

# COURTING THE MUSE

by David Olney

Thoughts on the art of songwriting

‘Write about what you know.’ We’ve all heard it. And who can argue with such down-to-earth advice? Well, I can. If writers only write about what they personally experience, then we can blow off the fields of Science Fiction and Fantasy. Good-bye to detective novels and pulp fiction. We can kiss Shakespeare a fond farewell. But let’s stick to songs. The great personal experience. Whoever wrote “Barbara Allen,” did not know Barbara Allen personally, if, in fact, there was a Barbara Allen to know. Someone probably made her up. And when they did, they created one of the most enigmatic and elusive figures in folk music. Or any music. The African-American blues tradition has given us any number of memorable characters who are the inventions of the human imagination. Imagination, the ability to create people and circumstances out of our own minds, is the single most important resource available to us. I don’t mean to suggest that a writer can immediately jump into any subject with authority. The intricacies of Gothic architecture, for instance, are beyond my scope at present. But the idea of a man working on a Gothic cathedral he knows will not be completed in his lifetime intrigues me. On some level, that’s what we all do. If I choose to pursue this subject, I will need to do some reading and ask a few questions. The point is, although I don’t live in the middle ages, my imagination allows me to connect emotionally with someone who did. The physical circumstances of life change from era to era, but human emotion remains the same.

Most songwriting today, it seems to me, is of a confessional nature. Men and women trying, with varying degrees of success, to explain how they feel about the world they live in. As it was in the beginning, is now,

and ever shall be, most of these confessional songs deal with love. This makes good sense. Love is one of the two experiences common to all people. The other experience is death, and death presents certain problems to a writer. In the first place, no one has been there and back. Secondly, it’s no fun. Anyway, confessional writers (or personal experience writers) want the listener to know very intimate details of his or her (the writer’s) life. When it is done well, it can be a powerful experience for the listener. When it is not done well, it is self-absorbed and self-indulgent.

I have found that I reveal less about myself when I try to stick totally to my own private experience. I can tell you what I had for breakfast today. Or how I felt when I fell in love for the first time. Or what I felt when my heart was broken for the first time. You would know something about me, but not much. My feelings towards breakfast, love and broken hearts are not much different from anyone else’s. But, if I tell you that I have a French prostitute and a World War I soldier living in my head, not to mention a 69-year-old escapee from a Georgia jail, John Dillinger, Barabbas and a bunch of other folks, I give you quite a lot of information about myself and the state of my mind. If I am talking to a shrink, this is the kind of stuff he would want to hear because it would give an indication of my emotional state.

I can only get to the murky swamp of my psyche through my imagination; through characters I have made up. They drive

the car that gets me to the swamp. Hopefully, they also drive me back. Once a character exists, then a good deal of honesty is called for. The French prostitute and the soldier have their own integrity and that integrity cannot be violated. They must speak and act in a manner that befits them. I cannot force them to do what I want them to, I can only stand back and watch them deal with each other and their world and hope a song comes out of it. “1917” is considered a story song, though, in fact, very little goes on in the song. A man and a woman meet. They go to her apartment, make love, then fall asleep. Not exactly earth-shaking. Whatever interest the song elicits happens because the characters come off as real. As long as that happens then the “story” part will take care of itself.

There are verses in “1917” that I wish were not there. It is still awkward for me to sing, “We make love too hard, too fast ...” But, since the story is being told by a prostitute, there is really no way to avoid the subject of sex. I imagined myself as the soldier, shattered by past battles and terrified of a coming battle. The need for human sexual contact would be great, but

*continued next page ...*

## DISCOGRAPHY

*Through A Glass Darkly*, 1999, Philo #1224  
*Real Lies*, 1997, Philo #1204  
*High, Wide & Lonesome*, 1995, Philo #1177  
*Roses*, 1991, Philo #1137  
*Deeper Well*, 1989, Philo #1117  
*Eye Of The Storm*, 1986, Rounder #3099  
*Contender* (w/ The X-Rays), 1981, Rounder #3064

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the fear of imminent death would be equally great. Besides the fear, there would be a lot of anger. And desperation. I think my performance under those circumstances might be something less than cinematic. I cannot back away from this. This is how the soldier would act. To have him do otherwise would be dishonesty of the worst sort. When the prostitute sings:

Oh, they die in the trenches,  
they die in the air  
In Belgium and France the dead  
are everywhere  
They die so fast there's no  
time to prepare  
A decent grave to surround  
them

I am thinking to myself that this is too much bleakness. People do not want to hear this much darkness. But I can't back off. This is what she would think and feel. The song only works if I keep my conscious mind out of the picture and trust my unconscious mind, where these two people live, to write the song. Of course, I needed to do a little research on the war and the period to get the details right. But not a whole lot. The heart of the song is emotional and any human being has that information after fifteen minutes on the planet. Emotional content always takes precedence over story line.

This soldier and this prostitute, so sad, so fragile and so human, emerged from my imagination, and yet they live on their own now. I find myself hoping against hope that somehow they will make it through. That they will be okay. But they are separate from me now. This must be how God feels. 

*The New England-born, Nashville-based artist David Olney has spent the last few decades churning out the kind of intelligent, emotional story-songs that have rightly earned him the title of songwriter's songwriter. The late, great Townes Van Zandt placed David's work in the company of works by no less than Mozart and Dylan ... far from faint praise. Check out any of his seven releases on Philo/ Rounder and you'll agree.*

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