

Here's What You Can Do With Your Song Evaluation... Pal!

This tip sheet is broken into three sections.

1. The ultimate handling of your song feedback.
2. Evaluator: Ass or asset.
3. Song eval preps and props.

The Ultimate Handling of Your Song Feedback

Following the below will help you get the most out of a song critique or evaluation. Hey, being honest with yourself, and your song too, will make you a better writer.

If you don't? your perspective could get a bit sticky, and you're writing is probably going to suffer.

The following pointers are based on real-time observations from years of giving evaluations, and the unforgettable feelings I had as a newbie writer getting them.

Ready? Let's kick it.

It's helpful to understand...

The 8 Emotional Stages of a Song Evaluation

Depending how mature a writer you are, the below are typical stages most songwriters experience when their tunes are critiqued.

It's a pretty natural process. Not always fun. But the litmus test is when the biggest prick around evaluates your song, and...

Well... you'll see in a minute.

For now here's the eight emotional stages:

1. Shock. Mouth dropping open. Maybe a nervous smile tries to disguise feeling like your ego was publically dope slapped. Despite your efforts to hide it, embarrassment has its own 50 shades of red, and gives you away.

Inside you're asking, "How can they say that about my song? They don't know me... it's my song. How do they know what I'm trying to say?"

2. Hurt: Feeling almost betrayed. Lips tighten, heart races a little more as internal defenses come to your aid. You begin to feel slightly pissed off with even more rewrite suggestions coming at you. You're holding your tongue, afraid you'll say something you'll regret.

3. Defensive. Lips try their best to not quiver, face turns a little redder, because you're outright pissed at somebody now. You can't help but comment through tighter lips why you wrote what you did. It's almost on automatic at this point. You start out saying, "Well, I wrote that because..."

4. Doubt. Back at home, lips relax, natural complexion returns. The after wake of the things people said bounce around in your head like a June Bug on a screen door. It's less about the song now. It's gone deeper. You begin doubting whether you're a songwriter at all.

5. Aggression. Sitting up straight, snapping your lyric sheet in your hands. Self-pity gives way to, "Oh yeah? I'll show them how to write a freakin' song. They want a song, I'll show them a song!" It's either that, or you cave in and quit... but don't do that, you're better than you realize at this point.

6. Honesty. Relaxing in the chair a bit. One hand holding the lyric, the other holding a beverage. Reading the comments on the sheet, you still feel a twinge in your cheek about the boldness they had. But... you notice, "Okay. Well maybe they had a point or two... maybe."

7. Determination. A raised brow, picking a few more black feathers from pursed lips which chowed crow after a closer look at the suggestions. You see a few more rewrite options to work on. You catch yourself mumbling, "I'll be danged. They had a few good points here. And know what? Changing it up is getting' kind of fun."

8. Acceptance. Smiling and nervous. Feeling as though you're risking being a punishment sponge, you present your re-written song for another critique.

Surprisingly, your song is missing crossed out verses and lines, no arrows pointing everywhere.

Instead, you see comments written like, "Much better... love it... great re-write..." You might even find little hearts drawn on it or lipstick kisses on it in place of teeth marks. Suddenly you're thinking, "Yeah. These folks aren't so bad after all."

Any of that sound familiar?

Granted, it's a generalization, but understanding each of those stages is really pretty helpful. If we're honest with ourselves, we can find some nice take-aways from each one.

Next we need to identify...

The 3 Kinds of Songwriters

There are basically three kinds of songwriters when it comes to feedback. In fact, this isn't limited to just songwriting. It's applicable to all sort of art, and even life. Don't blame me if you're surprised at my closing statement on this part.

Here they are.

- 1 The timid—Gee whiz, I hope they like it--writer.
2. The over-secure ass—I'll grace them with my greatness-- writer.
3. The visionary--Tell me what sucks about it.. I can handle it--writer.

Let's take a quick look at each one.

1. The Timid Writer

This is the writer, often new start-ups but not always, who are a bit unconfident in their writing.

Over humble in their approach, they see every other songwriter as better than they are. Secretly though, they hope somehow they'll blow the lid off their tune and it proves to be gold bullion inside.

