SONG GROVE

Music in the Margins

A busy professional's path back to creating



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The Dormant Creative

I am going to assume that you love music: listening to it, playing it, and maybe even making it. Maybe you used to play in a band, serve on a worship team, or write songs of your own. But life got full, and music slowly became something you used to do.

You didn't plan for that to happen. It just happened gradually. Job deadlines, never-ending to-do lists, relationships, family, and maybe even kids began to fill your time. After a long day, finding the energy to be creative felt out of reach.

Maybe each time you see your instrument or notice that unfinished song on your computer, you feel a little twinge: "I really need to get back to this." But somehow, there's always an invisible barrier in the way.

Perhaps you've started to wonder whether that creative part of you is gone. I don't think it is. Even when you aren't actively expressing it, you're gathering experiences, emotions, stories, struggles, and celebrations.

You may not have written much lately, but you haven't run out of things to write about: the conversation you keep replaying, the person you miss, the ordinary evening you wish would last a little longer. Any of those could be somewhere to begin. You don't have to explain your whole life in a song. You could start with just one thing.

Also, you don't have to be a professional musician or become one to take your interest in music seriously. You can build music into your existing life. However, you might be thinking that it's easier said than done, and that's true. For years, I was the person telling myself I would get back to music later.

From the outside, my life probably looked like it was going in all the right directions. I had a well-paying consulting job, was on an accelerated promotion path, and was happily married. I knew how to work hard, discipline myself, and deliver results.

Believing that all of this work would eventually buy me more freedom, I kept raising my hand for additional assignments and kicking creativity down the road to a future version of myself.

The problem was that this future self was an idealized version of me. He had the energy, inspiration, and excitement to make life-changing art. Meanwhile, the person I was actually becoming was tired and burnt out. Each decision seemed to pull me further into the pursuit of productivity. I began to wonder whether this future version of me was ever going to show up.

In college, I got really into weightlifting. I admired people who could move weights I could barely carry. I quickly learned strength came gradually through specific movements, scheduled training, and a lot of repetition. Alternatively, if I had walked into the gym and loaded the bar with the weight I dreamed of lifting, no amount of willpower would have kept me from getting hurt.

However, when it came to creativity, I had been treating it as though it worked differently. Despite the dust my creative abilities had accumulated, I expected to return to music and simply stumble into my creative prime, but I discovered my abilities could not carry the weight of my artistic expectations. So, returning was frustrating. I often felt like a child without words to express myself.

Thankfully, after the initial sting of right-sizing my expectations, I gave myself permission to "be bad" and kept returning because I realized how much I had been missing. Slowly, I started carving out time each week to learn, practice, and write. This became a life-giving creative habit. Even as a full-time management consultant, I found joy in writing original songs outside of my day-to-day responsibilities. It gave me fulfillment I couldn't find in work, helped me process difficult emotions, and freed me to be a more present husband and friend.[1]

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1. There are quite a few studies that support creative activity leading to improved well-being, energy, and flourishing. You might find similar benefits. See the following studies:

Acar, S., Tadik, H., Myers, D., van der Sman, C., & Uysal, R. (2021). “Creativity and well-being: A meta-analysis.” The Journal of Creative Behavior, 55(3), 738–751. https://doi.org/10.1002/jocb.485

Conner, T. S., DeYoung, C. G., & Silvia, P. J. (2018). “Everyday creative activity as a path to flourishing.” The Journal of Positive Psychology, 13(2), 181–189. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1257049

The Joy of Songwriting

I have always loved music. For most of my life, that love expressed itself through playing other people's songs. It almost felt like the song became mine as I played it. Still, I felt a strange sense of incompletion. There was something more that I wanted to express, so I found what I was missing when I began writing songs of my own.

For a long time, I didn't think of myself as a songwriter. I assumed the title belonged to unusually artistic people who were born with the right skills. Maybe you believe that too. But songwriting is a practice, and like any practice, it can be learned.

Songwriting combines a unique blend of emotion and thought into a single art form. Harmonies and melodies elicit feelings, and lyrics provide context and relatability. Once you've learned to write songs, it's like having the ability to write a soundtrack for your life. And, needless to say, soundtracks can return entire scenes to our memory, even without words.[2]

Writing my own songs has helped me wrestle through hard moments of anxiety, fear, and confusion and also helped me explore positive moments of gratitude, wonder, and peace. Often, I don't fully understand what I am trying to say until I start writing. And, while you may choose to write primarily for yourself, there's something unexplainably beautiful when someone else resonates with your music, when something private becomes a shared story.

