

How (or to what extent) is collaboration important in the pop songwriting domain?

By Abby Lee-Harder

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Introduction

The pop music domain is an unusual one, a market driven by consumers but full of music creators who want to be known and taken seriously for making authentic and valuable art. Collaborations in both the field of songwriting and performing (ie duets) have a long history in pop music, but how do collaborations affect a song's outcome and its potential to be commercially successful? This research will offer a definition of pop music and discuss how collaboration has become central to producing it. This dissertation will investigate the benefits and disadvantages of collaboration and how collaboration itself has evolved. It will also identify through ethnographic and auto ethnographic research, what is important to pop music practitioners when it comes to collaboration and will analyse how some common methods of collaboration are used in my own collaborative practice. Finally, it will look into collaborative performances and the legalities of rights and expectations when songwriting and performing with others.

Top 40

“Pop” music by definition is music that is “popular”, a sound that is being streamed the most on digital streaming platforms such as Apple Music and Spotify and played on commercial “pop” radio stations on high rotation (Hartse, 2022). In most cases, placing on a Top 40 chart for your territory i.e. Billboard in the United States or Recorded Music in New Zealand is a good indicator of what music is considered popular. As Bennett (2014) points out, while the 'top 40' and equivalent charts are reliable sources for some sort of popularity metric; by quantifying sales and streaming data, they tell us little about the creative process. The following research will uncover how collaboration fits into this creative process with one of the aims being to investigate the relationship between the creative process and popular success.

A significant factor in a song's popularity is how much radio play it gets (particularly on radio stations that focus on Top 40 songs). Seabrook (2015) explains in his book “The Song Machine” that Top 40 radio was only invented in the early 50’s. The operator and program director of KOWH, an AM radio station in Nebraska noticed that waitresses at a restaurant across the road from their work were listening to the same songs every day on a jukebox controlled by patrons. Once their customers left and the waitresses were given access to the jukebox, they were still

choosing to listen to the same songs. This was in direct contradiction with the ‘gospel’ of the time where it was thought that listeners would resent hearing the same song twice in one day. KOWH adopted a model of high rotation for the most popular songs and their ratings soared. These days, while streaming services give some power and control to the listener over what they are listening to, curated playlists with thousands of subscribers still have an influence. The more popular a song, the more playlists it is added to.

Top 40 Today

If we look at what pop music sounds like today and how it is created, we can see how there are now far more options on how to collaborate and who to collaborate with. The way that songs are composed, recorded and eventually released all rely heavily on the technology that is now readily available for soloists and collaborators alike. “Today's Top Forty is almost always machine-made: lush sonic landscapes of beats, loops, and synths in which all the sounds have square edges and shiny surfaces, the voices are Auto-Tuned for pitch, and there are no mistakes” (Seabrook, 2012, p.3).

The evolution of how music is created is seen further where Seabrook (2012) is observing a collaborative songwriting session with Norwegian Pop producing duo Stargate and top liner Esther Dean. He notes that in the professional recording studio where they are working (built only 5 years prior to his observation), a 64 channel mixing desk sat idle in the room, like a relic from another time while the producers tapped and clicked away on their computers using the software Pro Tools.

In this day and age, you no longer need to be an accomplished instrumentalist to compose music, all you need is access to a laptop and software like Logic Pro or Pro Tools where libraries of sounds and instruments are available to you with the click of a mouse (Caputo, 2021).

With the help of digital technology, the way that pop music collaborations can occur has also evolved dramatically. It is common for people to work on a song, either writing or recording, together without being in the same physical space (Pietrzak, 2021; Thorley, 2022). The days of factories such as the physical Brill Building of the 1960’s where songwriters (eg. Goffin & King)

were employed to churn out pop songs are no longer common. The costly overheads of running a physical recording studio can be saved. Rather there are “virtual brill buildings” where professional hitmakers (not necessarily on the same team) can create and collaborate (Seabrook, 2015). Audio files are shared online and collaborators need not be in the same country let alone the same room. While collaborating in person is still preferred by some, it is not necessary (Wilsmore & Johnson, 2022). Thirty years ago, not only would collaborators have had to be in the same studio, but there were far more restrictions on studio time, studio resources and people involved eg. session musicians. The logistics of getting everyone in the same room at the same time are no longer a barrier (Thorley, 2022).