But, there sort of scared to find out, in case it's not. Then what, they might suck. They can't get much lower than questioning in their mind whether they, "have it," or not.

So, they approach writing from a timid, insecure perspective. They rely on others picking up on the fact they are gentle souls, laying their heart before the group to either stomp on, or pick up and softly return it.

2. the Over-Secure Ass

This is the writer who graces the rest of us with his tune. Really aint about to change anything regardless of who says what. Even when a proven pro gives advice, they'll challenge it with defensive aggression.

They are one of two sub-types of writers in this category.

- Schoolyard bully. An insecure writer who hides behind a bold persona. Kind of like the schoolyard bully who really is over sensitive, so he pushes everyone around before someone gets a chance to hurt him first.
- The cosmos writer. Their songs are channeled in from the gods, and messing with them is nearly sacrilegious. They are viewed as perfect right off the pen tip.

3. The Visionary.

This is the writer who lays down a tune and says, "Okay, what sucks about it?"

They want to cut right to it. No platitudes, no pussy-footing around, just tell it to them straight.

They are anxious for a re-write, expect something needs to be done with it, and just want to know where it needs work so they can move on.

Could you identify with any of the above?

The first two sound a bit unbalanced, don't they?

Well. Not totally.

The best writer is the one made up with a little of all three.

We should have a level of humility. Everyone is unique, and brings their own personality to the craft. Understanding others do too, and our brand of writing compliments the whole is a good approach.

We do need to approach our writing with a level of confidence. Drop the angry aggression and arrogance, or perfect cosmic channel bit.

That is not to say we should take all credit for the song. I do believe there is a spiritual side of it. It's also mixed with our own talent, learned skill; influence from the styles of other writer's... all sort of things. We can't go through life without being influenced by others, and that shows up in our writing too. So, that alone creates a level of imperfection in our writing.

No song is written perfect off-cuff. Not even after a hundred re-writes. Probably even more so after that many re-writes.

I could take a Dylan tune or any other lyric from a writer we've put on a pedestal, bring it to an evaluation, and they'd find something to tweak on it. Don't get hung up on, "the perfect song."

So yeah, we may need to tweak and change things up, but we have value. Everyone has value. We aren't doing favors hiding behind insecurity. Most peeps are cool, but there are sharks that sniff the water for fresh blood and love to feed on that, out of their own insecurities or egos. Don't be a wimpy chum for the predators.

Having the "let's get to it" attitude helps you not get caught up in the moment, on one song. We are so much more than what we see today.

Writing is a life-long learning process.

Find the balance that suits you and allows the best reaction from others. You'll begin to hone in on it based off reactions from group feedback, one-on-one feedback, and live audience responses.

Great, that's out of my system.

Let's get on with the meat of this section.

The Ultimate Eight: Valuable Points in Accepting Song Feedback

1. Don't waste anyone's time.

Before you bring your tune for feedback, decide if you really want feedback or just an encouraging ear.

I've sat in on many songwriting groups where someone brought in a track to play. Usually in these cases it's a mastered track, which is a dead friggin' give-away.

So they play it, people are listening, and the song finishes with pens scratching audibly around the lyric sheet.

Comments begin. Usually the person will remain silent at first, but as friendly suggestions go around the room, they begin to defend the song.

That's the second dead friggin' give-away.

Finally, fifteen minutes later, with the newbie in the wings sweating bullets waiting to do his tune before the meeting runs out of time, the person getting the eval confesses...

"Well, I wasn't planning on changing anything anyway, so it doesn't matter."

You want to see some pissed off songwriters?

Pens angrily crisscrossing out the entire lyrics sheet mumbling, "Why did you just waste our time when we have others who actually want to improve their writing ..."

They get pissed, because they felt duped.

I can guarantee you, if you ever pull that trick, and later want a real evaluation. They'll remember it and be wondering if it's another hoax.

Don't do that.

Songwriters aren't a mean tribe, they just don't like to get drawn in by the heart, and have it yanked from their chest is all. They want to help, they love to help, but they don't want to get duped.

