



Tips On Songwriting Collaboration

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It is said that a great song is a seamless marriage of words and music. If written by more than one person, the song is a merged work that they share forever. In the best of all possible worlds, the collaboration is a seamless marriage as well. But like all marriages, it's got its pitfalls! Here are some things you might consider. And a collaboration agreement (the old pre-nup!), which might also include how to *unmerge* an unsatisfactory "song," (as in, you'll keep your words, I'll keep my music) is highly recommended after you do.

- It's a good idea to know with whom you are collaborating in terms of being familiar with his style, his strengths and weaknesses, and his goals. You want to get a good chemistry going. I find it very helpful to begin with a session during which you play each other your songs, try to find some common ground, get an idea of the ways you can enhance each other's talents, and discuss where you want to go with it. And it sure helps if you like each other.
- "Where you want to go with it" can vary widely, so clear communication at the beginning of a collaborative relationship can go a long way toward avoiding any misunderstandings later. If your collaborator is going for an artist deal, she may want to have more creative control. Are you cool with that? If you're both looking to place songs with other artists, you might want to discuss how to approach it, i.e. do you want to write songs that move you, and then try to find appropriate artists? Do either of you know of artists who are looking for material toward whom you'd like to gear your writing? Do you want to focus on a particular genre? Are you writing purely for the love of it, or are you highly motivated in the commercial realm? How you both answer questions such as these will give you a good idea about whether you're in the same camp.
- You might want to discuss your relative timeframes. Some writers work with many collaborators at once, so their time may be more limited and the project more drawn out than, say, a writer who likes to concentrate on one project at a time and get it done. Frustration can ensue!
- Be clear with each other from the getgo about how you will handle copyright issues. Equal division is the norm, and I find it creates the easiest working relationships. However, any deviations from that norm should be discussed upfront. True, one of you may not realize until the song has been written that you feel an equal split isn't fair. But if you might want to work on that basis, tell the other person that you may want to bring it up for discussion later in such a case. I have had several experiences with collaborators/artists who brought in demo producers and assumed I knew the producer would be getting a third of the copyright. I was much more appreciative when an artist with whom I was beginning to work told me at our first meeting that she wanted to give a third to the demo producer to hold down costs, and was that okay with me.
- Ditto being clear re costs for demo production, marketing, etc. Demo production costs are usually split, but there may be extenuating circumstances. For example, if an artist wants creative control of the demo product, perhaps he should pay more for that privilege. But maybe not. Just do bring it up early on if you think so. Marketing, it seems to me, is a stickier issue. I had a collaborator who wanted me to share the costs she incurred while trying to pitch our songs. At one point she felt that because she was pitching so much more aggressively than I was, I should give her part of my publishing. We had not initially agreed upon any of this (nor would I have), and so we both ended up feeling a bit resentful and taken advantage of. Although the collaboration worked well creatively, our different approaches to the business side of things eventually ended it. I don't think there's a right or wrong to this, but the issues should be discussed and mutually agreed upon at the beginning.
- It's key both to maintain a strong voice of your own *and* be open to the strong voice of your partner. After all, that's why you're working together. But disagreements, of course, will occur, and they can run the gamut in terms of import and intensity. Again, there's no right or wrong because it's usually a creative call. As with any relationship, choose your

issues wisely. Be considerate and discreet, not overbearing. Compromise. Try alternatives. Find something better! My father, who was a songwriter, and his partner had a blanket agreement that if either one said no to something, they had to come up with something else instead. In other words, they agreed that they had to agree. But that was them. Every relationship is different. Just keep remembering that a collaboration *is* a relationship, with a full spectrum of creative, personal, and business aspects, and that's not always as seamless as it might seem!



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