While most of my research for this project has happened out of our home studio (same space/location), audio files being sent via email back and forth between collaborators is very common in my personal practice. It is also useful to acknowledge other collaborative methods as the tools and methods used can crossover.

Pop Music Collaborations

Where do collaborations in the pop music domain both in terms of songwriting and recording belong now? They have become more of a rule than an exception. In October 2015, MusicWorld posted

At the time this article was written, every song in the top-10 on Billboard’s Pop, Country, Christian, and R&B/Hip-Hop charts was the result of collaboration. Out of forty top10 hits, zero were created by a solo writer. I’m not insinuating that successful songs are never written by one writer; BMI Icon Dolly Parton wrote the majority of her songs by herself, Michael Jackson was the sole writer of “Beat It” and Billie Jean,” and more recently Hozier was the sole writer of his GRAMMY-nominated “Take Me to Church.” But these are not typical. (Blume, 2015, ¶1)

This contrasts with the last six decades where Pettijohn and Ahmed (2010) found that collaborative songwriting teams and solo songwriters were responsible for an equal amount of number one hits when looking at Billboard number one charting songs in the US/UK from 1955-2009. The scale that once showed an equal balance of songs written by one person versus collaborators, now shows that collaborations far outweigh solo songwriters when it comes to the

pop music domain. One reason for this could be that producers and songwriters are now being correctly credited for their involvement with a song's creation.

This leads me to these questions: What are some compositional methods and strategies commonly used in collaboration and how can these be used to create a successful song? What makes a good collaborative relationship? What are the advantages and disadvantages of collaboration? My husband Vince Harder and I have been a part of the New Zealand music industry for 20 years and have had different experiences writing; solo, with each other, and with other songwriters. I decided to work on a collaborative album with Vince, exploring some of these questions and methods as well as doing some ethnographic and auto ethnographic research to investigate these questions further. I interviewed practitioners in New Zealand that have had successful outcomes in the pop music domain through collaboration both as songwriters and as performers. My interviewees included Stan Walker, recording artist, songwriter and Australian Idol 2009 winner; Kings, rapper, songwriter, producer and CEO of his independent record label "Archangel Records"; Ron LaPread musician, songwriter and an original member of the band "The Commodores"; Josh Fountain songwriter, producer (Benee) and artist (Leisure); and finally Kimbra, a two time Grammy Award Winning Recording Artist, songwriter and producer. These interviews enabled 'voicing' (Toynbee, 2003) of the creative and collaborative processes involved in songwriting, producing and performing.

What are some compositional methods and strategies commonly used in collaboration?

The collaborative songwriting process is difficult to generalise as it can be very individual, however, Bennett (2011) has summarised some models of collaboration that Vince and I have experimented with, although not all of these were able to be replicated, I wanted to "test" them out. I was interested to see if one process was preferred by us and if one process came out as the more successful tool in our collaborative songwriting relationship.

Bennett's models include:

Nashville - Acoustic instruments used with minimal technology – a 'pen and paper' approach, no clearly defined roles.

Factory - A geographical location with staff songwriters, songwriting is on a timeframe.

‘Factories’ may use parts of the other models and are studio based. Example the Brill Building.

Svengali - The artist is also a co-writer, Typically the other co-writers are more experienced and do the lion's share of the writing.

Demarcation - Writers roles are clearly defined - do not need to be in the same room eg. one writes track only, one writes melody & lyric - ideas are not discussed.

Jamming - Writing ensues when inspiration hits, writers bring ideas to start ie. riffs, melodies, lyrics. Song builds organically.

Top-Line Writing - a track is provided to another writer to create lyric & melody, decisions are made together around final recordings.

Asynchronicity - writers work separately but iteratively, with no clear roles defined. Can be done remotely (Bennett, 2011).

Apart from “Factory” and “Svengali” we were able to experiment with the other models in our home studio with the goal of writing a contemporary pop album. We decided on contemporary pop as it would be a blend of the genres we usually perform in, mine being singer-songwriter and Vince’s being Modern R&B, however we have both crossed over to pop throughout our individual and joint work in the past. In the methodology section of this dissertation, I will give an overview of the models that we used and which ones we found most effective.