If you want the group to hear your tune because you're excited about how a finished track turned out, great. Make an announcement in the beginning of

the meeting. Tell them you're not looking for an eval, but want to share a tune, and to stick around after the meeting if they're interested.

Let them know it's a listen just for grins. Most will be happy and curious to hear what you got.

What was pens slashing across the lyric sheet in a fit, is turned to smiles, pats on the back, and encouragement what to do with the awesome song. A much better option.

Besides, if you had a finished track and someone had a suggestion you couldn't deny or get out of your head... especially one in the arrangement or structure of the song, how would you fix it without re-recording the entire thing, or start chopping it up digitally.

2. Boldly Take the Hot Seat

This is mostly directed to feedback sessions where you sing and play live, but it's applicable to a CD play or on-line feedback where people listen too.

Here's the statement. Step up confident, and ready.

The below might be overkill, but it's a funny mind video anyway.

There was a box-office flop decades ago titled Rhinestone, starring Sly Stallone and Dolly Parton.

In one scene, at a talent night known for its heartless hecklers, this overconfident, hard-ass dude struts up to the mic with his black hat, leather boots, and the whole snail-trail get-up. Scowled his beady eyes across the hecklers, grabbed the mic stand, twisted it in half, and whipped it across the stage.

He kind of made a bold statement.

Now, I'm not suggesting to go overboard, but too many people are the opposite.

Let's face it, as beginning writers seeking feedback, many are a little vulnerable. Even some seasoned writers can be this way. It depends on your experience, ability to callus up from some abrasions, and personality.

While we don't want to spring for a new mic stand every time we step up, we don't want to appear as weak, needy, or insecure either.

First of all, we'll never get the best from ourselves coming from that mentality. If we tell ourselves, "Golly. Gee. I sure hope these nice folks like my song. Gee I'm so nervous... I hope I don't mess up."

We'll pretty much guarantee we won't do our best. Most people are sympathetic to this... because it's nearly impossible to hide, but there are people without a filter, who are brutally honest.

I'm not saying that is wrong, we want good honest feedback, but if we feel insecure, we'll take things more personally.

What to do?

First, it's a good idea to prepare a bit. I have a section on that coming up on how best to prepare for a good feedback. Preparing always helps anyone's confidence level.

Other than that, it's pretty much having the attitude, "This is my song. It might need work, but it's mine. I can choose to leave it as is, or accept suggestions. I'm in control of it. It doesn't control me. I'm seeking feedback because I want to, not because I'm a bad writer."

It's important to acknowledge to yourself, that the song is a product of you, not the reverse. It might need tweaks, they all do, but it in no way means it is of little value. It is yours, you have value, so your song does too.

Step up to the mic, or sit in the hot seat and await your feedback with confidence you are your song's master. You may not have advanced experience as some writers do, but we are all writers and no matter what happens, good will come from the evaluation.

Straddle the stool, grab your instrument, push out your chest, breathe calmly, and let it rip.

3. Take Your Medicine and Shut Up

From the time your song fades out, to the end of the feedback... shut up and take your medicine.

There is one exception. If someone directly asks you why you wrote a certain line, answer them. Other than that, put a smile on your face and do a lot of head nodding. It's good to acknowledge someone with things like...

"Oh, good point, I hadn't thought of that, thanks." Or maybe, "I'll take a look at that, thanks."

Stuff like that.

The absolute, huge no-no is to begin arguing or defending your song.

There are a few reasons for this.

The first reason is, if you begin to argue or defend. You are telling everyone in the room, "I'm an immature writer with no confidence in my writing." There is no getting around it.

You might think it's not the case, but everyone in the room knows better.

Look, you are taking the time of several individuals who have given up breathing time in their life to grace you with their input. Don't insult them with an argument.

The other reason is, if you argue, are you getting the best unbroken thought from others? If you spend your allotted time arguing or defending why you wrote this or that, you'll run out of time, and cheat someone out of time who might have had a really good suggestion.

Probably one of the biggest, longer lasting reasons is this.

Do you really think if you argue, the next time you have a song, you'll get as many people willing to help?

