

# “Bring Your A-game and Leave Your Ego at the Door!” Songwriting Camps as Sites for the (Re-)Production of Practice-based Knowledge

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## Abstract

Collaborative songwriting sessions and camps represent vital sites for the acquisition and transferal of songwriting skills and knowledge. There is limited research into collaborative songwriting and writing camps, and even less academic work done on their role as (informal) settings for training and education of songwriters. Understanding collaborative songwriting as a form of social interaction, and thus inherently characterized by unequal distributions of and negotiations over (creative) power, this paper asks: What frameworks of knowledge are being (re-)produced in sites of collaborative songwriting? To what extent is this knowledge and its distribution protected, challenged, and resisted, in what ways and by whom? Drawing on ethnographic data from a ten-day songwriting camp in Norway, the article explores how aspiring songwriters are socialized into the creative practice of songwriting. A particular emphasis is placed on who and what functions as gatekeepers of songwriting knowledge, and how this gatekeeping is executed and challenged.

**KEYWORDS:** songwriting camps, collaborative songwriting, knowledge production, power relations, gender

It was the last day of the songwriting camp, and participants, mentors and organizers were gathered at a local restaurant to celebrate in a final listening party. The overall vibe was cheerful, as people helped themselves to the complimentary sushi buffet, ordered drinks from the bar and chatted with each other. A representative from one of the publishing companies involved had taken on the role as DJ and played back the songs that had been written during the last and international part of the camp. After a short introduction of the song title and the writers that had been involved, the songwriters would gather on the small dance floor to sing and dance along while their song was playing, cheered on by the rest of the crowd surrounding them. As I sat with some of the songwriters in a lounge in

an area separate from the dance floor, a discussion came up around the subject of the young female topliner Lucy and the perception that she had been too insecure in sessions, not 'putting herself out there' creatively to the extent that was demanded on this level of songwriting. As we sat there, Lucy did indeed come across as rather shy, and not quite sure how to deal with all this criticism that she was getting. While it was clearly given with the intention to help her develop as a songwriter, it still seemed harsh to give such strict feedback on her personal traits.

We started chatting, and I told her how I had during my studio fieldworks found it very helpful to have some insight into the technicalities of the production – that is, what was going on 'in the machine', in order to better understand what was unfolding. It had also increased my credibility, which helped justify my presence in the room. I suggested that maybe this was something that could lend her some more confidence too? Other songwriters and producers who were sitting in our immediate vicinity, promptly voiced their disagreement in statements like: "No, there's no need for her to do that!" I was puzzled by this intuitive rejection of my informal suggestion. I raised the issue to several other experienced songwriters throughout the evening, and they all reacted in similar ways, whisking it away as something irrelevant and unnecessary. The hectic character of this festive occasion didn't enable me to pursue the issue any further at the time, but it stuck with me. What did this rejection of a young topliner's potentially increased technological competence actually entail? What can it tell us about what types of skills and competencies are considered essential in collaborative pop music songwriting – and to whom? And in what ways could this songwriting camp be understood as a site for the (re-)production of specific practices, frameworks of knowledge, and not least relations of power?

## Introduction

At the core of popular music stands *the pop song*, whose production and distribution represents the economic foundation for an entire industry (Bennett 2012). Its central position has in recent years become even more prominent due to the changes brought about by digitalization (Hughes and Keith 2019: 87). In the context of this development, *collaborative songwriting* has established itself as an industry standard in the production of commercial pop music (Pettijohn and Ahmed 2010; Tough 2017). This is reflected in an increased academic interest in *the practice of songwriting*, where songwriting studies is an emerging field (Beech 2015; Long and Barber 2015, 2017; Skaggs 2019), with Bennett (2011, 2012, 2013) and McIntyre (2008a, 2008b, 2011, 2013) as leading representatives for research on the creative process in *collaborative* songwriting.

While the US, UK and Sweden have historically been the major players of songwriting within international pop music, this position is now being challenged. Here, Norway has increasingly positioned itself in the international market, as artists as well as songwriters enjoy international success on an unprecedented scale. This development has contributed to an acknowledgement among governmental bodies and stakeholders of the need to create opportunities and allocate resources for quality training and experience for aspiring songwriters. Consequently, pop music songwriting has made its way into the formal education system, with at least three Norwegian universities and university colleges offering bachelor programs in

popular music songwriting and production. As an increasing body of academic literature shows, this is in line with a larger trend in which popular music is becoming increasingly integrated into formal music education (see for instance Green 2006; Gurgel 2019; Larson 2019; Powell et al. 2015, 2020; Rodriguez 2004; Smith et al. 2017; Vasil 2019). Here a small subfield is concerned with research into songwriting training and education (Bennett 2016; Gooderson and Henley 2017; Hill 2019; Hughes and Keith 2019).

