord your way into enticing musical territory.

If you try a progression more straightforward, the results can still be excellent. Follow your musical instincts.

In short, feel inspired in every way to borrow simple or complex progressions from wherever you find them. Strum those songs or tickle the ivories, and make up your own variations and melodies.

Beautiful.

To test this songbook exercise/chord progression **prompt**, I opened my dog-eared *The Beatles Complete* songbook. I found *I Will*. Remember that beauty? *Who knows how long I've loved you...?* This was a Lennon & McCartney song (but mostly if not completely a McCartney song). It opens with, F-Dm-Gm7-C7. Such a simple start, it's hardly worth borrowing, but for some reason I did start with those opening chords. Then I transposed the key and added my own variations. My verse chords ended up being G-Bm11-Am7-D7, with more complexity in the pre-chorus, including a beautiful diminished chord and Bm, Cm, Cmaj7, Bm11 and B7 in the bridge. The result was a bluesy-folk song called *If You'd Like To Come Home*. It does not resemble *I Will* at all, but Paul, old friend that you are, thanks for the inspiration.

Chord variation is more fertile amongst writers of the '60s and '70s than songwriters with hits today. Stevie Wonder? Genius. James Taylor (and the Beatles) taught me diminished chords in songs like the jazz-infused *Don't Let Me Be Lonely Tonight* and *Secret o' Life*. Paul Simon? A national treasure and an exquisite and inspired borrower of magic. Play the verse chord progression from *Fifty Ways To Leave Your Lover* and see what it inspires. Paul uses the same technique. His verse melody in *American Tune* is a direct and extended lift from Bach who, like Van Gogh, was largely forgotten at the time of his death, so never give up. It's a motto of mine. In fact, I shout it often, even sober: *They'll love me when I'm dead!*

If the Bach example is insufficient evidence that you, too, could borrow inspiration effectively, Simon's earlier exquisite classic *Bridge Over Troubled Water* borrowed from the same Bach melody. I heard the song with my kids this morning and got teary (Simon's, not Bach's). On the Dick Cavett show, Simon confesses the use of the Bach melody specifically on the verse line *when evening falls so hard*. He goes on to say the song was at a dead end until he "...was listening to some music by a gospel group called *The Swan Silvertones*...and that subconsciously influenced me and I started to go to gospel changes." Simon heard the lead singer of the group, Reverend Claude Jeter, using his legendary falsetto on a 1959 release of the gospel song *Oh Mary Don't You Weep*, "...scat singing and at one point shouted out, 'I'll be a bridge over deep water if you trust in My name.' And..." Simon adds, to laughter from the crowd, "I guess I stole it..." He didn't, of course. Paul Simon was infused and inspired by gospel rapture and vocal brilliance.

Prompt: play with Simon's chords on *Bridge Over Trouble Water* and see if you can find inside them your own gospel-tinged beauty of a song.

Now consider the West and South African musical influences on his *Graceland* masterpiece. After being entranced by *Diamonds On The Souls of Her Shoes* and *Under African Skies*, I took a dive into west African pop. The sound and the progressions were at times, to my ear, identical to many of the perfect songs on *Graceland* and the album's flavour.

Music, by nature, flows. Wade into that glimmering river and be washed by the wonder. Take what you need and let your songs give back to the melodic stream.

Whether you are flowing or panicking, hammering piano chords or stuck in a rut, keep observing the world as the artist you are, drinking it in as inspiration. Nature. Relationships. Politics. Movies. Novels. All of it. But most of all, *use* the music. Nowhere does a songwriter find more inspiration than in music itself. Adore the music you adore. Be inspired by it. Use it. Borrow it. Rearrange it. Make it your own. Steal it in the ways we've been discussing: with love and integrity.

Music is the elixir that every songwriter must use to write better songs.

Make your own magic using the source itself.