

The Student, the Craftsman and Case Studies about Being “Stuck”

Below are a few real life “case studies”. These are real people and real situations.

As a music pro, I use a similar approach to my work as I did in my time as a lecturer. The end result is a good product, but I also want to develop and help in the long run. I want to open doors for the artist. I have no interest in forcing an artist in a direction he/she does not enjoy.

Seeing a musician struggle is no joy for me and in these examples I wish the outcome had been different.

However, maybe these cases can help you – and may help explain why some very talented artists are stuck in first gear. Maybe these examples make you see that much of your career is determined by pen on paper writing.

Improvement Made Easy – Forgetting You Are an Artist:

The Student:

I was a full time lecturer for songwriting, composition and audio production. Students paid for my classes, so they were motivated to learn and listen and were open to new ideas for their music. The lecturer suggests homework and areas to study. After learning something new, a student often cannot wait to try it at home or apply it to something he is playing. The student is excited; he feels like he received a gift that will help his music.

You will notice progress and improvement comes easy and energy is high.

The Craftsman:

My composition professor taught that seeing yourself as a craftsman rather than as an artist is a healthier and more effective attitude. If someone wants a chair build to specific measurements, a carpenter builds it for him. If the carpenter has never worked with the desired wood, he might sit down with a test piece to get a feel for the material. Working with the desires of the customer leads to experience with a new wood, working in a different scale, a different style, etc... As a result, one notices that learning new techniques and experiences comes naturally.

For both the student and the craftsman outer stimuli can lead to growth. Both are still free to follow their personal ideas with their music or their personal woodwork, but both have more tools and techniques available to them than before the interaction.

Now imagine both situations with an artist (or a cliché of an artist).

The Artist:

A songwriter / producer / A&R suggests the same areas of study as the lecturer. The same changes and suggestions that were a gift that excited a student can feel like an intrusion to an artist. So instead of being thankful for a gift, studying it deeply and then seeing if it is possible to make it work, the artist simply rejects it.

There may be a lucky break and a filmmaker hires the artist to record a very specific song for a specific scene that happens to fit his current style. Instead of going to the “woodshop” / library / taking lessons the artist writes what he always writes, “because he is who he is”.

You will notice that there is no progress, no improvement, no new technique and no new experience. The student and the craftsman will soon have a vast array of tools and techniques, while the artist is stuck.

Next, look-up “neuroplasticity” and make sure you are not stuck as an artist.

I have noticed that artists with a strong sports background are usually a joy to work with – simply because they are used to training and trying new techniques to improve their skills.

Case Studies

1: 1000 Gigs

Issues:

- Will not work with a co – songwriter
- No Sound B
- Trying to fix writing issues in post production
- Strategy determined by personal preference, not material / professional considerations

This is a great case of how ineffective it can be to rely entirely on your own songwriting / creative direction if you are not a professional songwriter.

I had a singer/songwriter referred to me who has played over a thousand college gigs. He was a good-looking guy with a great voice. He was very hard working and technically solid. He had been pitching and gigging extensively and seemed to be stuck at his current level for a number of years. His latest feedback: "Too AC" (AC is adult contemporary).

He contacted me to produce him (as in record and mix not "produce produce") and to give him a more modern, less AC sound, so that the A&R who made that comment could sign him.

Listening to his music, I heard a sweet voice and a sweet guitar, playing sweet chords with exactly the sweet arrangements one would expect in his genre. All the vocal lines were sweet and too safe. The issue was clearly not the recording and mixing - it was in the writing and performance. Everything was a little one-sided. There was no dissonance to balance all the sweetness. This artist had mastered "Sound A", but he had no "Sound B". Unfortunately, this meant that half way through the first song, most listeners (especially the college students he targeted) lost interest.

Not only did he not have a "Sound B", his "Sound A" was for a much older audience.

Like so many artists, he was too close to his material to notice these issues. He had also never worked with a professional songwriter, and so never experienced a more nuanced writing. He was willing to spend money on a new mix, but working on the actual songs was not an option he was willing to consider.

A while later I listened to his new EP, which contained the same music he had been recording for the past ten years, with all the same issues. He will take it on the road to the same venues.

Case 2: **A-List Hollywood Movie Licenses**

Issues:

- Will not work with a co – songwriter
- Wrong sound for the voice (never worked with an "old-fashioned" producer)

This is a study of the importance of an "old-fashioned" producer who helps with the direction of the music or a co-writer who knows how to feature a voice.

I recently met a singer who had put his band on hiatus after working very hard for ten years to put the band on the map. The band had recorded several CDs and, through personal relationships, was able to place a number of songs into Hollywood films with top talent.

Through hard work and this unique lucky break, this indie band was exposed to millions of listeners. To his shock and surprise, these listeners did not translate into sales, or fans, and the band failed to make any progress.

While there was nothing wrong with their U2 / Coldplay–style music or their performance, in ten years, no one picked up on the one crucial detail holding the band back – the vocals did not fit the music. The voice is the focal point of any song, and the music should be written to make the vocalist shine.

While the singer wrote the songs himself, he wrote and arranged them to be sung by Bono or Chris Martin. His voice was different: smaller, more singer/ songwriter in style. Furthermore, the background vocals were not arranged to support him, nor did the band ever try a microphone shoot-out to find a more meaty vocal sound.

So for ten years he worked very hard writing music that drowned his vocals. His best efforts and a one in a million connection were less of a factor than the issues in writing and producing.

Case 3: **Electronic Music Guy**

Problem:

- Royalty obsessed
- No control over harmonies

A strange paradox exists in the professional music world. Professionals who actually make money through royalties often seem to get to reasonable agreements quickly. They also know that sharing royalties can work in their favor. The people who are the most unreasonable and over-protective about royalties are often people who never made any money or who are inexperienced.

I am not saying to be careless, but the old line that 50% of something is better than 100% of nothing is very true.

I met a talented electronic music guy who regularly came up with catchy ideas. As he had no concept of harmony or how to structure a song with harmonies, his ideas never translated into great songs. Despite a million different sounds his songs usually ran out of steam long before the end.

At the same time he was too much of a free spirit to buckle down and learn the songwriting craft. He enjoyed playing with sounds and coming up with vocal ideas. The easiest fix would have been to work with a co-songwriter to combine both strengths for great songs. In that scenario we could have knocked his album in shape in a couple of sessions. Especially since he wanted to produce himself, he would have only needed “pen on paper” work.

However, for him sharing royalties was unthinkable. Not an option. Not being able to write good songs, not willing to study harmony, he asked me to be his “project manager”.

For a while he visited me once a week to play his songs to me. As instructed I gave him feedback and tried help him getting his material in shape, without touching it.

Thankful and excited about the points and the chance of progress he went home, where his limitations as a writer caught up with him. I'm sure you can imagine how frustrating that must be - stuck between knowing you cannot go all the way alone, but unable to share credit.

As I said earlier 50% of something is much better than 100% of nothing.

I hope this text helps you to avoid some of the usual pitfalls.

Lars Deutsch
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MUSIC CARS DEUTSCH
rol @ orsdeutsch.net
www.orsdeutsch.net