While Bennett gives us some practical starting points and tools for collaborative songwriting, it is important to also recognise the relationship between Vince and I, we are not just two songwriters who have no other allegiance to each other once a song has been released. Therefore, I feel the addition of John-Steiner’s (2000) four “patterns of collaboration” are relevant here. These give some broader models of collaborating through creative practice (not just songwriting) and outline the relationship and goals in different collaborations. These patterns are Integrative, Family, Complementary, and Distributed. The Integrative pattern is based on joint endeavours where collaborations are created and built upon to try and reach transformative change. The

Family pattern is where collaborations occur in familial relationships (life partners being one such relationship) where there is a sense of belonging, companionship and mutual obligation which serves in any conflict resolution that may arise as a result of the collaboration. There is also a focus on the shifting of roles and responsibilities over time. The Complementary Pattern lies with collaborators who have complementary skills including expertise, knowledge and temperament. These skills are recognised and utilised to achieve a common goal. Finally the Distributed Pattern happens when ideas and practices are shared in loose networks or communities and may be utilised by individuals or separate groups.

For the purposes of my research, we would be working under the Family pattern as it gives some insight into how couples are able to work and collaborate together successfully. We knew making this album would be a challenge, but having released some pop music together previously, it was a challenge we were both willing to undertake. When writing about creative collaborations between spouses/significant others John-Steiner (2000) notes that there is a delicate balance required of intimate partnerships between depending on each other and keeping your own individuality.

What Makes a Good Collaborative Relationship?

Wanting to leave this project with our marriage intact, I was investigating aspects of collaborative relationships that practitioners enjoy and value. One big theme that kept presenting itself in both my interviews and research for this project, is that there has to be an initial “vibe” and connection with your co-writer/co-performer that leads to trust. Mallett (2018) states “Within any collaboration, the initial stages of a project will include a period of establishing scope, roles and responsibilities, as well as gaining an understanding of the motivating factors for working together.”

Each one of my interviewees also touched on this as part of their collaborative process as mentioned in the below quotes:

“.....you're essentially going to share a bit of your soul with that person. So you have to feel comfortable enough to be able to do that,there has to be that level of that trust.” - Stan Walker

“.... I think vibe is more important than anything, if you don’t click with the person I don’t think songs are ever gonna come out decent.” - Kings

“.....Do it with somebody you like and respect...you must do that.... You believe that they are intelligent enough to help you...everything you get, you gotta give a little.” - Ron La Pread

“.... We’ve managed to... have an environment where everyone feels free to suggest ideas without fear of being shot down or like, it’s a real safe space to ’do’ ideas... we know each other so well that it’s not like these guys are going to think that I suck just because I sent through a bad idea.” - Josh Fountain

“....I love collaborations where you get to spend a lot of time trying different ideas and develop(ing) a soulful connection to each other as humans - this will then translate into the performances/songwriting.” -Kimbra

Most of the above songwriters start their collaborative process with an initial meeting or “scoping phase” before they even enter a studio or musical project together.

The interviewees spoke about trust, connection, respect and feeling safe, this support is especially important for those in the creative arts as their work can be very unpredictable. In contrast to other fields of work which provide more security, artists have to use every facet of their resources to finish projects and reach goals. “A life devoted to creative work in the arts is insecure. In contrast to academics who can rely on an institutionally organised work environment, most artists have to mobilise personal, emotional, and financial resources in order to fulfil their objectives. Central to meeting such a challenge is belief in oneself and one’s talent. Such a belief is seldom built without the support of mentors, personal partners, family, and friends” (John-Steiner, 2000 p.79).

While working towards this research project, it has been made clear that in order to get to a space of vulnerability where you are free to create, and create authentically, you must feel comfortable

with your co-writer. This supports findings of other researchers such as Bennett (2011), Henry (2004), Khodyakov (2007), Mollering (2005), Moran and John-Steiner (2004) and Sawyer (2001).

Our Collaborative Relationship

In the relationship between Vince and I, there are a few different dynamics. We are husband and wife, male & female, usually Vince is the producer and I am the co-writer. This is the first project where I have also co-produced the work.