But, if you're like me, you might feel a pressure to write only great songs. Perhaps you'd like to avoid any possibility of embarrassment. I've often thought, "What if someone discovers what I've written and they laugh at me?" That's what personally kept me from

2. As an experiment, listen to a few songs from the soundtrack of one of your favorite movies. See what scenes flood your imagination or what emotions begin to bubble up. For example, if I listen to "Married Life" from Up, I can immediately see the movie playing out in my mind; I'm definitely shedding a few tears.

writing and sharing my music for a long time. And it's true. Songwriting is vulnerable. You're often baring your heart, and the slightest hint of distaste from anyone feels like rejection. But when someone else connects with your music, there's nothing like it. It's a moment of compassion and joy, receiving the intimacy from being seen in your vulnerability while also experiencing the wonder of providing that for someone else.

Though not directly related to songwriting, this reminds me of how C. S. Lewis writes of love in his book, *The Four Loves*.

> "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable."
>
> — C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*

That said, you don't need to share your songs; there's no pressure. I write songs that I love, songs I shelve, songs I share, and songs I keep for myself. And regardless of what each song becomes, each one grows me in a unique way. I find so much joy in that process, and I think you will too.

Getting Started

What does it take to start? Perhaps less than you expect. You don't need to quit your job or leave your career. You don't need an impressive musical background, fancy equipment, or hours in a studio. You don't even need to play an instrument.

You just need:

1. A vision of yourself becoming someone who writes songs
2. The intention to pursue that vision
3. The means to begin realizing it

The vision establishes the destination. It gives you a goal. Can you imagine yourself writing and playing original songs? Perhaps it's a weekend morning. You've sat down with a cup of coffee, your instrument, and pen and paper. You hum new melodies over chord progressions and sing what comes to mind. What do you feel? Do you play your songs for anyone else? Without vision, we're a bit aimless.

Then, once your vision is established, you need the intention to act. Sometimes, we have visions of who we'd like to be or things we'd like to do but lack the intention to actually start. For example, I often like the idea of running a marathon, but I have no intention of training to do it.

Finally, the means equip you with the resources to make meaningful progress toward your vision. In this case, means may include time, resources, skillsets, and knowledge. Without means, even the best intentions can leave you frustrated.

That's why I created Song Grove. As an ex-consultant, I understand how precious your free time is, so I want to help you experience the joy of making music within the life you already have. You can write original songs, and I'd love to show you how.

Let’s start with an exercise.

The Exercise: Song Seed

In this exercise, you'll learn how to build an authentic song idea ready for chords, melodies, and lyrics. We'll plant what I call a Song Seed: a written idea for a song that captures the emotional direction and message. If you're unsure whether you can write songs, I hope this shows you that you can.

You will need:

- 40 minutes
- A private space
- Something to write with (a notes app, pen and paper, etc.)

At the end of this exercise, we'll have answered two main questions:

1. What do I want this song to make me feel?
2. What do I want to say?

In other resources, we will explore the listener's perspective when writing songs, but this is for you, so don't worry about what others will think. It's important that you give yourself permission to try! And, if you're a struggling perfectionist like me, you may benefit from intentionally leaning into the first thoughts that come to you rather than thinking them through multiple times.[3]

3. There's a misconception that great songwriters are naturally talented, spontaneously writing whatever comes to mind. Perhaps that's the case for some, but the truth is that songwriting, while spontaneous, is creative within boundaries. It's an artful form of communication. By aligning songwriting decisions with your north star, you'll likely find that certain decisions become obvious, helping you identify what a song needs.

Step 1: Feeling - 15 Minutes

This part might be uncomfortable, but I promise it's worth it. Whether intentional or not, songs bring forth emotions, so identifying an emotional target establishes a north star for your songwriting decisions, allowing you to ask, "Does this artistic decision align with the intended emotion?"

To begin, let's identify our primary emotion. You may already have an idea, but I'd encourage you to give this a try. You may discover something new and find yourself writing more authentically in the process.

Take a moment to pause, breathe, and observe. Actually take a moment to check in with yourself.

- What are you feeling currently?
- What have you been feeling this season?

Sometimes, this exercise is difficult, so here's a tool I like to use: How We Feel.[4] It's a free app that helps me identify what I'm feeling by dividing emotions into quadrants based on energy and feeling. Additionally, you may use a feelings wheel.[5]

Once you've identified your emotion, fill in the blank.

The primary emotion I am feeling or have been feeling is...

_____

_____

_____

This is about identifying what you are currently feeling or what you have been feeling lately. The purpose is to unearth an honest representation of your inner world. From this place, you'll likely find new ideas and feel confident in your song's authenticity. Next, fill in the blank for what you want your song to evoke.

4. https://howwefeel.org

5. https://www.feelingswheel.com/

The primary emotion I want my song to evoke is...

