

# Prisoner Express Songwriting Course

Hello brave songwriters!

Welcome to the Prisoner Express songwriting course hosted by .....me! O.K. so who am I? and why am I doing this? My name is Kathy Ziegler, I am a multi-instrumentalist who also writes songs. I play keyboards, bass, guitar, drums, even violin. I have made a (very) modest living from music making, but that is by no means the reason why I do it. Being creative, productive in a positive way is the main tool I have found useful to climb out of dark moods, or to move forward when I feel stuck or helpless. It has been my lifeline when I have felt alone, and a way to change painful emotions or experiences into things of beauty. I guess that is what you would call transcendence. It is also a way to give thanks, comfort others, channel hope, and express awe.

Speaking of AWE. I am in awe of each and every one of you. The fact that you made the choice to participate in this course means that you have made the choice to keep your soul alive despite the cage which houses your body. You have decided to learn and nurture your mind, the one thing which you still truly control. Do you realize how amazing this is? I have felt whisperings of that urge to give up when life's struggles feel overwhelming and unfair. Still I cannot imagine how it feels to lose the basic freedoms that most people take for granted and to face each day without the promise of simple pleasures. My heart aches for you, but not only in a sad way. I have the deepest respect for the fighting spirit which has led you to try this course. I am touched and awestruck and thus honored to work with you.

We have special challenges. How can we share music without hearing? How can we collaborate without meeting one another? Well, welcome to this experiment in innovation. Many of the participants will not have access to musical instruments or even

have the possibility of listening to shared files via mp3 players. For this reason, I will look for other ways to pull these songs from you; without melody, but perhaps with rhythm. Of course if you do have access to musical instruments, you can take what you learn here and develop it further on your own.

What are the goals of this course? I will share with you some of the tools that have helped me to hone the craft of songwriting. I will help you to push the limits of your creativity and imagination.....things which are, perhaps, limitless. I will offer some tips on finding and honoring your own unique voice (not singing voice, but way of expressing concepts which is also called voice.) I will try to show you that songs can be like windows, thus a way to create more space more breathing room in your daily life. The act of creation is spiritual development. Let words pass through you and feel the power of that. I heard someone once refer to songwriters as the ones who FIND the songs. I challenge you to find one, then translate it and share it.

**The course will be divided into 4 units.** You don't need to follow them in any particular order but can go back and forth, take pieces and work with them as you wish.

## 1. BUILDING INTUITION

As I stated above, songwriting can be more like channeling information than actively working and working at trying to express something. It doesn't HAVE to be. Songs can be written in many ways. But my favorite songs of my own have come this way. On the wind so to speak. To be able to explore this you need to strengthen your connection to source, higher power, God, self, intuition however you want to label it.

## 2. SELF EDITING

That means putting limits on your writing. Learn to be concise (to say something in the

fewest words possible). Only say that which is vital to getting your point across.

### 3. THINKING OUTSIDE OF THE BOX (ORIGINAL LANGUAGE)

Find your own very unique way of describing an experience or emotion that is common to most people. Push yourself to be original. Work harder to find new ways, new connections.

### 4. GROUP PROJECT

After working at developing intuition, learning to edit yourself, and practicing the art of finding unique words to capture common emotions or experiences, you will be well prepared to try your hand at song lyrics. The idea for the group project is to all work on the same song. I have written the chorus, and the verses will be up to you. As stated before, not everyone will have access to listen to pre recorded mp3s. Some of you will have to use a great deal of imagination to get on board with a group project. We will discuss melody and rhythm, but these will not be a part of what we can share with each other although they are obviously key elements in songs. The reality of circumstances translates to lyrics only. Do you know that some songwriting competitions have a category called lyrics only? That is how important the text is to a good song. My plan is to incorporate some of your lyrics into a finished recording. If there is an outpouring of good material, then I will consider expanding this to a full album's worth of songs inspired by your lyrics. In this way you will be collaborating with fellow inmates despite never meeting them.

OK, let's get started!!