Most people avoid senseless arguing, so they won't purposefully enter in to one.

I've had people defend or argue their song with me. I will happily let their song flutter to the ground like a kite on a windless day before I'll entertain them with an argument.

It's not worth it to me, and they aren't listening anyway. So why waste my time.

I think most people come to that decision. Some sooner than others.

And get this, here is the effect of it for this type of person.

When they're known to argue or defend a song, no one offers feedback, because they think he's a dick about accepting helpful suggestions. Then, without him even knowing, he walks off feeling he's a much better writer than the entire room collectively knows, but ain't talking.

So just take your medicine gracefully. Even if you feel like they have something wrong. Let it ride man, let them talk without interrupting their thought pattern. You can always ask them about it after the meeting or whatever.

Are we cool on this one? Great.

4. Be a Jerk-proof Comment Sponge

Okay, how shall we say...

There are different personalities in the world. We don't all gel.

Someone can tell another person, "That shirt? Where did you get that thing? From a 1970's dumpster? It's the most hideous thing I ever saw."

Some might hear that and think, "Man, what a friggin' jerk."

Another might hear it and say, "Really? Hmm, I don't think it's so bad. But thanks for your honesty. I appreciate that."

One person is offended, the other appreciative.

Weird how that works.

A friend of mine always asks me...

"Do you want it nice, or do you want it blunt?"

I always choose blunt, because I don't like platitude attitudes. I don't want to be insulted, but I don't want to circle the issue for ten-minutes before getting to a watered-down comment afraid of hurting my feelings either. That doesn't work for me personally.

It seems to be easier for most to handle the soft pitch, "dance around the issue" type of approach.

That said, we'll focus on how to handle the blunt person for now.

So. What do you do if someone with a bit of an edge to their voice says:

"This whole verse here. It doesn't say anything to me at all. It's got forced rhymes all over it, a few clichés, and it's not adding anything to the song's point at all. It doesn't even make a good placeholder verse. It's just a throwaway verse. You're going to have to write a whole new one for this tune to make any sense at all."

Ouch.

And this after pouring over the page for hours last night.

I once had a pro writer tell me, basically I had no business tackling that particular topic without first coming to the likes of him.

Unfortunately for him, I already had two thumbs up from another writer with multiple hits to his name.

I will say. These sort of encounters aren't the norm, but they do occur and I don't want you to get caught off guard.

I really don't think these folks mean to come across as they do, it's more to do with them than you. Always remember that. But, we do have responsibility in how we react.

I'm not saying you are perfect or what you wrote was gold, because it probably wasn't.

It's easy to stew on it though, and internalize it.

Remember back when we covered the 8 emotional stages of getting a song evaluated?

In the beginning we can get a bit pissed off?

Get someone without people skills while you are going through that defensive stage? You'll be ready to spit nails at that point.

Here's what you do.

Grit your teeth with as pleasant a face as you can pull off. It helps to realize, it has nothing to do with you or your song. It is just this person's way of

communicating. Jerk or not, he or she has their own reasons for it, and they have to live with it. You don't.

Smile. Thank them for the awesome insight. Finish your eval session and the meeting.

And when you get home. That's when you can cuss a hole clean through the wall.

Toss your tantrum. How they had the audacity to say that. What a prick they were to say it like that. In front of everyone too. Man-oh-man.

Then, let it sit for a day or so. Get a little distance from it.

Come back, and then do something you might not want to do.

Look at the person's comments on your lyric sheet or listen to the audio file or whatever way you recorded it.

Look past the person, and at the points and see if you can honestly agree with them.

You might be surprise. As jerky and prickly they were, they probably had some pretty helpful points to consider.

Here's the point, don't let someone's poor personal communications skills, bad day, or blunt personality rob you of improving your song.

Sometimes, these type of folks are the only ones to be brutally honest with you. Others might not be so detailed or pointed.

You might even come to respect them as a songwriter a little more. You don't have to invite them over for dinner and be friends, but when you need a hard look at a tune, you can count on them to be honest.