John-Steiner says of more experimental and innovative projects, that the experience can present itself as less daunting compared to if it was an individual project as there is a spreading of risk. This shared work experience can cause the participants to have a renewed sense of purpose and an emotional connection to their collaborator (John-Steiner, 2000). Where Wilmore and Johnson (2022) say that there are many reasons to undertake co-production including the sparking of ideas and the potential for greater success.

While success is a motivating factor, I have observed in the past that because Vince and I are very comfortable with each other, the courtesies that we afford other collaborators sometimes are not given. We tend to have less tolerance for mistakes and less patience in explaining ideas that we would have had if we were working with someone who wasn't our spouse. In a study of language style matching between couples, it was found that initially couples start to mimic each other as they become more invested in the relationship, then once they feel more comfortable, they start to divert back to their old ways (Phlegar, 2023).

This being said, the benefit of working together is that we know each other's strengths and weaknesses so well, that there is a level of the collaborative process that doesn't need to be spoken. Phil Harding (2010) one of the pillars of music making at PWL studios states "There's something unique about working partnerships where you get to the point where you know what each other are doing and thinking without verbal communication. In other words, a telepathic understanding where you get on with creating what you feel is right" (p.129).

Because we were aware of the danger of being too comfortable, we made a conscious decision to try and be as respectful and polite with each other as we would other collaborators. Most days,

we succeeded. There needs to be a deliberate effort when it comes to navigating emotional labour and social relations, this can take up considerable time. It is important that these issues are worked through as the collaborative creative process is tightly linked to emotions (Barna, 2022).

We know that the emotional support of collaborators is important but what about the technical aspects of songwriting collaboratively? Bennett (2011), contends that there are some creative constraints that are typical of pop music (Curl, 2021; Theel & Sydow, 2023) and that pop songwriting collaborators should have an implicit understanding of these “norms”. The constraints should not need to be explained to their co-writer. Some of these constraints include: repeating titular choruses, rhyme – usually at the end of lyric phrases, an instrumental introduction of less than 20 seconds, the song title is somewhere in the lyrics, and the song is between 2 and 4 minutes in length. There are other constraints noted by Bennett, however these are the ones that stood out to me as a ‘given’ in Pop songwriting.

It is argued by Bennett that having this “framework” or these constraints in place can lead to a more creative and original songwriting opportunity. Composer Igor Stravinsky (1942) writes that the more constraints and boundaries one imposes on oneself, the more freedom they have, and that said freedom is greater and more meaningful than if those constraints and boundaries had not been in place. So if you are able to foster an environment with your collaborator of trust, vulnerability, where ideas are sparked and there is an understanding of the creative constraints of pop music, there is potential for a superior song.

It seems that the effort required for effective songwriting collaborations can lead to a sense of unity.

What are the disadvantages and advantages of collaboration in music?

Why do people choose to collaborate when there are so many variables to consider when finding the right collaborator to reach that level of skill and vulnerability, or as Pettijohn and Ahmed (2010) ask “Do groups, with their shared areas of expertise, create better songs than individuals working alone? Do songwriting individuals have to compromise their visions when working in groups, thereby producing a lower quality song?” (p.2)

When thinking about one of the greatest pop songwriting partnerships of all time, John Lennon and Paul McCartney, Jackson and Padgett (1982) suggest that as McCartney and Lennon grew apart, their reduced cohesiveness and varying viewpoints could have created a desire for greater individuality. However, like McIntyre and Thompson (2021) I think most people would say that Lennon and McCartney were better together.

Another study, Simonton (2000) looked into operas and composers who wrote libretti both individually and collaboratively and found that operas were more successful when composers wrote their own libretti.

Kings had an interesting answer around efficiency of working independently, as he is a writer, producer and artist he had this to say:

“...for me I work really quick. So I can get a song in like two hours, finished, mixed, mastered, ready to go on spotify I’ll be like “I have this idea” and then it will take maybe a day or two with someone else where I can do it in an hour or two”.

Ron La Pread also talked about the simplicity of songwriting individually from a credit and royalty perspective saying: “My preferred process is to do it myself, because there are so many ways that you can be involved with another writer..... It all depends on what you negotiate with them, how you talk to them in the beginning, what the understanding is....”