## BUILDING INTUITION

What exactly is intuition? Some might refer to it as flow, inspiration, 6<sup>th</sup> sense. To me it means being still, in-tuned enough to receive the messages and creative ideas as they come into your consciousness. It can mean strengthening the connection between subconscious (the part of your brain which is working without your intervention) and conscious thought. Conscious thought is subject to judgement, filtering, doubt, self-commentary, or any number of limiting facets which can keep creative FLOW from reaching its potential. For example, as you are working on your song texts you may hear the voice in your head saying things like "boring" "no good" "people aren't interested in this" "this is wrong" and so on. This stops your process before the words even hit the page. Increasing intuition can help you to trust ideas and give them a chance. It can help you to clear room for the inspired brilliance which will ultimately support your songwriting efforts.

I would like to offer you a two-part intuition building exercise, although there are many.

### The first part is 100 QUESTIONS

This exercise should be done in one sitting and as quickly as possible. It is simple. Write down 100 questions which are important to you. I would suggest writing numbers 1 through 100 in your notebook or on your paper before you begin. While writing do not worry about grammar, spelling, or even if you are repeating the same question in different words. Just go quickly and try not to censor yourself.

Sample Questions:

- What is something I have which can't be taken from me?
- What is love?
- What is a big problem in society?
- What am I afraid of?

- What is a small change that would make prison life more bearable?
- What makes my heart hurt?
- What is letting go?
- What is beautiful?
- What is my favorite food?
- Who do I miss?
- What do I love about myself?

And continue until all 100 questions are written down. Do this exercise in one sitting and write as quickly as you can. When you have completed your list of questions, read through them. Are there themes which have emerged? Are there things important to you which you were not aware of? After reading through them all, pick your top 10, then list them in order of importance from 1 to 10. At this point you can edit or add new questions as they come up. Eventually you want to have a list of 10 questions which you would really like to ponder. Don't attempt to answer them now, just put them in a place where you can easily find them. Maybe you want to hang them on the wall where you can read them throughout the day or maybe you want to tuck them away somewhere. When it comes time to write a song, you may want to use this top 10 list to choose a theme to write about.

The second part of the exercise is stream of consciousness writing. There is quite a famous book on awakening creativity called "The Artist's Way" by Julia Cameron. (maybe you can ask for this book?) Anyway, in her book, she suggests a ritual of writing morning pages. That means sitting down every morning and writing three full notebook pages without thinking about what you are writing. Just keep the pen moving and go as quickly as possible. Try to write continuously without stopping until the three pages are filled up. You are welcome to try this. It is a form of meditation, a way to empty the mind. I want to take this concept and apply it to the list of 10 questions that you have made.

Pick one question at a time and devote at least 10 minutes to answering in this stream of consciousness way. Keep your pen moving, do not edit yourself and see what comes up. Take a break and ponder what you have written. Highlight any themes which come up, or even words or phrases which speak to you. Do you see the beginning of a song in any of these phrases? Have you expressed something in a new way that you hadn't thought of before? There is a poet's motto (I don't know who said this) "write drunk, revise sober." Scribble your thoughts down, then make sense of them later. Everyone will have their own funny way of doing this. I notice that when I write fast without thinking I get in the habit of rhyming everything....it's hysterical! (Sitting on my bed, his name is Fred, don't know what he said.....) Still, within this seemingly nonsensical ranting, I will realize what is on my mind, what is eating at me, I might formulate a list of worries, or things I need to do. I might notice there are people I am thinking about or situations which I haven't let go of. It is very interesting, you will see! I hope this brings you inspiration and a point of beginning for starting a new song, for picking themes to write about.

### **SELF-EDITING**

One of the main things I remember from High School English class is learning to be concise in writing. This has helped me to be a better writer in everything from simple emails to friends, letters protesting parking tickets, and has affected my approach to songwriting. I do agree that writing in the simplest most straightforward manner has the most impact and is most likely to hold the attention of the reader/listener. Choosing your language carefully, getting rid of unnecessary words, being direct: these are tools which turn to skills when practiced. You want to stay on topic, hold your audience, and communicate a message or an emotion. Lastly, the very act of practicing self-editing, i.e. making rules around your writing is another way to shift the focus and allow that inspiration to come through. What happens is,

your brain is occupied with the task of carefully choosing language and this keeps that critical voice at bay.