In Norway, public and private funding has also contributed to the establishment of several annual international *songwriting camps*. Predominantly a popular music phenomenon (Hagen 2022: 189), songwriting camps are multi-day events convened by music publishers, music production companies, record labels, royalty collection societies and practitioners. Gathering a larger group of songwriters to create songs for specific artists, defined markets, and song catalogues, songwriting camps continue a long tradition of industrialized production in songwriting (see for instance Barber 2016; George 1986; Harding 2009; Jasen 2003). While the function of these camps is primarily to bring forth pop songs aimed at distribution within an international music market, they are within the Norwegian context, also explicitly considered main arenas for the recruitment and training of up-and-coming songwriters. A strong emphasis is then placed on the significance of *practice* for acquiring the relevant and applicable skills, competence, and knowledge about what it means (and what it takes) to succeed as a professional songwriter.

While the body of research into collaborative songwriting and songwriting camps is limited, there is even less academic work done on their role as (informal) settings for training and education of songwriters. Considering how strongly integrated songwriting camps are with the workings of the music industry itself, studying them as sites for knowledge production can provide valuable insight into what is considered valid knowledge within the industry, and the ways in which aspiring songwriters are socialized into the knowledge tradition of collaborative songwriting. Being a form of social interaction, collaborative songwriting processes will inevitably be characterized by unequal distributions of and negotiations over (creative) power. As illustrated through the opening vignette, it thus becomes vital to examine who and what function as gatekeepers of songwriting knowledge, how this gatekeeping is executed, and what room there is for resistance and opposition to established practices and notions of professionalism. Drawing on ethnographic data from a ten-day songwriting camp in Norway, this article asks: What frameworks of knowledge are being (re-)produced in sites of collaborative songwriting? To what extent is this knowledge and its distribution protected, challenged and resisted, in what ways and by whom?

## Theoretical Perspectives – Knowledge, Learning and Power

A core issue for the research presented here relates to what knowledge an aspiring songwriter would need to acquire to make his or her way into and successfully operate within the world of professional, commercial songwriting. This question requires a conceptualization of what is understood by knowledge, and further a perspective on learning – that is, how that knowledge might be acquired. According to the anthropologist Fredrik Barth, knowledge is “what a person employs to interpret and act on the world” (2002: 1). It is thus the understanding of the world

that people make use of in their continuous efforts to make sense of and act upon the “raw and unexpected events of life” (ibid.). As people’s lives are always embedded in webs of social relations, we depend on sharing those understandings with others if we are to be able to move about in, communicate and interact with the world around us. Such shared bodies of knowledge are, through their mutual generation, closely intertwined with the social organization of human activity (Barth 2002: 2).

Following this train of thought, this study does not draw on a traditional conception of knowledge, where it is understood as something that people *have*, something that is “copied, ready-made, into the mind in advance of its encounter with the world” before it is applied in practice (Ingold 2011: 159). In line with Small’s (1998) notion of music as a matter of doing (musicking), it follows Ingold’s encouragement to “prioritise the practice of knowing over the property of knowledge” (Ingold 2011: 159). Applying a notion of knowledge as something that people *do*, that they “know [...] through an ongoing engagement, in perception and action, with the constituents of their environment” (ibid.) implies that knowledge is understood as “the ever-emergent product of a complex process” (ibid.) of interaction between social actors and their environmental contexts. The notion of what constitutes the ‘knowledge of songwriting’ can thus be analytically approached as a form of *assemblage*, or actor-network (Latour 2005), understood as the continuous outcome of the social interaction involving the range of human and nonhuman actors making themselves audible within this specific field of practice. Through continued immersion into this field of relations, its various participants become increasingly woven into the songwriting assemblage, contributing to its continuous construction and reproduction in the process. With their strong emphasis on the doing of songwriting, camps such as the one investigated here can be considered main arenas for the production of collaborative songwriting knowledge.

As assemblages of knowledge are continuously constituted through the ongoing interaction of its various participants, the relationships between these participants are of vital importance to the social organization of its emergent formation. Those actors, or “knowers” (Barth 2002: 3), that are referred to as ‘professionals’ or ‘experts’ within the field can be understood as those who are at any given moment the most deeply enmeshed in its process of assembling. For aspiring songwriters, the ambition is thus necessarily to weave themselves deeper into the songwriting assemblage in order to become recognized as ‘knowers’ within the field.

Through their positions of authority, ‘knowers’ function as gatekeepers for “the criteria of validity that govern knowledge” (Barth 2002: 3), and thus have the capacity and authority to enable, control and sanction interactional flow within the field. While providing clearly marked pathways for how and where to move in order to become enmeshed in the assemblage of collaborative songwriting, ‘knowers’ can through their hegemonic position also limit and control where participants can actually go. Facilitating and enabling, while also confining and excluding trajectories of movement (Tsing 2005: 6). This points to the fact that such assemblages are always inevitably characterized by unequal distributions of knowledge and power, something which must be taken into consideration when

analytically unpacking the ways in which songwriting knowledge is (re)produced in songwriting camps.

