

**University of Southern California  
Thornton School of Music  
MUSC 255 – Songwriting I  
4:00 – 5:50 pm, Fall 2016**

**Instructor:**           **ANDREA STOLPE**  
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**Office:**               **TMC 118**  
**Office Hours:**       **By appointment**  
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**Course Description**

Organization of musical ideas and words into the writing of popular songs. Analysis of current and historic songwriting trends. Emphasis is on the craft and art of the raw song product. No formal musical experience is required to enroll in this class. Students will record demos of songs and will perform their compositions in class.

**Basic Supplies**

Required Textbook: Beginning Songwriting by Andrea Stolpe

Access/ability to LEGALLY DOWNLOAD songs (iTunes, Amazon, etc.)

Journal or other preferred method for keeping notes/song ideas

Access to recording device (computer, phone) – that can export to digital audio files

A user account on [www.soundcloud.com](http://www.soundcloud.com) account that is linked with professors' accounts (astolpe@usc.edu)

**Learning outcomes**

At the conclusion of this class students will be able to demonstrate a proficient level of organizing harmonic, melodic, rhythmic and lyrical elements into a compelling and cohesive structure through the writing of original songs. This class will help establish a “creative habit” that will increase the flow of original ideas and develop a unique songwriting “voice”. Through extensive listening examples and writing exercises, students will demonstrate a greater understanding of the popular songwriting craft and traditions through the identification of key songwriters, writing techniques and stylistic approaches, and be able to apply these concepts to their own songwriting.

## **ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING**

**In-class projects and assignments - 20% of grade:** Several in-class projects will be presented to help develop skills and various writing assignments will be made. Grading will be determined by students' active participation in the project, thoughtful peer review of presented work and effective application of concepts learned in class. If you are not present at class on the day of an in-class project, you will receive "no credit" for that project. In-class projects cannot be made up.

**Song 1 - 15% of grade**

**Song 2 - 15% of grade**

**Song 3 - Topline and Lyric (Collaborative) 15% of grade**

**Song 4 - In-Class Writing Activity "Pictures and Words" (Collaborative) 15% of grade**

**Song 5: Message In A Crumple - 20% of grade**

**Final portfolio - 20% of grade:** A final portfolio of completed songs will be due on the date of the final, TBD. The portfolio will include lyrics and a demo recording of Song 1, Song 2, and Song 5.

### TO RECEIVE CREDIT FOR SONGS

Songs 1, 2, 5 must be written independently.

All songs must be presented in class on due date. They may be presented live, but a recorded version with complete lyrics must be turned in as part of the final portfolio.

### GRADING OF SONGS

Songs will be graded based upon effective application of concepts, originality, completeness, strength of melody, lyrics and overall presentation as outlined. Level of performance ability or recording quality of demo will not be a consideration in the grade, but students should rehearse and perfect their performances and recordings before class. Note: please do not upload audio that is overloaded (unintentionally distorted) or contains fundamental mistakes or false starts -- if work is marred by a fundamental flaw, fix it before upload.

Students should make revisions to their songs as they see fit based upon in-class feedback and critique.

### **Additional Information**

**Establish Daily Work Habits** – Students should work daily on songwriting -- writing, collecting ideas, critical listening, analysis, playing, recording or whatever helps you create new work. Establishing a creative ritual is extremely effective in increasing your creative flow and doing so will make a dramatic improvement in songwriting.

**Late Assignments** – Late assignments will be marked down 5% each day it is late. Late assignments will not be accepted beyond one week of the original due date.

**Attendance and Participation** – Attendance and participation is expected at all classes.

### **Songwriting I Code Of Respect**

Presenting original composition before an audience requires courage. Every student's performance will be heard with respect, feedback will be constructive, and each student is responsible for fostering a classroom atmosphere that encourages artistic risk. As in most performance environments, talking during performances is never tolerated.

### **Week 1:**

#### **Lecture**

- Capture lightning in a phone: keep a journal
- Why you shouldn't take this class (or should)
- Political correctness in song and in class
- From The Personal to The Universal
- Composition vs. performance: it's the song, not the singer
- Songs are small
- Common songwriting challenges

Required Textbook: Beginning Songwriting by Andrea Stolpe

Assignment 1: Begin compiling ideas and building a songwriter's habit. If you play an instrument, bring it next week to share a song.

Reading Assignment: Chapters 1 and 2, pg.1-13

**Week 2:**

Review of book and assigned reading

Lecture: CHORUSES & HOOKS, VERSES & LYRICS, WORDS & MELODY

The Chorus: Don't Bore Us

What is a hook and why does it stand out?

How can we make ours stand out too?

Listening Examples:

Bad (single word and riffs)

Dude Looks Like a Lady (outrageous and 'call and response')

Keynote Presentation includes: 100 years or 511 Miller Street (numbers)

From My Front Porch Looking In (play on words)

Waiting On The World to Change

Let It Hurt (internal repetition)

Musical Tools: Shorter notes, added rest, new chord, change in melodic rhythm and pitch, harmonization, shout chorus, loud/quiet/loud/stop

In-Class activity: With a partner, talk about hooks/titles. Help each other try on different titles and topics. Performances of songs or song pieces for feedback.