Several years ago, I came across a website called 100 words. The challenge was to write exactly 100 words every day for one month. Every writer who completed the task was published on their website. I think I completed three cycles and wrote some of the best prose I have ever written. This one simple rule brought everything together for me. It was fun to count the words along the way and then have to decide to add or lose a few words here and there. It was a simple but real challenge to really look at language and how we become attached to our little creations and how difficult it can be to have to look again and to really try to better one's self.

So. Task number one: write 100 words, do it every day then send us your favorite pieces. We will share them in a future newsletter!

Here are some examples from the website so you can see how varied the approach can be. Some people really write little stories, some people write as if it was a diary, some write poems.....

From Nat October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2006:

***"Today is Sunday. I just crawled out of bed. It is unreasonable to expect great thoughts at this time. OK, I'm 76, and while I feel OK and enjoy my life, 76 sounds awfully old. Perhaps related to that sobering fact is that I notice I am saying 'Thank you God' now and then. I never used to say that. I remember the time when, drunk, I sat on my bed and cried out, 'God, if you're there, then make that picture move!' But that picture on the wall didn't even quiver. Hmm, that says that my days are getting better."***

From Psyche July 21, 2004

***"Busy colors and lines, shapes everywhere. Black and whites, many shades of green, many textures. All this above yellow, golds, and oranges with silver***

***edges. It is out of focus, moving in the wind, constantly changing. Wild movement. Is the message to be chaos? When the leaves fall, it will slow down. When the snow comes, it will be calm. Then all will sleep. Sleep until the sun calls them, urging them to rise slowly from slumber. Daintily, they will awake. Shyly the colors come out and grow bolder as the season progresses until again they explode in riotous color."***

From KathyZ, October 7 2002

***"Confess your sins and worries, grab, shake and tell them all. Hold them high above you for a look and let them fall. All the work you didn't do, all the good they think of you. All the blessings never earned, all the talents never learned. All the nice things that they said, all the poisons in your head. All the times you needed rest but couldn't, didn't do your best. All the luck that you have more of, all the loved ones who adore you. Things that keep you up at night, these dark angels to hold you tight."***

Can you see how each person has a different voice and a different way of approaching this exercise? Really, everything is fine, anything you want to express or document. Try not to judge the quality, but at the same time, strive for something. Capture something, anything and do it is exactly 100 words.

Another idea for practicing self-editing is to write in one of the poetry forms which have very specific rules. Haiku is one example. Have you heard of Haiku? It is a Japanese poetry form. The basic rule is three lines, line one is 5 syllables (a syllable is one beat), line two is 7, and line 3 is 5.

For example: ***First autumn morning:***

***The mirror I stare into***

***Shows my father's face***

(Murakami Kijo)

Or : ***This songwriting course***

***Might lead to fantastic work***

***Or at least bring smiles***

Try writing some Haiku then send us your favorites.

#### ORIGINAL LANGUAGE

There have been countless songs written about love, heartache, loss, rejection, loneliness, street life, the human condition. So what sets one song apart from another? What makes a song more memorable? What makes one rapper better than someone else? There are a lot of factors to what makes a good song, but being able to put something that many people can relate to into words and expressing these things in a unique and ultimately moving way is a big key. These words are what grabs people, gives them goosebumps or tears of recognition. This is the area where you will need to really put in effort. Write something, then scrutinize it. Look at where you have taken the easy route. Have you chosen something because it was an easy rhyme? Have you repeated something you've heard before? As you read through your lyrics, look for places where what you have said sounds familiar, trite, or cliché. Try to avoid clichés.