On the one hand, learning to be a songwriter implies becoming socialized into the processes and practices of knowing that are acknowledged by the ‘knowers’ within the field. Simultaneously, learning understood as “the specific processes, practices and interactions through which knowledge is created, contested and transformed” (McFarlane 2011: 3), also implies contesting and challenging established notions, practices, and patterns of movement in order to contribute to the production of *new* knowledge. Such contestation can occur through the (attempted) enrollment of new actors, tools, and practices into the actor-network, holding the potential to re-shuffle the overall assemblage of knowledge and creating new patterns of interactional flow. This necessarily challenges the position of ‘knowers’, their level of enmeshment in the assemblage and their control over established pathways of flow. In order to maintain control over established flow patterns and stop further extension of the existing actor-network of knowledge, ‘knowers’ might thus meet such attempts at enrolment with efforts to gather, stop or contain flow through *cutting the network* at the new entry point (Strathern 1996). Such “encounters across difference” make themselves audible in incidents of *friction* whose effects “can be compromising or empowering [as...h]egemony is made as well as unmade with friction” (Tsing 2005: 6). This article pays particular attention to such incidents of friction, and the negotiation over, or sanctioning of, potentially new patterns of flow within the assemblage of commercial, collaborative songwriting knowledge.

## Methodological Approach – Writing Camp Fieldwork

This article is based on ethnographic data material accumulated through fieldwork during a ten-day commercial songwriting camp held in a Norwegian city in 2016. As this fieldwork dates back a few years, the empirical data cannot account for the implications of more recent developments, such as the industry’s turnaround in revenue and the arrival of platforms such as TikTok, on the practice of commercial, collaborative songwriting and consequently the organization of songwriting camps. However, I argue that the ethnographic material presented remains relevant and valuable in terms of how it does, alongside Hiltunen’s (2021) PhD fieldwork in three Finnish songwriting camps in 2015, 2017 and 2018, provide the only existing ethnographic insight into the real-time events of a songwriting camp.

The camp promotes itself as the world’s largest songwriting camp, with approximately 100 songwriters from around the world participating in the camp’s national, Nordic, and international sections. Some songwriters were invited, while others were recruited through online application. Writers who did well in the national camp could get an extended invitation to the Nordic camp, and participants in the Nordic camp could advance to the international camp, which had the highest professional level. Internationally renowned songwriters functioned as mentors during the camps, and industry representatives provided expert feedback and networking opportunities for the songwriters attending. While an arena for professional songwriters gathering to produce hit songs aimed at an international market, the camp was also explicitly framed as a site for the recruitment, training and networking for aspiring songwriters. As such, it represents an informal and

practice-oriented educational setting aimed at socializing participants into the knowledge tradition of professional songwriting. The chosen methodological approach of fieldwork—that is, ‘being there’ (Watson 1999)—offered the opportunity to gain in *medias res* insight into the interactions, negotiations and power relations aspiring songwriters become involved with as they make their way into the profession of commercial, collaborative songwriting.

Throughout the camp, I attended eight songwriting sessions with different songwriting teams. While based on an ethnographic approach, where one strives for participant observation, my role in these sessions was mainly limited to observing, and listening, from a corner of the studio room. In addition, I attended information meetings, plenary listening sessions, as well as talking with people during meals and breaks. Access to the camp itself was initially provided by the camp’s organizers, while written, informed consent was acquired from each of the songwriters participating in the sessions I followed during fieldwork. The names of research participants have been anonymized.

## Welcome to camp!

On the first day of the national camp, *Paul*, the camp’s founder and leader, held an opening talk to the participants. These songwriters were primarily in the early stages of their careers and thus less experienced than most of the songwriters who would participate in the Nordic and international camps. *Paul* explained how the camp was aimed at helping the participants speed up their career paths towards making their way into the international music industry. Here, they would learn and practice the craft of writing songs together. The presence of several experienced songwriters, producers and industry representatives would provide the participants with opportunities to build and expand their network of contacts. These established professionals would also contribute with their experience and knowledge as mentors during songwriting sessions, and through providing specific feedback to the songs written. The participants were encouraged to ask questions willingly, ‘to everyone around you’, about anything they wanted to know. This was a place to be inspired, to build confidence and ‘to start believing in yourself!’