On the other hand Beckman and Graves (1997) contend collaborative music-making is not just used for developing and exchanging musical ideas but also for developing musical skills. Sutherland (2015) has similar sentiments in that collaborations can be motivational through “the meeting of creative minds” (p.1642) despite any difficulties that may occur. DeVries (2005) supports this with the idea that without more than one party involved, you lose the opportunity to create a superior song that collaboration through songwriting can lead to. Bennett (2012) speculates that co-writing helps individuals to reach a point of creative flow “through a mutually supportive but workman like creative environment” (p.166) and that co-writers can act as a test audience for any ideas that can impact the decision making process.

Most of the people I interviewed for this project indicated that they preferred to work in

collaboration, Stan Walker, says when asked what his preference is, “I (prefer) collaboration. I like the mind of somebody else ...I love being able to tap into somebody else’s brain to activate something that doesn’t exist or is dormant in mine”.

Kings offers further “... I have a lot more fun..., when I’m with people. When I’m by myself it’s all mahi and I still love it. I have fun, but nowhere near as fun as kicking it with other people”.

This gives us some insight into reasons for and against collaborative music making and whether collaboration actually leads to better songs. I would further add from my own personal research and interviews, while creating music individually can be a simpler, less complicated and sometimes faster process, collaborative music making can lead to a more rewarding, more enjoyable and potentially more successful outcome. I surmise that this is because two heads are better than one when it comes to fostering an environment where it is safe to experiment with ideas/concepts and that the ideas/concepts are made stronger with another opinion.

Methodology

Vince and I initially thought a good way to approach our contemporary pop album would be to test out Bennett's (2011) models. We would start by deciding on one model to use, the decision was based on how much time and resource we had available at the designated studio session and then to analyse some key moments during the session.

We very quickly realised that this method was not very efficient and that our particular collaborative style and process requires us to be more present and that the constraints put in place to stick to one model were not conducive to a creative and productive environment. Our songwriting/recording process is fluid and merges Bennett’s models constantly. This is not to say that it would not work for other collaborative arrangements but the way that Vince and I work, it was detrimental to the music we were trying to create.

An example of how restrictive we found the initial method is when trying to practically apply Bennett’s model of Demarcation, where roles are clearly defined but ideas are not discussed, it started out well for us as it was a rather organic process. Playing to our strengths, I would be focused on lyrics and melody while Vince created the chord progressions and proceeded to build

the instrumental track. However, we did not get very far through the recording process of the song without needing the other person's opinion and our individual ideas definitely needed discussion. When Vince heard the lyrics I had written, we had to negotiate on changing certain words or sentences as it did not feel authentic to him. As he would also be performing the lyrics, we went backwards and forwards over the right words and execution to still get the same message across while using language and delivery that was appropriate to both of us as artists. If we had strictly stuck to the model of Demarcation, we would not have had an end result that pleased us both.

That being said, the models of Demarcation, Asynchronicity, Top Lining & Jamming happen almost automatically for us. We know that I naturally focus more on melody and lyrics which frees Vince up to focus on instrumentation falling right into Demarcation or Asynchronicity where we spend time working separately sometimes discussing ideas. Where a track idea has already been created, Top Lining is enacted first. We finish the songs by coming back together for final decisions and often this is where Jamming occurs. We play around with ideas for production, backing vocals and ad-libs. These are the processes that resonate the most with our songwriting and recording process. We also use the Nashville model, usually by developing ideas with a guitar, melody then lyrics. We tend to record these ideas into a phone so we can lay the idea down in the studio at a later date but for this project it was not used as commonly as the previous four models mentioned. This is because we use the Nashville model spontaneously when we are not expecting to be songwriting but inspiration arises. We may not have the studio available but we often have a guitar and our phones available. For the album we were consciously allocating time in the studio therefore we had the other resources of Logic Pro, instruments, microphones and laptops ready and the song ideas weren't necessarily spontaneous.

There is a time and a place for all of Bennett's models to be used as tools, but we found that crossover needed to happen. A more efficient method of recording our research was to go into a recording session, and on reflection, analyse what had occurred. We asked ourselves, which of Bennett's models did we use? How long did it take us to finish the demo? I noted down how we felt about what we had written and anything that we found interesting about the song.

