

How to Give (and Take) Songwriting Critiques



Jon Nicol

**Things to
Think About
When
Critiquing
Someone
Else...**

Any critique given should be CONSTRUCTIVE

Take time to point out the positive.

Remember, the song you're critiquing has cost the writer time, emotion and whatever life experience it took for her to write it. Yes, she wants feedback on how to make it better. But she also wants validation that she's on the right track with this song.

Giving *only* positive feedback is nice, but ultimately not constructive. Gently point to where improvements can be made.

Each writer is in a different place – different writers can handle different levels of input. Try to get a feel for the writer being critiqued. You may even want to ask him/her how much they want to hear.

Critiques should start at the forest (then move to the trees)

It's easy to get tied up in looking at how someone can make a rhyme scheme better or make the 2nd verse parallel to the first, etc. But if there are issues of multiple or confusing themes, or no central hook, (i.e. the big idea), those should be addressed first.

If you just look at the little things, it can be like straightening the drapes while the Titanic goes down.

Consider the intended audience

A song written for my grandma's 85th birthday party should be held to a lighter standard than a song I want to pitch to a publisher or an established artist.

Songs written *by the artist for the artist* are also given a lot more leeway than songs written for others to record (or to sing in a congregational worship setting).

Each genre of popular music has its own subset of rules – (e.g. mainstream country dictates that a song has to be written in conversational language – if the artist wouldn't say it that way, they probably wouldn't want to sing it)

**Things to
Think About
When Being
Critiqued...**

Qualify the Feedback

Just because the feedback sucks to hear doesn't mean it isn't true. *However...*

Just because several people say they don't like it doesn't mean it sucks. *However...*

If you keep hearing about the same issue(s) from different people, it means you probably need to give their point some consideration.

It's easy to get defensive. Don't.

“Yes, but...” is a common way we begin our defense. When you're tempted to defend yourself, ask questions instead:

*“What do you think should
be done to improve it?”*

or

*“Here's what I'm trying to say: _____.
How do you think I could communicate
that better?”*

There will be people who will irritate the crap out of you when they critique your song.

Unfortunately, sometimes they're right.

Try to understand the biases of the person giving the critique. E.g., a Nashville writer will critique differently than a garage band rocker. So take that into consideration.

But what if someone steals my song?

If you bring your song in to be critiqued, could somebody steal your song idea/lyrics/music/etc.?

Yes.

Likely? No.

Fact: *Most publishers don't even bother to register a song with the copyright office until the day the album hits the store and their song is on it.*

Nine words to prepare yourself for a critique.

Be humble. Learn.

Be Humble. Learn.

Be humble. Learn.

(repeat as often as necessary)

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