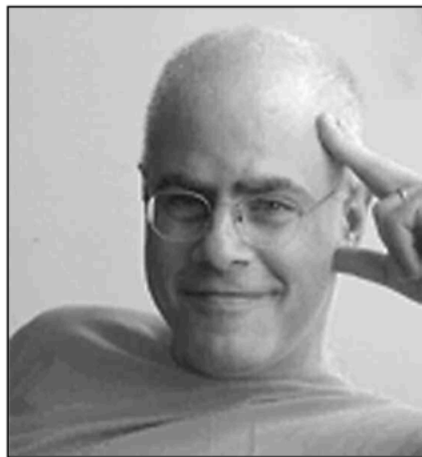

WAYNE COHEN



Wayne Cohen is a multiplatinum-selling hit songwriter and producer. His first success as a songwriter came with five co-writes on the debut album by Cur-

tis Stigers, who was signed to Arista by Clive Davis, an industry legend and early champion of Wayne's work. Cohen's further success includes his multiterritory hit song 'Just a Step from Heaven' (which broke UK girl group Eternal through Europe and Asia), as well as hits and cuts with several US, UK and European major label artists. He has also written music for feature films and television. Cohen has made staff songwriter deals with Sony, Windswept and EMI, and currently publishes himself through administration

deals he negotiated on behalf of Wayne's World, his publishing company. He has also finished a collaboration with Sophie Ellis-Bextor at the studio of his New York production company, Stand Up Songs.

How did you get your start in songwriting?

I've always been infatuated with the three-minute pop song. When I was nine years old, I heard a song and thought, 'Yeah, I could do that. It's easy'. But it's

not so easy. It's a challenge. Basically, I've spent my whole career developing a way of crafting pop music; it's a cumulative process that never stops. I started by being in rock bands, and after studying jazz and music theory in college, I was fortunate to work in the advertising music industry as a music producer. In college, I played bass with lots of pick-up ghost jazz big bands and was on and off the road, but always had my ear to pop music. I didn't think I had the talent to be a player, but I had an overview of how pop music works. That was what excited me.

I spent eight or nine years as a journeyman music producer in advertising and worked with some of the best producers, musicians, singers and writers on the planet. Jingles and underscores, every kind of music you'd hear in ads. In those days, from 1980 to 1988, there was a very fertile live music scene, and before MIDI came in, everything was done live. I would spend anywhere from four to twelve hours a day in a recording studio. It was a great way to learn to deal with every stripe of musician, singer, engineer and clients, to understand how business is done, how there are so many more concerns beyond what a particular musician or singer thinks about or even what a particular song or score is about. Music fits into the firmament of pop culture, whether it's advertising or film or pop music. We're all cogs in the machine, and that's not a bad thing, it's just the way it is, so I've always tried to keep that in mind.

What steps would you recommend to a person today with similar impulses to the ones you had?

Write from your heart and write what you believe has a universal emotional truth. Listen to the radio: pay attention to it but ignore it at the same time. Don't worry about fitting into current genres, because at the end of the day, it's all about breaking through with something different. It's something of a cliché, but everyone in this industry is looking for something that stands out. But it also has to have that universal emotional truth, and if it has both of those things, then you're in business. I'd tell all the people who might be interested in songwriting that they should not lose heart or be cowed or intimidated by the industry. It's just about coming up with something that sounds hot. So you have to go with your gut. All the breakthroughs in pop music, and pop culture in general, have come from people wanting to tell a story and finding a fresh way to tell it.

How are you inspired to write? Does it make a difference if you write songs for yourself or for a client's brief?

It happens all kinds of ways. It can come as a commission from a particular artist or manager, or it could come from a newspaper article, something on TV,

or something that happened at home. For example, I was inspired to write two songs in two days with Sophie Ellis-Bextor, which came through Sophie and her manager Craig Logan. Generally, the inspiration comes from an artist, but I do write for myself too. Sometimes when I wake up it's just there, a title or phrase or subject. It took me a few years to realise this, but I don't write because I want to but because I have to. Frequently, I find that initial inspiration for a song is not the final vehicle for a song, which is okay as long as I get a great song out of the inspiration. I like to think of something Sammy Cahn, who wrote a slew of hits for Frank Sinatra, said when he was asked which comes first, the music or the lyrics. He said, 'The phone call'.