In the remainder of his talk, *Paul* elaborated on what the participants would need to understand, learn, and know if they wanted to succeed as professional songwriters, how this was related to how the music industry works, and how the songwriters should position themselves within it to be successful. As such, his talk came across as something of an introductory lecture to their practical training. The talk was not repeated in the beginning of the Nordic and international camps. The division of camps into increasingly larger geographical areas seemed to correspond with a notion of them as representing progressively higher levels of professionalism. This further corresponded with a decreasing focus on the educational aspects of the camp. The higher the level, the less need to be explicit about the valid frameworks of knowledge, as these are necessarily already internalized by the professionals participating. This hierarchical organization of the camp and the corresponding decrease in its perceived educational function reflects a notion that the higher up you move in the hierarchy of camps, the more you are woven into the songwriting assemblage, and the closer to becoming a ‘knower’ in the field. The role of the

‘knowers’, or professional mentors and experts, can here be understood as that of guiding the aspiring songwriters, or the ‘knowers-in-the-making’, along specific pathways of interactional flow that can bring them further up in the hierarchy of songwriters.

I here make use of *Paul’s* outline of the necessary skills and competences needed to be able to work as a songwriter in the contemporary music industry, as a way of exploring what frameworks of knowledge the participants were being socialized into during the camp, and the ways in which these frameworks were (re)produced, challenged and negotiated along the way.

## Co-writing sessions

*Paul* explained how the songwriting camp was built around the concept of the *co-write*, where a small team of songwriters (most commonly two to four) work together to write a song usually within the span of a day. This is also often referred to as a songwriting *session*. Each day of the camp, the participants would be divided into new teams that would be writing a song together within that day’s session. Songwriters would take on the role as either a *producer* or *tracker* responsible for producing the musical track of the song (including drum and synth programming, instrumentation, recording and mixing), or as a *topliner* contributing with title, lyrics, and melody and often also vocals for the demo. This way of working collaboratively corresponds with the track-and-hook approach that has, according to Seabrook (2015), been the standard method for writing pop songs since the mid-2000s. In sessions set up by publishers or other industry representatives, professional songwriters continuously work with new teams and constellations of writers within specific time frames. Working in new teams each day and having to manage the stress of finalizing a full song within a day, the participants in the camp would be exposed to and given hands on experience of how professional songwriting works in the industry.

While a significant majority of the participants in the camp were men, a rather obvious observation was also that all the women participating were topliners. The producers during the camp were all men, but men also took on roles as topliners and lyricists. This implies that it was primarily the male participants who were involved with, and thus controlled, the technological aspects of the songwriting processes observed. While producers would regularly have opinions about the melodic or lyrical choices and make suggestions for changes or tweaking of melodic or lyrical elements, topliners would to a lesser extent interfere with the creative choices of instrumentation, processing, production, and mixing made by producers. Indeed, while jointly choosing (or landing) the initial direction or vibe of the track and the development of the melodic and harmonic elements of the song, the actual production done on the computer was to a large extent done by the producer, working on the track by himself with or without the other songwriters present in the room.

The skewed distribution of gender among the participating songwriters in the camp, as well as the highly gendered division of roles in the songwriting process, correlates with overall statistics reported from the field both in a Norwegian and an international context. Numbers from the Norwegian collection society TONO has for instance showed that only twenty percent of their registered members are

women, that among the 100 Norwegian songwriters receiving the largest TONO payments in 2021 only twelve were women, while women constituted twelve percent of the songwriters and staggeringly less-than-one percent of the producers on the fifty most played songs on Spotify in 2020 (TONO 2022). Similar numbers are presented in the UK (Bain 2019) and in the US (Smith et al. 2023).

This gendered division of roles, which aligns with a division of involvement with (digital) technology and thus (creative) control over the songwriting process, was remarkably absent in the discourse during the camp. The practice of knowing that participants in the songwriting camp here become socialized into, thus seems to imply a naturalized expectation that this is how collaborative songwriting works. A female Norwegian producer has recently described her experience participating in songwriting camps as a producer, and consistently being asked to take on the role as a topliner instead (Moen 2022). She describes the friction she caused by becoming the one ‘who raises her voice’, and the resistance she met to her potential enrolment as a different kind of producer in the assemblage of songwriting. By repeatedly being asked to sing and write lyrics instead of working on production, her network was cut, stopping potentially new paths of interactional flow.

Revisiting the ethnographic vignette that opened this article, one might ask if the resistance towards *Lucy’s* potentially increased interest in and competence on the technological aspect of the songwriting process was linked to its potential disruption of the division between these established roles and their respective areas of competence, as well as a reluctance to deal with this as being related to issues of gender. These kinds of gendered experiences might be one of the reasons that we currently see an increased interest in songwriting camps aimed specifically towards female and non-binary songwriters, such as the Norwegian ‘Loud!’, Swedish ‘Her Songs for Him’ and ‘Beats by Girlz’ and in Denmark ‘Nordic Songs’. Recent developments also suggest that while students of music technology and production are increasingly female and non-binary, their motivation is largely based on a wish to ‘move out of the shadows of the boys’ club’ to produce their own music and gain more control over their own creative process, not to participate in collaborative songwriting (Kjus, Brøvig and Wang, coming 2023). Thus, while gender bias and inequality are increasingly recognized as challenges within the international music industry (Smith et al. 2023), with the emergence of initiatives (such as the European ‘Key Change’) working towards increased gender balance in popular music songwriting, it can be argued that sites of practice-based learning such as commercial songwriting camps seem to maintain rather than challenge the status quo on gender in songwriting.

