

WHERE DOES A SONG COME FROM? THE ORIGINS OF ‘GOODBYE TO HOME’

Dave Kane

I do not identify as a songwriter: I have played guitar for more years than I care to remember and, during that time, have played with a number of bands, contributing songs to the repertoire of each. Despite this, I still view myself as a guitar player rather than a songwriter and, if I'm ever asked about my role in bands, my answer is always 'I play guitar' and not 'I write songs.' However, the exercise of describing the process of writing 'Goodbye to Home' (abbreviated to GTH from this point onwards) has forced me to reassess my relationship with songwriting, how I actually approach it and do it, something which I had previously rarely given much thought to: it was almost as if I imagined it happened organically and didn't require the discipline – the 'work' – of continuous practice that playing an instrument does.

I should add at this point that my music career has been strictly amateur, and that professional songwriters inhabit a different universe: refer to the Sodajerker podcasts for further enlightenment relating to this. So, this is a personal take on the practice of songwriting, within the context outlined, using GTH as an illustrative case study.

In the beginning...

To motivate Write Club members, the first meeting was devoted to a screening of 'American Graffiti'. This took place in a bland university teaching room, the screening simply being the playing of a DVD of the film on a television set. I had seen the film on TV years before and had, therefore, a working knowledge of the period it was set in, the characters and the actors. Any residual knowledge of the theme(s) of the film however, had long since dissipated. We were seated in a rough semi-circle around the TV, with the window blinds drawn. A few shafts of light picked their way through the attempted obstruction and fell across the desks. I cannot remember the exact timing but, at some point in the screening, I was absently scribbling some notes relating to the plot – the theme of leaving home and the potential ramifications for the film's characters was uppermost in my mind – a phrase popped into my head; 'goodbye to home', I wrote it down.

The songwriting process

Which comes first, the tune or the lyrics? In my experience, it can be either. Noodling on the guitar can result in a riff or chord progression that excites and demands development into something more. Alternatively, an overheard conversation, a random phrase resulting from a situation or a pleasing juxtaposition of words can suggest potential for a lyric. I've read that some songwriters describe themselves as passive in the creation of a new song – that the song already existed and they were simply the vessel that allowed the words and music to come into being. Personally, I do not subscribe to this phenomenon, although I am loath to dismiss it out of hand. For me, songwriting has always involved an element of hard work, often resulting in something unfinished or unsatisfactory, where the original spark of creativity refuses to be transformed into something more substantial.

In this particular case, the line 'goodbye to home' immediately suggested a melody, which was further extended by the addition of the second line of the verse – 'to all I've ever known'. I cannot be exact in my recollection of how the lyric for the opening verse developed: I know that it was completed relatively quickly, which is unusual for me, and my working theory for this is that the film influenced the narrative of the lyric, giving me some raw material to play with. I remember speaking to a colleague about writing the song and remarking that I completed the lyrics while walking our dogs on the evening of the original screening of the film at Write Club.

As previously noted, I was already thinking about the theme of leaving home that underpins the film and this undoubtedly contributed to the opening verse. The second verse also draws upon the setting of the film, particularly the 'drive in' haunts that are a feature of both *American Graffiti* and the television series 'Happy Days,' which is set in the same era (and which features actors who performed in the film). The desire for a better life away from home, and the realisation that some cannot escape, concludes the second verse, which to an extent, is invention, as the film does not provide any clues as to the future of the characters. It does, however, suggest tensions at play that influence such decisions and that neither outcome might be positive.

The expectations of popular songs, or even constraints, impact upon the writing process. Our expectation is that there will be verses, a chorus that repeats and perhaps a middle eight and/or an instrumental break. I already knew that the film would influence the 'sound' of the song i.e. that the instrumentation would evoke the period setting. The melody suggested an Everly Brothers' close harmony ballad and this informed the writing of the 'break' section of the song – I had in my mind songs such as 'Till I Kissed Her' and 'Cathy's Clown', where the close harmony verses give way to a solo voice middle eight.

A further element that characterises many pop songs is repetition: this can include musical motifs, structural elements such as choruses or even repetition of verses. GTH makes full use of this device by repeating the middle eight and utilising the opening verse as the concluding verse. I could claim that this was deliberate, but in truth, the song just happened to feel 'complete' in this form.

The finished recording does not reflect these initial aims, but this is probably more a result of my limitations as a musician and vocalist – I realised very quickly that I was not going to be able to replicate Phil and Don – and so, while I hope the recorded piece retains a period feel, it does not sound like the song I could hear in my head when the structure was initially completed.

Recording

While the actual writing of the song was completed swiftly, I did not get around to recording it for some time. I do not claim to be proficient in the use of home recording equipment and finding a drum beat that I felt suited the sound I was looking for took an age. However, once the drum track had been identified and laid down, overlaying the bass guitar, acoustic and electric guitars was relatively straight - forward. I am not a great fan of my own voice so recording the vocal tracks took a little longer and, in retrospect, I think I could have done a better job or, alternatively, recruited an actual vocalist!

As I note above, my intention of making the song 'heavily Everly' did not come to fruition and the tempo of the song changed from a keening ballad into a brisker country/rock 'n' roll feel. It puts me in mind of the 'B' sides that I listened to as a youngster, rifling through my brother's collection of British beat boom singles; the ones where the band had an opportunity to record one of their self-penned numbers, but were constrained by time and the technology of the time.

The completed recording was 'road tested' on a couple of colleagues with experience of both playing in bands and song writing and subsequently shared with the Write Club members. I felt more nervous about sharing GTH than I had about previously contributing written pieces to the group: an indication again perhaps, of my own insecurities about my abilities as both a songwriter and performer. I do not identify as a writer either, but am much more comfortable in that particular medium.



Scan the QR Code to listen to *Goodbye to Home* by Dave Kane.

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Concluding thoughts

In many ways, the creation of GTH bears similarities with my previous songwriting practice. Often, I hear or read a phrase that I find interesting, and it becomes the starting point for a lyric in search of a melody. Alternatively, a musical idea or riff suggests a mood and lyrics are written that fit the musical identity. Where GTH differs is that the style of the song was very much influenced by American Graffiti, both lyrically and musically. I have not attempted to repeat this particular process i.e. create a song from watching a film and wonder if it would actually bear fruit. I suspect it would not and that the pressure of trying to recreate the process would ultimately lead to disappointment.

However, the premise of Write Club is to create something from a prompt, something that I understand when committing words to paper. Is writing a song really that different? For me, I would have to say that yes, writing a song is different. I view GTH as a happy accident, a combination of circumstances that led me to be in the right place at the right time. Perhaps that's where songs really do come from.

Dave Kane was a researcher in the Social Research and Evaluation Unit (SREU) at Birmingham City University before retiring in 2022. Dave has been fascinated by pop music since discovering his brother's collection of 1960's singles at a tender age: his MPhil investigated how music fans organise online resources devoted to their object of fandom, and he previously investigated community experiences of popular music in his home city of Birmingham. In his spare time, Dave plays guitar, writes songs and escapes into the countryside on his motorcycle.

