

5 TIPS FOR SONGWRITERS STARTING A BAND

Think your songs will be best served by putting a group together?

SHANE COOLEY ensures you get off on the right foot with these guidelines

Don't ever start a band,' was the first piece of advice given to me by an early songwriting mentor. He was an older musician who had been in several outfits throughout his career; most of them based around his original songs. As a starry-eyed young songwriter dreaming of starting my own ensemble, those words took me aback. My musical obsessions at the time were Bruce Springsteen and Tom Petty, singer-songwriters who surrounded their songs with musicians who believed in them. I found out later from learning more about their stories (as well as living my own) that creating a sustainable team of any kind comes with a vast amount of complications and responsibilities.

Years (and bands) later, my mentor's opening line still occasionally haunts me. I certainly have learned to appreciate the simplicity of being a solo artist, but overall I still disagree with those words. The moments on stage, when you and your musical companions are surfing a blissful groove are well worth living, along with the strong friendships it can instill.

It can be equally exciting and daunting to be a singer-songwriter starting a band. Every group is unique, as are its individual components. Finding the right group of people to share a passion for something you have created comes in many forms. However you decide to approach it, here are a few things you can be aware of that may help your band dynamic find its flow...

1. COMMUNICATION

Communication will be a recurring theme in all of these points, but still deserves one of its own. Every band is a relationship, whether it's a high school garage band or a group of "hired guns." Interacting with respect and openness goes a long way in any healthy relationship. Most bands have to coordinate rehearsals, bookings, load-in times, promotional appearances, social media posts, setlists, gear and a plethora of other minutiae. I've always found the phrase "herding cats" to be an apt description. Keeping everybody in the loop, helps all the extraneous things come together to focus on the most important (and fun) part – the music.

2. LEARN HOW TO TEACH

Learning how to effectively and efficiently communicate your musical vision is crucial for a songwriter in a band. This is completely case-by-case, depending on the nature of the group. Everybody learns and teaches in their own way. The important part is figuring out the common language that works best amongst your team. Let's say, for example, that you find yourself in a band where some of its members play by ear, while others prefer sheet music. Whether it's humming melodies or writing out notes, finding a common ground to communicate the music is bound to reduce the stress.

I find musical references to other artists to be extremely

helpful, especially with original compositions that haven't been previously recorded. Music itself is a universal language, so referencing a rhythmic feel, a guitar tone, or a certain vibe from a more familiar song can create a bridge between what you hear in your head and how your bandmates perceive it. Having chord charts written or typed before a rehearsal can also come in handy, but again, make sure the charts are written in a way your bandmates can understand. It took me years to write a chord chart for one of the musicians I perform with that didn't confuse him. Our brains simply map things out differently. Now that I know how to create a properly translated chart for him the song becomes ingrained with much more ease.

3. ESTABLISHING ROLES AND DYNAMICS

This aspect of communication can be a lot less fun, but not doing so has been the death of many great bands. I even feel awkward writing about it! Nonetheless, as a songwriter, you have a responsibility to protect your own art. It is 100 percent yours until you choose to bring others into the picture. Some songwriters engage in the act of writing in the room with their band, or may actually be a band formed from songwriters, such as Crosby, Stills and Nash. Others may have fully composed songs that the other musicians are performing renditions of.

Whatever the nature of the group, it is in everyone's best interest to



PIC: RENEE DOMINGUEZ

talk about it. When it comes time to record your music, you probably want to turn that “talk” into something in writing. It sounds yucky because it can be! However, it can be a lot yuckier if you don’t. In clear co-writing situations, I find split sheets to be the simplest solution. Split sheets define the ownership percentage of a co-write with no frills, just the splits and contact info of the collaborators. If the other musicians are performing on a song that is exclusively your creation, establish a written agreement with your bandmates that states and defines that.

I strongly advise having an entertainment lawyer’s input on any written agreement. Again, this is to avoid future conflicts, but it may also immediately create them. Either way, it’s best to clear the air before you start recording and releasing music together. Copyrighting your songs and registering them with a performance rights organization is also very wise.

4. EGO

I’ve always heard that one of Willie Nelson’s mantras is, ‘Don’t be an asshole!’ It must hold some merit,

because his band, which he deems “Family,” has been loyal to him for decades. Musicians have a pretty nasty reputation for having egos. I personally don’t think ego is necessarily a bad thing, as long as you’re not a jerk about it. Working with a team of individual personalities requires patience and the ability to step outside of your own perspective. Some of the best bands are solid units composed of extremely dynamic individuals. Knowing your parameters and freedoms within the band allows for everybody to shine their unique light within the collaborative effort. Respect for the music is key. Respect for each other is a must.

5. HAVE FUN

I mean, really, otherwise, why do it? Whether you’re performing at open mics or arenas, being in a band is being in the business of creating joy from within and spreading it to others. That may not be what

Google tells you the music business is, but it is the true business of art. It’s easy to get caught up in the other stuff, but true longevity comes from the joy within the journey. Making music together is one of the most profound experiences creative beings can engage in. Clear communication, established dynamics, and respectful interaction amongst your bandmates can set the stage for the time of your life, and nothing is more infectious than that.

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