### “Songwriting Is a Job”

While the songwriting camp was a site for learning and training, *Paul* emphasized that an overall aim of the camp was to get songs placed with artists in the US, Europe, or Asia. This reflects how the entire economy of the popular music industry is built around the production and circulation of a “single item of intellectual property” (Bennett 2012: 139), that is, the pop song. For anyone wanting to make a living working as a songwriter, songs were thus in *Paul’s* words “the tax return” and “the values we create”. Having ownership in songs that were successfully placed with recording artists and achieved high levels of circulation not only



represented “the money you will make in the future,” but would also do wonders for songwriters’ credibility, reputation, and further work opportunities. It was thus important that the songwriters would, in the beginning of the session, fill in the split sheet identifying the percentage of ownership among the writers contributing to a song.

While the knowledge, contacts, and training that they acquired during the camp could increase their chances of becoming a professional songwriter making a living writing songs, they would also have to understand the process behind getting to that point. Reminding the participants of the strong competitive element involved in professional, collaborative songwriting, where only a few of the songs written make their way into the market, *Paul* compared the achievement of landing a Billboard number One to “winning an Olympic gold medal. You have to train”. Implicitly, the process of successfully weaving oneself into the assemblage of professional songwriting and moving up in the hierarchy towards becoming a ‘knower’ would take time and require a lot of hard work. Most importantly, they had to write: “The big songs don’t happen often, but you have to write a lot of them to get there”. Whether you were established as a professional or not, and making money from writing or not, you had to realize that “songwriting is a job”. And that job implied putting down hours in the studio.

The requirement of ‘putting down the hours’ was also reflected in the camp’s ‘one day, one song’ session format. Completing a song with a decent demo in place within the time frame required was demanding, and many of the teams would work well into the night and sometimes even until the next morning getting it done. The knowledge that someone had stayed up late or done an all-nighter would for instance be met with the joking remark that ‘I see many tired faces here today’, as a form of humorous recognition of the participants’ willingness and ability to put in the long hours required. While writing camps involves traveling for most of the songwriters involved, the everyday practice of collaborative songwriting tends to require (the usually female) topliners to travel more than (the predominantly male) producers, whose studios are commonly the site of the collaborative session (Hagen 2022). During the camp there was not much discussion about the challenges involved in combining excessive traveling or late nights in the studio with social or family life, but rather an emphasis on this being a way of life and work that you would have to embrace and love if you wanted to work as a professional songwriter.

The female producer mentioned above has also described how when expressing concerns about structural discrimination of female producers she has been met with statements that she is probably more interested in family and prioritizing other things in life than in actually producing music (Moen 2022). Rather than opening up to the notion that the way commercial, collaborative songwriting is structurally organized might prevent women from participating equally in its practice, the camp’s unquestioned celebration of working long and unpaid hours as a key to success implies an implicit reproduction of established and highly gendered notions of what the practice of songwriting entails. This can not only contribute to cut female producers out of the network, but also stops potential new paths of interactional flow that could lead to increased female and non-binary participation and a more even gender distribution among the roles available in collaborative pop musical songwriting.

## What to Write – and How

The income a songwriter might receive from a song depends on how widely it is circulated—that is, how much it is played and listened to, as this is what influences how much revenue is accumulated through copyright collection and remuneration. Emphasis in the camp was thus placed on the ability to write *hit songs*—songs that could reach high levels of popularity and circulation—and the goal of any songwriting session was to write a song that had the potential to be a hit single.

A main aspect of a song's 'hit potential' is considered its level of 'catchiness', and it is especially crucial that the song has a good *hook*. While a notoriously elusive concept (Byron and O'Regan 2022), a hook can be defined as "a musical or lyrical phrase that stands out and is easily remembered" (Monaco and Riordan 1980: 178). As Burns (1987) has showed in his typology of hooks, a hook can take on several forms, including rhythmical, harmonical and instrumental, but is perhaps in its most fundamental sense "one or more catchy passages in a song, [...] assert[ing] itself on the listener's consciousness, inviting anticipation and providing pleasure with each return" (Bradley 2017: 57).