Here are some examples:

A cliché would be: ***"There's nowhere but up from here"***

But then Bob Dylan said it like this ***"When you ain't got nothing, you've got nothing to lose. You're invisible now, you've got no secrets to conceal."***

One could say "I will love you forever" But check out how Iron and Wine says this same thing in his song NAKED AS WE

***"One of us will die inside these arms. Eyes wide open, naked as we came. One will spread our ashes round the yard"***

How about expressing the feeling of rejection like this from Jimmy Dale Gilmore:

***"I would have killed myself but it made no sense***

***Committing suicide in self-defense***

***But I lost everything I brought her***

***When she said babe, you're just a wave, you're not the water" ..... OUCH!!!***

This is how rapper Saul Williams expresses the folly of discrimination, his version of "we are all human" "I am the streets/ The white lines only separate me from me/ you hydroplane in false god's name and still crash into me/ Sign and tree; mountainside; guard rail; into the sea/ They thought they stole you from my arms then carried you to me/ Here's the key: DNA encoded in a beat"

Take some time to think about who you love as an artist, as a lyricist. What are your favorite song texts? Let them influence you and inspire you. Write the words down if you can remember them and judge for yourself, see if anything jumps out and impresses you. Notice the many different approaches to expression.

The main message is: PUSH YOURSELF don't ever settle for the easiest way of communicating something. If you are going to tell a story, then really tell it. Be vulnerable, be open. Use your brain, gather up your forces, sit with it, try, then try again. For practice:

Express each of the following sentiments in as many varying ways as you can, or for now, let's say come up with 5 different phrases to describe:

Loneliness, frustration, giving up, picking yourself up, beauty, love, anger, regret, accomplishment, injustice, shame, connection, fear, panic, claustrophobia, heartache, loss, and inner strength. Find new ways. Be a pioneer of language, an inventor of words. This is what will set you apart, this is what will allow your song to impact someone.

If I think of my personal experience as a songwriter and the improvements I've made over time, I always come back to this. I only really feel I have written something great if I have used my own way of thinking and not regurgitated something that's been said or done by someone else. My biggest challenge is to be vulnerable, to let real emotion show and shine through, to be very honest. This is hard, but so worthwhile if you can get to a place where you are willing to try. What do you have to lose? Be open, challenge yourself, free those emotions, and touch lives!

## GROUP PROJECT

As mentioned in the introduction, the ultimate goal of this course is to write some lyrics. I have written a song tentatively titled "Pick It Up." It has a beat in place, all the chord progressions are worked out, and there is a chorus. I want everybody to write some verses based on what they interpret from the Chorus. That means: you get to decide what the (very simple) chorus means to you and what you want to write about.

Imagine a drum/ snare hip hop beat that goes something like this (imagine these words are the rhythm) 1 2 3 I'm gonna move a rubber tree.....put the accent on GOnna.....the whole thing is inside of 8 beats ☺.....take these clues and imagine this beat however you are hearing it.....this goes through the whole song. Picture the piano chords above it. For those with access, the chords for the verse are: F#minor/ G#/ A 3x then resolve on the E chord. The changes happen within the rhythm as follows F#minor (123 I'm) G# Gonna move a rubber tree A( 123 I'm gonna move a rubber tree) with the E chord holding out through two rounds of the rhythm phrase.

The Chorus is E/ C#minor/ B and resolves on the A.....Each chord holds for one round of the rhythm phrase, except for the B which holds for two, and the A which holds indefinitely until the next verse begins.

Anyway, if you don't have access to music or to an instrument DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT!!

**I'm going to give you the words to the Chorus. Read them, feel them, let your intuition guide you. Think about what these words could mean to you and then write some verses. Any style you want. Pay attention to authenticity, originality in speech, conveying emotion, and being clear and CONCISE (not too wordy)**

*Pick it up, pick it up, Mo-oooh-oooh-ove it*

*Pick it up, pick it up, move it*

*Pick it up, and we pick it up, and we move it*

*Pick it up, pick it up.....lines on my face (tell a story)*

That's it! Write some verses to this chorus and send them back to us.

