

THE PERILS OF PERFECTIONISM

BY ALEX FORBES

Of course you only want to share your best songs with the world, but when it comes to creativity, perfection can be the enemy of progress. Use this experiential worksheet to take your foot off the brakes and kick your writing into high gear.



We all strive for excellence in our creative endeavors, and most of us are going for it 100%, every minute of every day. Even when we're failing miserably, it's still the best we can do at that particular moment — it's just that for some bloody reason it's not working.

This natural tendency towards perfectionism can get out of control, though, and interrupt the flow of our best ideas. When we experience an “aha! moment” — and feel the sudden urge to capture it in the form of music or lyrics — our need to Do It Right, Right Now can become our biggest stumbling block. Sound familiar?

How To Tell If You're A Perfectionist

Over the years I've discovered a few warning signs that, indeed, the ugly side of perfectionism is rearing up its ugly head. Check the boxes that apply to your own creative process (at its worst):

- I feel like I'm drowning in a gigantic pile of incomplete works-in-progress
- Everyone's heard that I'm a songwriter, but no one's actually heard my songs lately
- I envision doomsday scenarios if I ever DO reveal what I've been working on
- Whenever I start writing, my critical inner voice rips each line to shreds
- I spend ridiculous amounts of time “polishing” until I lose all perspective

If you checked most or all of those boxes, read on.

The Perfect Cure For Perfectionism

Indeed, there is a pathway out of this maze of self-doubt. I know because I've lived it, and have coached hundreds of others through it. My loving shorthand for this approach is “Dare To Suck.” Or

Hit songwriter Alex Forbes works with committed songwriters to prepare their music and lyrics for film, TV and record label placements. To unleash the full potential of your creativity and find other resources, visit

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for those with more delicate sensibilities, “Dare To Fail.”

Huh!?

Let’s face it, a perfectionist’s worst fear is that their work will bite the big one. Publicly. But here’s the thing: until you reach the gates of heaven, or whatever your personal version of that blessed moment is, the vast majority of your work WILL, in fact, adhere to the 90/10 Rule — in favor of sheer dreck. We’re talkin’ stanky here.

But (and this is a Big But) unless you’re willing to trudge through all that Bad Writing, you’ll never arrive at that blissful destination called Great Writing. It seems obvious enough. The hard part is actually ALLOWING yourself to wallow, unashamed, in the mud of mediocrity. And that’s not just a passing phase... it’s an ongoing, essential part of the creative process itself.

Here are some ways to bypass your perfectionist streak, and get that nasty 90% out of your system, so that you can generate more great stuff:

1. While Writing Songs, Shoot For Quantity Over Quality

Turn down the voice of your inner critic, however loud or insistent, and start filling page after page with whatever pops out. Blather on and on. The more the merrier. And here’s the key: don’t delete or cross out ANYTHING. That probably sounds impossible, but I guarantee that if you write a lot, when you go back later (and make sure it definitely IS later) some of it will inevitably rise above the rest and tug at your heartstrings. (I delve into this process in more detail elsewhere, since it really is the key to success.)

2. Seek Out Safe People & Avoid Toxic Ones

A lot of us are frantically doing our best to please those Less-Than-Supportive people in our lives who dole out plenty of “helpful” advice, even if they’ve never written anything more emotionally resonant than a grocery list. What’s truly helpful for writers’ progress is a heavy dose of unconditional encouragement as we discover what it is we have to say, and put it into words. So start surrounding yourself with friends, colleagues and family members who are consistently in your corner, no matter what. And yes, they’re out there!

3. Invent Some Hard Deadlines

Having lunch with a friend, or even three? Use that meet-up as an excuse to share your latest and greatest songs. Is there an open mic, a party, or a writing contest that’ll provide the opportunity to dip a toe in? Or if you’d rather do it from the comfort of home, howzabout joining an online community? Personally, I find the threat of public humiliation a rather bracing motivational tool, and fill my days with a wide variety of collaborations, meetings, and feedback loops. Just don’t fall into the trap of isolating in front of your computer like a zombie for months on end. (I know, it’s so tempting.)

4. Rummage Through Your Archives

This is best approached as a one-time exercise, designed to rid yourself of the Ghosts

Of Writings Past. Pick through the ol' scrap heap and see what, if anything, still screams out for your attention. MAYBE there's something in that that slimmed-down stack that'll serve as a jumping-off point for your brand-new work. Afterwards I challenge you to relegate whatever doesn't pass the smell test to the physical or virtual attic, where it's sole purpose until the End Times is to gather cobwebs. Because as wondrous as they were when you wrote them, these creations can now be viewed, respectfully, as mere steppingstones on the path to greatness.

5. Seek Out Coaches, Mentors and/or Teachers

This is one of my personal favorites, since I would never have achieved diddly without the support of my own coaches, mentors and teachers. It's also the surest way to put your writing on the fast track. The moment you open up to the mere possibility of building an effective support structure, your team members miraculously start appearing. Like in the movie *Field of Dreams*, if you build it, they will come. And for my money, there's nothing more powerful than the company of like-minded souls to nudge you out of your comfort zone — and into the miraculously IMPERFECT real world!

I know, I know... you're terribly busy, but the beauty part is this: all five of the tasks on this list can be completed in ONE DAY if you put your mind to it. After all, how long does it take to blurt out a page of what-might-possibly-be-lousy writing? No time at all! And creating a firm deadline — you can do that in the time it takes to type a text.

The only thing that's stopping you is that pesky perfectionism. Do your soul a favor and kiss that part of your brain goodbye, at least temporarily.