The significance of the hook made itself audible in one of the first sessions of the national camp, where four aspiring songwriters were well into the process of getting a song up and running when *Nate*, one of the mentors, popped in to check on them. This mentor was a songwriter associated with the local production company, with an impressive track record and experience writing for international artists, especially the Asian market. He asked to listen to what they had done so far, and they played the track back to him. His immediate feedback was that the refrain needed to be 'lifted'. "Where's the hook?" he asked. His question seems to indicate that without a hook in place, there was no point in moving forward in the songwriting process.

The popular music industry has historically always been concerned with bringing forth hit songs. However, digitalization and the transition into a streaming economy accumulating less revenue than before has perhaps led to an even stronger emphasis placed on the significance of hooks, catchiness and hit songs. While an album cut could previously provide a decent amount of revenue for a songwriter, the current market conditions imply that a songwriter will need to have cuts in many hit songs with high streaming levels in order to secure a decent income. In a songwriting camp such as the one described here, the flow of creative interaction will thus consistently be directed towards pathways of catchiness, hooks and hit potential, cutting off ideas that might lead elsewhere.

According to *Paul*, part of the ability to write a hit song was related to having an updated sense of what was going on in the music market. To stay relevant, songwriters needed to keep up to date on "the sounds and songs and artists out there". What were people listening to on Spotify? What was on top of the charts? As a producer you needed to be able to translate what was going on 'out there' into a relevant track, while topliners should continuously build a storage of concepts, titles, and song ideas that they could use in their writing. In addition to identifying, and reproducing, what characterized the songs that were popular right now, it was also crucial to have a feel for what the *sound of the future* might be. If you copied

what was currently number one on the charts, the song would necessarily be outdated by the time it was potentially ready for release. As there is a latency of months, if not years, between what is written in a session and its potential release into the market, *foresight* (Hiltunen 2021) is considered a central skill for a songwriter.

The ability to write a catchy song with hit potential and a sound of tomorrow would be of limited use without opportunities to get the song into the music market. One of the aims of the camp was thus “to tie you closer to the industry”. Industry contacts were essential for gaining knowledge about what kinds of songs labels were at any given time looking for, or which artists had upcoming releases planned. “You need to know what to write” as *Paul* put it. Record labels, production companies and publishers regularly send out so-called *leads* (or briefs) to the industry, describing what kinds of songs they are currently looking for. They usually contain information about what the song should sound like, references to potential styles and genres, and often which specific artist it is for. “We want the next single for Justin Bieber, and we want it to sound like this and that”, *Paul* exemplified. Leads are not openly available to all, but signed artists get access to them through so-called ‘who’s looking lists’ distributed by their publishers.

Through their participation in the camp, songwriters who were not yet signed would get access to actual leads and get guided training in *how* such leads could and should be answered. This did for instance imply knowing how to stay within the given genre and to listen to the references provided. In sessions, the songwriting teams were free to choose from the wide range of leads that were provided. After agreeing on which lead to answer, *Paul* suggested that the team should make “a little list” of the parameters they wanted to set for the song. Where in the music market did they want to go? What genre were they going for? Were they writing a ballad or an up-tempo song? This would help set the premise for how to move forward. He also considered it to be smart to think in terms of *concepts*; to find an overall theme or expression they could all agree on and work from.

Submitting a song that the label did not feel corresponded with the lead would not only result in a failed opportunity to place that specific song but could also make the label sceptical to your skills as a songwriter and thus less inclined to want to give your songs a cut. One of the main challenges was that even if the label said that they were looking for something particular, that was not necessarily what they would pick. Rather, *Paul* said, it was often the song that was “a little to the left”, “the weird song”, that they would choose as a single and that would go ahead and become a major hit. Answering to the specific parameters of the lead (or producing a song that was ‘weird’ in the ‘right’ way) did not provide any guarantees that the label would choose your song, but it would increase its chances—provided it was good enough.

The aspiring songwriters are here socialized into the notion that in order to weave themselves into the assemblage of songwriting knowledge and move up in the hierarchy as acknowledged ‘knowers’, they need to adhere to a strict set of guiding principles for ‘what to write’. Straying away from these paths is associated with risk, as it reduces the chances of a song being placed—which is ultimately the goal for a professional songwriter. The songwriting parameters provided thus strongly govern the songwriting process, leading the creative and interactional flow in certain directions rather than others. The judgment of whether a song written

meets the defined criteria is made by mentors and industry professionals—that is, the ‘knowers’ of the field, who thus reinforce the existing patterns of flow inherent in the assemblage of songwriting knowledge.