A more broad model that Bennett writes about is six interacting and non linear processes of

stimulus, approval, adaptation, negotiation, veto and consensus that occur in studio songwriting sessions (Bennett, 2011) - these seem to be more in line with how Vince and I create music. When songwriting together we often get inspired by a chord progression (stimulus) that we both want to work with (approval and consensus). We come up with ideas, either independently or together, on melody and lyrics which are then vetoed, adapted, negotiated or approved by the other person. This in turn creates more stimulus and these processes repeat (in no particular order) until we have created a song that reaches mutual approval and consensus. These processes occur no matter which one of Bennett's summarised models (ie. Demarcation, Jamming, Asynchronicity etc) are being utilized.

Successful Outcome

Once we had finished recording our songs, we faced the challenge of coming up with some sort of measure of what a "successful outcome" of a songwriting session is. At the time of writing this, my intention was to commercially release the album we are writing, however this won't be done until after my research period has ended. This means I won't have streaming numbers or charting positions to quantify which songs have been the most commercially successful, so part of the reflective analysis has also been identifying positive/negative outcomes and how these relate to the models used.

In order to gather more information, this became a question for my interviewees:

How do you measure whether a songwriting session has been successful or not?

Answers:

"...if I go away remembering the song, and it hit me different and I go home and talk about it, ...it might not even be a song that sees the light of day, but for me as a creative person, that moment in time was a beautiful creative outlet that I felt like I got to pour out and get filled up at the same time" - Stan Walker

"..... that probably will just come down to a feel thing aye, like after the song is made if you're listening to it or if you NEED to listen to it on the way home that's probably a good indicator it went well...." - Kings

“The success is in manifesting something out of nothing, regardless of where it goes!” - Kimbra

It is apparent that economic success does not seem to be what the interviewees are chasing, however as they have all tasted commercial success, I’m sure it is a motivating factor for continuing to make music and attempting to replicate that success. That being said, when they are looking at the songwriting/recording session in isolation, it’s more about how it makes them feel and how satisfying the process was.

Taking this on board, the analytical process after our songwriting/recording sessions for this project involved asking ourselves the following questions: Are we happy with the song on completion? Are we happy with the song after one week?

The interviewees also indicated that sometimes space/time between listening to a song is a reliable gauge if a song still evokes the same feeling as when it was first created. Toulson and Burgess (2017) refer to this period, where a song has been recorded but it is still being reviewed, as a “critical appraisal process” (p.8).

We also sent the final ten songs we had written out to our peers in the Pop music domain to get some feedback both on the songs as a whole, and which ones they liked the most. We used our individual analysis and the feedback from our peers as a metric to quantify which songs were considered to have the most “successful” outcome. Listeners consciously and unconsciously weave their value judgments through their feedback and conversations about the music we engage with (Lipscombe, 2015).

Taking the feedback from our peers plus Vince and my own individual thoughts and feelings into account, we discovered that of Bennett’s (2011) seven summarised models, three stood out as the most successful for this project. We came to this conclusion by asking our peers and ourselves to pick three favourite songs from the album, then by using a majority rules approach, we looked at which models were used in the the top picks and the models that were used most consistently were Demarcation, Top Line Writing and Asynchronicity.

Performance Collaboration

As well as collaborating on the songwriting aspect of these songs, I was also investigating

performance collaboration seen in the upward trend of featured artists in the pop music domain. It is not uncommon to see high profile pop artists teaming up with other recording artists for a single. For example Ariana Grande & Justin Bieber had a joint release with “Stuck with U”, as did Billie Eilish & Khalid with “Lovely”. At the time of writing (December 2023), eight of the songs in New Zealand’s Recorded Music Top 40 chart either feature or are a joint release of two or more artists. According to the Economist, published in February 2018, over a third of the songs in the Billboard Hot 100 at the time were collaborations. Of the top 10 songs, half of them were credited to more than one artist (Economist, 2018). The Billboard Hot 100 is a weekly ranking of the most popular songs in the US.

With this in mind, it is fair to say that recording artists featuring on each other's songs is now a common practice. How do artists negotiate terms that are fair to all parties? If a song has already been written and an artist is going to feature on that song, are they just a glorified session musician singing somebody else’s melody and lyrics? Or is there something in their vocal delivery that adds value to the song, and if so what credit should be given if it is not given via songwriting splits. “...recordings carry meaning...beyond that which is encoded by the songwriter” (Bennett, 2014, p.10).