**Week 3:**

Lecture: SONG FORM, CHORUSES, CLICHES AND RHYME SCHEME

Listening examples: (Refer to Keynote Presentation)

Verse/Refrain forms:

'Yesterday' Beatles

'Wake Me Up When September Ends' Green Day

'End of the Innocence'

'Still Crazy' Paul Simon

Strophic Form:

'Wildflowers' Tom Petty

Chorus Form and Function

Placement of hook/title and repetition

'I Believe In Love' Paula Cole

'Anytime' Brian McKnight

Simple chorus listening - 20 simple structures

Verse/Chorus forms:

'Clarity' Zedd

'Daughters' John Mayer

'Let It Hurt' Rascal Flatts  
'Strawberry Wine' Deana Carter  
'Right Now' Fort Minor

Breaking form:

Collin 'Summer'

Father John Misty 'Bored in the USA'

Rules of rhyme

The problem with perfection

What else can we do? (5 rhyme types)

Prosody

Harmonic Color and frequency

Melodic shape, pitch, and rhythm

Production and Performance

Assignment 1: Write a Chorus.

Reading Assignment: Chapter 3, pg. 13-20

Week 4:

In-class performance: Assignment 1

Lecture: Verses and Sensory Detail

In-Class Listening: 'Man In the Mirror', 'Right Now' Fort Minor, 'My Stupid Mouth', 'On A Bus To St. Cloud', 'Rusty Old American Dream', 'Boys of Summer' Don Henley, 'Here' Alicia Cara, 'All I Wanna Do' Sheryl Crow, 'Stolen Car' Sting, 'Something Like That'.

Showing and Telling

Object Writing

Using object writing to form a verse

Assignment 2: Write two verses for your chorus to be performed next week. Find examples of sensory lyric in five songs that are not your own. Due next week.

Reading Assignment: Chapter 5, pg. 49-62

Week 5:

**IN-CLASS PERFORMANCE: SONG #1**

Bring whatever gear you need to perform in class OR

Bring your recording and and share it in class.

If you are emailing your song to me at [astolpe@usc.edu](mailto:astolpe@usc.edu), use this format:

STUDENT NAME - TITLE OF SONG

**Final Portfolio will require a lyric and recorded version of the song, due during finals week.**

Reading Assignment: Chapter 7, pg. 75-94  
Read Theory chapter in book for next week!

Week 6:

Lecture: Harmony and Music Theory

#### Harmony

What are chords and chord progressions?

What is a scale and basic music theory?

Axis of Awesome video clip

Applying harmony to the piano

Simple 1 and 2-chord grooves

“Bad” and “Billie Jean” Michael Jackson

Contrast between sections using harmony

Frequency of chords

Repeating chord pattern “Clarity” Zedd

Borrowed chords “Daughters” “Gravity” Mayer

New chords

Relative major and minor “My Favorite Mistake”

Sheryl Crow

12-bar Blues

“Ain’t Nothing But a Hound Dog” Elvis

“Give Me One Reason” Tracy Chapman

“Gravity” John Mayer

Song 2 Step 1/3: Write a chord progression and a contrasting chord progression and bring it back next week with your instruments.

**Reading Assignment: Chapter 6, pg. 63-73**

Week 7:

Lecture: MELODY

Have you established your chord progressions?

Let’s write it down - basic charting skills

#### Bones of a Melody

The Motif

Shape, note length, position in the measure, vocal range

Repetition

Contrast between sections

Song 2 Step 2/3: Write a melody over your chord progression without lyric and perform next week.

Week 8:

Workshop verse/chorus without lyric song.

Assignment: Song 2 Step 3/3: Write the lyric and perform the full song next week.

Week 9:

Workshop full Song 2 in Carson Soundstage

Week 10:

Lecture: Lyric and Topline, Collaborative Effort

Writing Lyric to Music Videos Pointers and Keynote

Plot Progressions

Start at the height of the emotion

Current moment, past, future

Collaboration Pointers

Assignment: Write Song 3, Collaborative Lyric and Topline

Week 11:

Workshop Song 3, Collaborative Lyric and Topline.

Week 12:

Continued: Performance of Song 4, In-Class Collaborative Song

Industry Discussion

Small Groups and Full Class Discussion

Ideas for continued creativity, forming songwriting groups, and basic understand for how the business works, recording costs, jobs related to the industry

Week 13:

In-Class Writing Activity: Words and Pictures

In-Class Performance of writing activity

Week 14:

In-Class Writing Activities:

Generating Inspiration through various activities

Metaphor and Colliding nouns, verbs, and adjectives  
**Assignment: Song 5, Message In A Crumple**

Week 15: In-Class Preparation for Final Song Performance

Review of course contents, final portfolio contents. 20 Suggestions for continued creativity.

Week 16:

Workshop Song 5, Message In A Crumple

Final Portfolio due the date of our regularly scheduled Final Exam

### **Statement for Students with Disabilities**

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me (or to TA) as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located at 3601 Watt Way, Grace Ford Salvatori Hall, 120, and is open 8:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.

### **Statement on Academic Integrity**

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. Scampus, the Student Guidebook, contains the Student Conduct Code in Section 11.00, while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A: HYPERLINK "<http://www.usc.edu/dept/publications/SCAMPUS/gov/>". Students will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards for further review, should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty. The Review process can be found at: HYPERLINK "<http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/>".