## How to Write Songs *Together*

*Paul* clearly emphasized the significance of collaboration for a co-writing session to be productive. A main aim of the camp was that the participants would, through the practical experience of sessions, learn how to write songs *together*. This competence was related both to how to get the collaborative process going and how to maintain good collaborative flow throughout the session. The songwriters needed to ‘turn their soul inside out’ when contributing in the creative process, while simultaneously listening to the suggestions made by other people in the room. “If there is only one person who likes something, it might not be the best idea—and vice versa”, *Paul* said, encouraging the writers to use *feeling* as a guideline for making creative choices during the session. If no one in the room was *feeling* the refrain, the refrain clearly was not working.

Several of the mentors I talked to similarly described a core skill for a professional songwriter to be the ability to balance between *taking* and *giving* creative space—that is, to know when to bring ideas to the table and when to make room for the ideas of others. This aspect is also reflected in the way *Paul* at the opening of the camp encouraged the participants to “bring you’re A-game and leave your ego at the door!” Knowing how to successfully balance between when to pitch in and when to lean back was thus considered a key element in the ability to create and maintain a good sense of *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) in a session. This can, according to some of the mentors, be particularly challenging in a setting where you are working with people you haven’t met before. For them, a core element in the skill set of professional songwriters is thus a *social* competence that enables them to facilitate good creative interaction in the songwriting process. In line with what I have described elsewhere (Tolstad 2018, forthcoming 2023), the songwriting processes observed were characterized by an alternation between periods of flow, where ideas were shared and bodies moving, and periods of analysis, where the participants discussed what to keep and discard in the process moving forward. Following the different camps from the national to the international level, the ability to keep flow going was perhaps one of the most distinguishing features between aspiring and professional songwriters. The presence or absence of the skills required to balance between giving and taking in the co-write, and thus keeping the creative process going, seemed to constitute a main measure for evaluating songwriters’ “level of professionalism”, as one of the mentors put it.

When *Lucy* is criticized for not putting herself out there enough creatively, and not trusting her creative abilities sufficiently, it is perhaps precisely this evaluative measure she is subjected to. As *Paul* said in his opening talk, “You are not allowed to be shy during camp!” While encouraging people to believe in themselves and put themselves out there, there seems to be less room for the experience of insecurity and vulnerability in the role of the professional songwriter. *Lucy’s* way of acting—that is, holding back creatively due to feeling unsure of herself and her abilities—is here subject to a kind of moral judgment based on established notions

of what it means or takes to be a professional songwriter. The undertext here seems to be that if you cannot handle being part of these creative processes, then maybe you are just not cut out for it. Within this line of thinking, it is not surprising that my suggestion that she can gain more confidence through learning more about the technical aspects of the process is dismissed—the issue is not solved by obtaining a technological competence primarily assigned to the role of the producer, but by ‘toughening up’ as topline. The friction that occurs in this situation implies the possibility of enrolling something new into the songwriting assemblage, namely ensuring that the songwriting session is a safe space where the experience of being insecure and vulnerable is validated and supported. Instead, this potentially new pathway of interactional flow is contained, as the network is cut at the new point of encounter by established ‘knowers’ in the field.

## Feedback and Listening Sessions

According to *Paul*, an important reason for building networks was to establish contact with people in the industry who could not only provide access to leads, but who would *listen* to your song and make a professional assessment of it. Such industry representatives were significant gatekeepers for the possibility of getting songs placed. Towards the end of the national and Nordic camps there was a plenary listening session, where an (all male) expert panel made up of one topline, two producers, and a publishing representative would give their feedback to each of the songs that had been written during the camp. This feedback was usually saturated with references to contemporary artists, styles and markets, how certain elements were in synch with current trends, or how they might be adjusted in that direction. The experts’ comments, positive and negative, would touch upon all kinds of aspects of the song, such as production and mixing details (“try to filter out that bass sound in the verse”), the beat (“it stops too often”), the melody line (“the verse melody, that stands out”), the instrumentation (“you should add a string thing or something in the second part”), the arrangement (“every part is cool, but not together”), the lyrics (“you should tell the story in a better way”), the chorus (“it’s too repetitive, you should take it somewhere else”), and its chances in the market (“it couldn’t be placed as such, but that’s an easy fix”). On the one hand, this was an occasion for the writers to get hands-on feedback to the work they had been doing, that they could bring back into their continued practice as songwriters. Simultaneously, it provided valuable insight into the highly evaluative way that industry professionals approach submitted song material.

Some of the feedback could be quite hard and direct. After listening to one of the songs in the national camp listening session, one of the mentors was not impressed with the opening part of the song and laid down the harsh reality: “This is one out of 3000 songs they [labels] can choose from. They use 20-25 seconds to decide. A songwriter should know this.” Similarly, when one of the teams presented a song written with K-Pop placement in mind, a member of the panel explained why he did not think the song was good enough for K-Pop:

People overdo it when they aim for K-Pop. Don’t make it purposely cheesy, write a proper hit song. Don’t think “this is good enough for K-Pop”. Politically it’s easier in Asia than the US, but musically it is just as difficult. We are victims

of our own prejudice. [...] If you want to be a professional songwriter, check out what's cooking all over the place.