When asked about featuring artists on songs he is producing and giving them a songwriting percentage, Kings says “if they kinda just came in and hit it as a session musician, then I’d probably just pay them a fee and be like, “Thanks for your voice” but if they came in and were like adding value like other than their voice, like actually participating, then yeah, I feel like that’s fair.”

After further conversation with Kings, I can confirm that “participating” means contributing to melody and lyrics, or giving ideas on arrangements.

In my experience the producer usually creates the sounds surrounding the vocal lines and often 50% songwriting split goes to lyrics and melody and 50% goes to track production. It can be difficult to clarify terms, as producers or co-writers can have different expectations or a different understanding of what each party is entitled to. I have heard of other scenarios through Vince where the expectation is that whoever is in the room when a song is being created gets a

percentage of the songwriting credit even if their contribution is minimal. An example of this is in Stan Walker's song "Messages" which was written with a group of seven people (including Vince) in Los Angeles, his contribution to the song was only one line but he was still given a 5% of the songwriting credit.

There doesn't seem to be one rule or a clear definition of what elements constitute which credit. McIntyre (2001) says of defining a "song" and its contributing elements:

When a precise and workable definition for the thousands of musical works heard on the radio, on CD, and in film, is sought, this supposedly solid entity becomes decidedly slippery and abstract. Copyright law won't tell us precisely. The Anglo-American based popular music industry that depends on those copyright laws guards its rights tightly in relation to songwriting and there are indications that the audiences for songs also have a wide ranging concept of what may constitute a song. Importantly, musicians who deal with songs every day usually work with an assumed but increasingly elastic definition. (p.101)

Sutherland (2015) notes that not only has collaboration got a variety of meanings, but that there is a gap when it comes to musical performance collaboration. It is an interesting topic as there doesn't seem to be a lot of academic writing on collaborative recordings and performances especially in comparison to collaborative songwriting. It is therefore difficult to come up with a definite answer on whether collaborating on a performance should result in songwriting credit.

A contributing factor to the lack of academic writing on this topic could be that the two processes of songwriting and recording are not necessarily separate. Given the way that technology allows songs to be created today, it is not uncommon for songwriting and recording to occur at the same time. For example you could write a verse and then record it, then write a pre-chorus and record that idea and so on, adding to and changing the recording in real time as you are writing. This blurs the lines of the two processes and creates a hybrid process where songwriting and recording is a part of the same creative process (O'Grady, 2016). In this instance, if a person is involved in the development of a song, I would expect that a songwriting credit would be appropriate.

I thought Kimbra would be the best person to talk to about this as her Global hit “Somebody That I Used To Know” won her the award for “Best Pop Duo/Group Performance” at the 55th Grammy Awards in 2013, yet she holds no songwriting credit on the song. The song's sole songwriter/producer Wally De Backer (2011) tried another female vocalist on it, but Kimbra’s performance was ultimately what they decided on. This suggests that there was something in Kimbra’s vocal delivery that another artist was not able to add. I asked Kimbra whether she thought there was value in singing somebody else’s song and how credit can be given:

“Definitely. You have to get inside their brain and where they were in their life at the time. You have to listen to what the song wants and let the other artist guide you toward a vision while also bringing your own personality... I love the challenge of this... This contribution can be honoured in different ways but probably most commonly through a royalty on the master rather than a writing percentage.” - Kimbra

It is unclear for “Somebody That I Used To Know” what the specific arrangement was for Kimbra but it does highlight the importance of knowing what rights are available to you when collaborating with others.

Legal Agreements

This brings us to “Agreements” and how the collaborative relationship can impact the ease of which these agreements are met. At some point, when a song is going to be released, and there has been more than one person involved in either the songwriting, recording (or a hybrid of the two), a conversation needs to be had over both songwriting and master splits.

There are two types of royalties to consider when looking at the terms of an agreement.

Publishing refers to the composing/writing of the song. The term hasn’t changed since the 1800’s where sheet music of compositions was printed and distributed for other people to learn how to play/perform the song. In her book “Steal This Music” Demers (2006) explains that in 1831, legislation was updated for statutory protection for music publishers, up until then, sheet music was included under the broad term “books”.