For each person, the imagined rhythm is bound to feel slightly different. Just get one in your head and figure out a way to remember it. Experiment with some vocal melodies and lines around that rhythm just to loosen up and get the creative juices flowing. Just like in the exercise where you wrote freely in stream of consciousness, start jamming out words. See what comes up and let that be the start. Write things down as they come up. Notice what images come forth. Don't censor yourself in the beginning, just let it flow. After you have a clear idea what it is you want to communicate, it is time to sit with it and hone it and shape it into something special, something which SPEAKS.

I will give you feedback and also pick some of these to use in a recorded version of the song. Like I said, if there is too much good material to choose from, I will incorporate your lyrics into more songs and possibly make a full album out of it. (Don't get any big ideas, I am not a famous musician, just a humble recording artist who wants to make music ☺) At this point we can brainstorm what to do with this music. If you are

in a situation where mp3s are available to you, we will look into getting this to you to hear. Let us know if there are family members who would like to hear it. Send in your ideas for what this song could be used for. The internet has become an amazing tool for spreading messages. Do you want to use this song to raise awareness about prison life? To start more music programs in prisons? To teach about other issues? When you send your lyrics, let us know your thoughts. Good luck and I can't wait to hear from you!

***Some of you may be concerned about sending your personal work out to a complete stranger to possibly be used in a song or recording. I believe that all of your work is automatically copyrighted as soon as it is published. What you can do is copy your work, date it and sign it and mail it back to yourself. That way you have an official record of when your work was written and by whom it was written. If there are any lyrics that you would NOT like me to use but still want feedback on, please just let me know in your comments.***

All the best, KathyZ

**Final Notes-** KathyZ [KZ] has put together a great packet for getting your creative juices flowing. She is interested in hearing your feedback on the packet, as well as gathering your lyrics for the group project. As she does not live near the Alternatives Library my plan is to scan your songwriting submissions into the computer and email her your work. I will also collect your original submissions and mail them to her every few weeks. Scanning will allow her to see your work as it comes to us. Please send you lyrics for the group project to us by Feb 15<sup>th</sup> 2017. Certainly you can send them earlier. We will update the progress of the group song in either a special letter to all the participants, or keep you updated through our semi-annual newsletter as to the progress of this project.

If you are submitting song lyrics or other ideas to KZ please be sure to mark the materials or the envelope as being for KathyZ. We get so many poems for our

poetry anthology, unless you let us know the lyrics are meant for KZ they will not get to her. **Make sure your name and address are on all the materials you submit so if we scan and email it to KZ she will be able to contact you directly if need be.** If you have songs you wish to share with her that would be okay, but please don't ask us to mail back any individual submissions as we struggle to find funds just to cover the photocopying costs and postage for all our program mailings. Feel free to send us any questions that come up for you in this packet. I will forward them to KZ. Perhaps we can put out a follow up packet and use it to answer questions and highlight some of the submitted song lyrics. While many of us hunger for the fame and wealth certain musicians acquire, I encourage you to join this project with a focus on what you can uncover within yourself and to share with the world rather than with the idea of becoming a rich celebrity.

Our projects are focused on improving communication skills, deepening our personal understanding of who we are, and connecting us all to the common humanity we share. This project is an ideal way to acquire these understandings whether you plan a career as a successful songwriter/musician or not. I hope you will contribute something of yourself and your experience to this effort.

FYI, I have seen KathyZ perform with bands in front of thousands of deliriously happy fans, and can testify to her skill as a music maker and performer. You are getting the advice of a successful professional musician, and I encourage you to take the different exercises she has suggested seriously. Even if you already have songs you have written please take the time to further develop your creativity and writing skills. Go through the steps she suggests and see what new insights, ideas and language come through you. From all of us at Prisoner Express I wish you all the best.

Gary

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## Prisoner Express Songwriting Instruction Packet-

Unleash Your Creativity! --- Fall 2016

**Prisoner Express is a program of the Durland Alternatives Library [www.alternativeslibrary.org] which is a project partner of the Center for Transformative Action. [CTA]**