In short: the songwriters had not done their homework in terms of staying up to date.

The only songs not subject to critique or scrutiny were those written in the international camp. The listening session was here a part of the closing party for the overall camp, and the songs were played back while the songwriters celebrated, sang, and danced along to them on the dancefloor of the restaurant venue. As the songwriters participating in the international camp were largely considered to already be 'knowers' in the field, this was clearly not a learning situation but rather an affirmation of their abilities to work along established pathways of interactional flow within the songwriting assemblage.

The listening sessions that took place in the preceding camps were clearly not arenas for dialogue or debate. The songwriters themselves would hardly explain their choices or respond to the feedback they received but would in the company of others have their creative work subjected to critique and scrutiny according to evaluative parameters defined by the panel of established 'knowers'. On one occasion, a song was presented in which a local producer and topliner had worked in a session with two publishing representatives who were attending the camp to present leads and recruit songwriters to the Asian market. During the sessions the publishers seemed to enjoy the thought of being involved in songwriting, without having any major ambitions for the song itself. The producer and topliner did their best to accommodate the wishes and preferences the publishers had for the song along the way. When it became the song's turn to be scrutinized in the listening session, the publishing representatives were not present, and the two local songwriters had to face the criticism on their own. The song received very harsh feedback, being described for instance as having a 90s boy band vibe and quite simply leaving one of the experts lost for words (and not in a good way). While the producer tried to communicate that they had only done what the publishing representatives wanted, he ended up merely shrugging his shoulders in response to what could be characterized as a rather public shaming of their work and thus their songwriting credibility.

As such, the listening sessions did not only put the highly hierarchical organization of professional, commercial songwriting on display, but was also a central arena for governing the creative practices of songwriters in their process of 'knowing' and maintaining control of established pathways of interactional flow.

## Conclusions

Observing the interaction of participants, organizers, and industry professionals through the various stages of the songwriting camp enables an identification of the pathways of interactional flow that hold the assemblage of songwriting knowledge together, and how these pathways are maintained by established 'knowers' in the field. The entire camp is built and organized around a strongly hierarchical structure, where experienced professionals 'know best' and represent values, practices, and positions that aspiring songwriters should strive towards and replicate.

In part, this is related to professional, collaborative songwriting as a highly commercial endeavour where potential income, and thus the possibility of making a living as a songwriter, to a large extent depends on having ownership in hit songs that achieve high levels of circulation in the market. The skills and competences required to write this kind of songs are highly specialized, and the camp is built around the notion that the main way of acquiring competence and knowledge about this kind of songwriting is through practice. Only through repeatedly writing with various constellations of others can aspiring songwriters make their way upwards to the top of the songwriting game.

The parameters that are presented to the participants as necessary to adhere to in the songwriting process (such as the need for catchiness and hooks, being able to answer the lead, the divisions of roles in the creative process, and the rules of collaboration) are largely conveyed in a top-down manner, where there is little room for challenging what is presented by established experts, or ‘knowers’. Further, the ability to be, or develop into, a good songwriter seems to be understood as a largely individual responsibility. The climb to success is described as steep, and the only way of getting there is through ‘putting in the hours.’ You are required to embrace the moral imperative of professional songwriting as a lifestyle and feel privileged that you are allowed to spend all this time (mostly without payment) doing what you love. A lack of success can thus always be associated with the notion that you simply did not work hard enough.

Exploring songwriting camps such as the one presented here as sites where songwriters can through practice weave themselves into the assemblage that at any given moment constitutes ‘the knowledge of songwriting’, one might be struck by the extent to which the pathways of interactional flow are subject to control by established ‘knowers’ in the field. Attempts to divert these pathways into new flow patterns or to enrol new actors or practices into the network (such as questioning the gendered division of roles or displaying a need for creative reassurance during sessions) are quickly dismissed or disciplined. While observing moments of friction where established notions and practices were challenged and contested, thus holding the potential to contribute to a reshuffling of what is gathered and held together as songwriting knowledge, the songwriting camp and its creative and interactional processes were to a large extent characterized by efforts to maintain control of and *re-produce* existing patterns of creative and interactional flow. Especially in terms of gender, it is worth exploring further how other arenas (such as all-female and non-binary camps) might to a larger extent be able to enrol new actors and practices that can contribute to a re-assembling of the established actor-network of songwriting knowledge and its inherent power relations. Here it might also be relevant to compare the process of knowledge re-production in practice-based contexts like songwriting camps with more formalized educational settings for songwriting. Not least, the academic literature would benefit from more profound investigations into how being socialized into the practice-based knowledge of professional songwriting is in various types of arenas experienced by the aspiring songwriters themselves.

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