While sheet music isn’t usually distributed these days, the term has stuck and it still encompasses all rights related to songwriting. Income from publishing most commonly comes through

performance royalties collected and distributed by Performing Rights Organisations (PRO). For example if a song is played on radio, television or as part of a live performance, the PRO will collect the royalties due to the songwriter/s, and then distribute the royalties to the author/composers usually every quarter. The other source of income comes through synchronisation licences, this is where a song is used in an advertisement, television show or movie.

Master refers to the master recording, the final version of the song that is released, played on radio and available on digital streaming platforms. This is traditionally where major labels have an investment and where they can earn money. Income from the Master most commonly comes from song sales and streams. Demers (2006) explains that in the United States, intellectual property laws were a few decades late when they finally passed the Sound Recording Act of 1971 that provided federal protection for all sound recordings regardless of the media they were distributed on.

If someone re-records a cover of a song, this creates a new Master but the Publishing remains the same and stays with the original songwriters. However if someone wants to use this recording (even in the form of a sample), another licensing agreement from the Master rights owner is needed (Demers, 2006). It is not uncommon for negotiations on the ownership of Master recordings (especially in New Zealand and between independent artists) to occur in collaborations where performance or producer fees are not paid upfront.

Most commonly, I have been part of collaborations where there are two people involved, usually myself as the recording artist and the producer. In these instances 50% of the publishing has gone to myself and 50% has gone to the producer. Where the songs have been released independently I have retained 97% of the Master with 3% going to the producer. Where a label has been involved the Master splits depend on the contract terms, but usually the majority share goes to the label and the artists percentage of the master only gets paid out when any financial investment (eg. producer fee) from the label has been recouped.

In the instances where I have acted solely as a songwriter for other recording artists, the songwriting splits are usually shared equally among the people involved with the song writing process. No master rights have been allocated to me in these situations.

I have also been asked to feature on songs as a vocalist for some tracks that have already been written, in these instances a 5% songwriting credit or a 5% ownership of the master has been offered in lieu of a performance fee.

It is important that recording artists and songwriters understand these rights before entering into any sort of an agreement. In his book “Unfree Masters” Matt Stahl conveys that while recording and publishing deals between an artist and major label may seem lucrative and advantageous with the ability to “free” the artist from a regular 9-to-5 job, a closer look at these contracts usually reveal a deep imbalance of power between the artist and industry (Stahl, 2012). Even when songwriters or recording artists are not dealing with labels or third party agencies, this knowledge is important so that they are able to make well informed decisions about the music they are collaborating on.

In my experience, the more comfortable and the more trust there is within a collaborative relationship, the easier these conversations and subsequent agreements are able to be made. Therefore the importance of collaboration and the function of a collaborative relationship in the pop music domain doesn't just stay in the studio, it crosses over to every process from song formation to release.

Conclusion

To collaborate or not to collaborate, that is the question. In some ways there is a risk that a songwriter may receive less financial benefit when collaborating. If a songwriter writes with one other person; they are essentially halving their potential income from the song. On the other hand, there is an argument that by having two people involved you are doubling the chance of success.

Under John-Steiner's Family Pattern, when the person you are writing or performing with meets the criteria of an ability to establish the trust, connection and support needed for a successful collaborative relationship and the collaborators have knowledge of creative constraints and how to utilise technology, the work is bound to be strong and if not commercially successful, at least the experience will be a rewarding one.

While Bennett's models are good starting points, and could be used as catalysts for songwriting

sessions, his broader model of stimulus, approval, adaptation, negotiation, veto and consensus seem to be a more functional and relatable process for not just songwriting but most creative collaborations.

Commercial success will always be a motivating factor for writing and performing pop music but it seems most people working in the pop music domain have a goal to write or perform on songs that they are proud of, and can hopefully earn them some money. Therefore most practitioners do not shy away from working with other people as after weighing up the pros and cons, collaborating with the right people will not leave you wanting.

Once you find a collaborator or collaborators that you trust and can connect with, the songwriting process is more enjoyable and authentic, as is the recording and production process. Finally the motivation and creativity that can stem from these mutually beneficial relationships can lead to easier conversations and agreements around rights and ownership.

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