5. Platitudes

On the flip-side, we have people who dish you a plate full of, "I really love that song. I wouldn't change anything."

You'll mostly find this among family and friends. They too mean well, but they aren't being completely honest with you.

They don't want to hurt your feelings.

We also mentioned earlier about being confident when you present a song, right?

Try doing that with family, and also telling them it's okay to rag on the tune.

You want to know where it sucks and where it's good.

If you get all mush cookie on them about your song, you're setting them up to want to fix you through undeserved compliment.

Walk the elephant out of the room, and get down to "bidness."

One of the best tools, and songwriting teachers you can have is evaluating someone else's songs. You see other's songs differently than your own. But you can use the skills you've identified in your evaluation of their song, to make your next tune even better.

6. Gratitude

It's a good idea to look at all the comments with a sense of awe and gratitude.

Think about it. These folks could be anywhere else in the world. Each breath we take is one we can't get back, and they chose to spend some of theirs to help you be a better writer.

Pretty humbling when you think of it.

Plus, if you approach songwriting with a sense of gratitude, you'll get the most from others every time. Everyone likes to be appreciated, and will do more to feel more of it.

It translates into your network, co-writing opportunities, and opportunities to monetize your work.

7. Every Comment is Worth Considering

In light of the previous point, respecting other's comments by considering what they had to say on your song is good practice.

It can be easy to overlook some comments.

For example, one person might simply circle a word and put a question mark over the top of it.

Someone else, in attempts to show how things are better moved around, might draw arrows from line to line or verse to verse. A larger job.

Another person might have As, Bs, Cs, and Ds marked at the beginning or end of the lines to indicate rhyme scheme. They too might have arrows or comments on it.

It is easy to forget that little circled word. How significant is that anyway? I mean, it's just one word.

The thing is, one word can change the whole meaning of a line pretty easy, and not everyone catches that type of thing.

In fact, if you hang with the same group to give feedback on your songs, you'll recognize something.

Bill. He is a music guy. He always comments on the melody and how it plays against the chords.

Linda. She seems to always notice the chronological parts of songs and the things which can date a song.

The guy who always wears the Harley hats, I don't know his name, but he's good. He always has suggestions which make the word meter pop against the beat of the song, and thinks a bit bigger picture on structure of the song.

See what I'm getting at? Some writers tend to have a specialty on what they notice. You probably have some too.

So, be sure to consider everyone's comments, big or small. They all are worth it.

Not that you have to change everything they said. That is up to you as writer, but you should consider it.

8. Common Denominator

I recommend getting several different sources of song feedback. Ten different sources of feedback is a good goal. Even better if you can get them from different sectors. Your writing group, family, audience, an evaluator for hire, and from some one-on-one people you don't know real well if possible—a friend of a friend.

I personally don't recommend counting a group feedback session of twenty people as twenty different sources.

I might consider it a couple, depending on what feedback was given to a writer.

Group sessions have advantages. You get many eyeballs on your song at one time which might otherwise take more effort and time to get equal results.

And there is always the camaraderie and networking part as a bonus.

But there is always the "pig effect."

Tell me if you hadn't heard something similar to this...

Nick says...

"Yeah, I agree with Sue. The chorus seems like it needs more. If I weren't looking at the lyric sheet, I wouldn't have known what the title is either."

The problem here is, if Nick hadn't piggy-backed on Sue's comments, he might never have noticed or said what he did.

When this happens, we get power of suggestion snowballing. Many times it's based off the original commenter's credibility in the group.

I've seen five or six people out of twenty follow one person's comment around the room.

This not only takes up valuable time repeating pretty much exactly what someone else said, but presents another problem.

Have you ever been in a conversation and a really good point comes to you? But, either you can't get a word in or the other person also had a good

point? Then when you got a chance to talk, you couldn't connect back to the thought again. An original thought was gone.

Same here. If people spend time repeating points, they aren't hitting on things they could bring to the table themselves.

The best indicator of a real issue can be multiple comments addressing the same thing. The common denominator.

But, if fifteen out of twenty people in one group said something about the song being more abstract and less visual, we get a tainted count when they crank up the piggy-back train.