This is about the song's emotional direction. In other words, how do I want my song to respond to the emotions I have been feeling? This could be painting those emotions, processing them, reinforcing them, reframing them, or even contradicting them.

What you feel and what the song evokes do not have to be the same. For example, you may be feeling anxious and choose to evoke a sense of peace rather than reinforcing your anxiety. Try to choose one main feeling, though you may include a second feeling if it helps.

Examples:

- The primary emotion I am feeling or have been feeling is... joy.
- The primary emotion I am feeling or have been feeling is... sorrow.
- The primary emotion I am feeling or have been feeling is... nostalgia.
- The primary emotion I want my song to evoke is... whimsy.
- The primary emotion I want my song to evoke is... a sense of longing.
- The primary emotion I want my song to evoke is... gratitude.

Step 2: Message - 15 Minutes

Now that you've identified your emotional direction, what do you want to say about that emotion? This becomes the scenery painted around the emotion, the context that provides expression and relatability. Lean into your imagination! Here are some prompts to help guide your message discovery within the context of your emotional direction.

- What scenarios recently evoked that emotion?
- What do you imagine? Is there a particular scene or image that comes to mind?
- Is there a particular topic that comes to mind?

The Exercise: Song Seed

Jot down a few ideas. You might even find it helpful to sketch a scene instead of describing it.

Once you have some ideas, choose one of them. What do you want to say about it? Write a complete thought, not just a topic. For example, you might write about "marriage" as a topic, but your message might be, "Married life is sweeter than anyone could have described."

If you're stuck, try completing one of these:

- I wish _____.
- I miss _____.
- I'm grateful that _____.
- I want you to know _____.

Write it as something you would actually say. "I want to tell my friend that I miss spending time together" is enough. It doesn't need to rhyme, sound profound, or become a lyric exactly as you've written it.

Step 3: Bringing it Together - 10 Minutes

Bring your ideas together with these three statements:

This is a song about...

What I want to say about that is...

The feeling I want the song to evoke is...

Examples:

- This is a song about missing someone. What I want to say is that the apartment doesn't feel the same now that you aren't here. The feeling I want this song to evoke is sadness, with a little nostalgia.
- This is a song about marriage. What I want to say is that the ordinary days with her are the highlights I've been waiting for. The feeling I want this song to evoke is gratitude and affection.

Once you've finished, read through what you've written and look for one place you could be more specific. I've found people tend to err on the side of generality rather than specificity. Being more specific does two things:

1. It helps you choose what belongs in this song. A song gives you limited space to develop an idea. Rather than trying to say everything about a subject, choose one thing to explore. If you have a lot to say, you can write more songs instead!

2. It gives you something concrete to return to. For example, the phrase "The apartment feels emptier without you" gives you more to work with than the general topic "I miss you." Additionally, details like that can become a time capsule of what this season felt like. And if you eventually share the song, someone else may recognize their own experience in yours.

Once you finish, you should have three short sentences formatted similarly to the examples given earlier.

Congratulations on completing the exercise! You now have a Song Seed that's ready for the next step. You can give your idea a working title if you'd like and save it in your notes for what's next.

Next Steps

You've created the seed of an original song. You have something you want to say and a feeling you want the song to evoke. Those two decisions serve as your north star as you begin choosing chords, lyrics, and melodies.

The next step is to bring those pieces together into a complete song. That might feel like a lot from where you're sitting, but you don't need to learn everything about songwriting or music theory before you try. It helps to have a process to follow, with room to learn as you go.

That's the next resource I'm planning for Song Grove: The Songwriting Formula, a workbook with a few short videos to help you take the idea you've just created and work it into a complete song. Think of it as a recipe you can follow while you learn how the pieces fit together. You'll work with one idea, making choices about the words, music, and structure along the way.

In the meantime, keep your idea somewhere you can find it. When you're ready, I'd love to help you grow what you've started.

The music is already there.
Give it room to grow.

About the Author



Christopher Tung

SONGWRITER &
FOUNDER OF SONG GROVE

I'm Christopher Tung, a songwriter, independent artist, and the creator of Song Grove. I write and release original music, blending pop songwriting with R&B influences and lo-fi textures. My music is an expression of my faith as I follow Jesus in the highs and lows of everyday life.

Before this, I spent years working in management consulting. I know what it's like to love music and still struggle to make room for it. Learning to write songs alongside that work helped me reconnect with a part of myself I had kept putting off.

I created Song Grove to help other people find their way back to making music. My hope is that you'll discover the joy of writing something of your own, whether you share it with others or keep it for yourself.

Listen to Christopher Tung on Spotify →