When you attend one of these sessions, refrain from marking anything on the lyric sheet which wasn't your own original comment.

And it's good to say you agree with Sue's point in the chorus, if you originally marked it down. Or, even if you hadn't noted it, but felt a strong agreement with a comment, but no need to repeat it in full.

Song Eval Preps and Props.

You've probably been told evaluations aren't based on whether you can sing or play like a pro, and it's true they aren't auditions for "America Has Talent," but over the years I've observed some avoidable situations which have negatively affected a song's evaluation.

Here are five pointers to think about before your evaluation.

1. Tune Up. Playing live with an instrument that is tunable? Tune that thing. Besides those with pitch sensitivity being majorly distracted, a detuned instrument can have an even undetectable negative affect on a song.

Years ago, Mike Deasy, one of the most recorded session guitarists of all time told me if an instrument is out of tune, a song can be played flawlessly and folks will still sit with a screwed brow trying to figure out what was wrong with it.

Musicians and songwriters have an advantage to hear over a guitar ringing and zinging off-color tones all over the room, but why risk it? They'll tell you it doesn't matter, it's not an audition, but it does effect the song's impression.

Tune up. If you can't or don't know how to tune your instrument, just ask, someone will help you out.

2. Belt it out. Granted, often folks are still learning their own songs at evaluation time, lacking confidence compared to songs already written, but sing it as powerfully as you can.

Get the vocals out in front of the instrument ... no mumbling. No one expects perfection, but they do want to hear what the words are, how they are stressed, metered, and laid against the melody.

Even though evaluators in a group setting might have lyric sheets to look at, mumbling the words in a performance does not help them see how the meter flows, how syllables are stressed, and that sort of thing.

Some evaluators, such as myself if afforded the time and not in a live session, prefer to listen first then look, because that's exactly what an audience will be doing.

3. Backup music. In either pre-recorded or live performances, the supporting music is not the main focus at this point. It's important the musical accompaniment is in the background so we get an idea but vocals should be out front and clearly heard.

If you are singing as boldly as you can and are still not being heard because of the loudness of the instrument or music, either play lighter, use a thinner pick, or turn down the instrument track volume so vocals are out front.

Also if you have a demo recording, now is not the time to show off your lead guitar chops or ability to mix pounding instrument tracks in your home studio.

You can still give rhythms and grooves if doing a pop tune, but save tucking the vocals in your Clapton-, Satriani-, Hendrix- SRV-like masterpiece for the final mix.

I mentioned earlier about not investing money into a demo before getting your song evaluated.

You won't like rerecording it after someone tells you it would be a good idea to eliminate the fifth verse, it needs a bridge, or the bridge you do have has the same chords as the verse and needs changing.

4. Lyric sheets. Bring some lyric sheets for people to mark up and return to you.

I'd bring twenty sheets, double spaced if possible but all on one sheet.

At the top of the sheet leave space for the evaluator's name and date. I might even put the organization's name if you're at a group session.

Label the sections accordingly: verse, chorus, bridge, etc.

Put a copyright statement at the bottom.

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Doing this does several things.

- Gives you a name to follow up with later if you need more info on the feedback given.
- Gives proof to Uncle Sam you were at the meeting for mileage tax write-offs and supports your case of intent to earn income as a serious songwriter.
- Gives you proof that your song was seen by members of an organization on a certain date so you can help win that big infringement case someday.

5. Relax. This is your song, relax, breathe a little bit, lower the music stand from your face, be proud of it ... your song that is, I can't speak for your face... well that too I suppose if it's in keeping.

If you just aren't a singer or know you'll be too nervous, all is not lost, get someone to sing it for you. A wife, hubby, a songwriting buddy, a willing soul who can do a decent job of getting the idea across.

I hope this is helpful to you in your next song evaluation.

If you would like a full-blown audio evaluation on one or more of your tunes, Contact me off the WWW.TUNESMITHTIPS.COM website.

I found most songwriters appreciate an audio evaluation in an MP3 format.

You'll get a minimum of 20-minutes of detailed feedback on your song.

Let me know if I can help.

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