Let's say you have a bunch of songs you've written. How would you go about getting them exposed, or whom would you try to send them to?

It depends on if you have a network of contacts to start with or not. If you don't have a network, people think that you have to do all kinds of crazy things to get noticed. This is not a good idea because it irritates people. It's really all about building relationships. You may not be able to get the person to listen the first time you meet them, whether it's a manager or producer or A&R or whatever, but you must try to build a relationship with them and give them something of yourself that's potentially of value to them, even if it's just a tip on a cool band you just heard.

To me, the whole Internet and e-mail world has fostered this atmosphere of passivity in how you reach out to people. It's good for some things, but you need to figure out a way to catch someone's attention. You can turn up at an office unannounced or send a CD and follow up with a phone call. Don't bother to leave a voice message because you're only adding to the noise they have to deal with. It comes down to persistence, and there's nothing sexy or fancy about that. It's just the way life is. I would suggest getting the songs you really believe in to artists, producers, A&R people, music publishers, managers, PR people, anyone you know associated with artists you want to be associated with. Even today, I spend at least half my time marketing my work and the other half writing.

Any other essentials?

Just expose your work live as much as possible. Having a Web site is also a really good thing, although I wouldn't spend a lot of time on how it looks. It has to be functional, and it has to be easy for people to access the mp3s or the streams without taking lots of load-up time. It's really about persistence

and believing in your songwriting. Try every possible way to collaborate and build relationships that work, with anybody you think is closer to where you want to be. Reaching out to a hero of yours is okay too, as long as you're not stalking them. Creative people respect talent and it doesn't matter where it comes from.

Does your song have to exist as a recorded piece already, or can you send people written music and a lyric sheet?

If you're trying to convince someone to work with you, like a co-writer, you could send them lyrics. But people in the industry don't really have time to deal with anything that isn't coming through a pair of speakers.

Does that mean that as a songwriter, you need a high-quality recorded version of your song to pitch it?

A good A&R person will be listening for a breakthrough lyric idea that says the same old thing a fresh way. They'll be looking for amazing hooks, melodies that lodge themselves in your brain, but not necessarily a perfect recording. Having said that, there are lots of A&R people who are looking for copycat artists. For example, when Avril Lavigne hit, lots of labels went out and tried to get their own version of her. Sometimes you can make that work for you, but you have to be careful because as an artist you have to be true to yourself.

What professional associations should new songwriters consider joining?

I'm a big believer in ASCAP because it's a performing rights society that is basically run by writers; a big collective with good, smart people and a good network. It's probably the best association to join when starting. It's not going to get you work, but it may help you get some showcases or co-writing opportunities. But still, the challenge when you're getting started is getting someone who makes decisions to pay attention to you. It's true that we're living in a corporate world, and if you really want a breakthrough record you need to be attached to one of the four major labels. But if you want to hone your craft as a songwriter or recording artist, the important thing is to just keep writing, performing and recording and not worry so much about that. Performing is great because you get immediate feedback from people about which songs are working and which aren't. The Internet is a great leveller of public opinion. But to sell a platinum record you generally need a big machine behind you.

What skills do songwriters need?

It's useful for songwriters to have basic instrumental skills, minimal music theory knowledge and basic notation. The important thing is to be able to communicate your ideas, lyrically or musically, in a cohesive way. But it's by no means necessary to be a really well trained musician. In fact, I've noticed that the first ten years of my training was about the craft of being a musician, and it took me another ten years to forget about all that and actually get to the core of it, which is finding that universal idea that's going to move people.

How does collaboration work? How do two people write a song together?

It's a bit like blind dating: you never know quite what you're going to get. There was a period in my career, when I was signed to Sony, when I was writing with a new person nearly every day for about a year. After that time, there were maybe two or three people I struck up good relationships with that felt complementary. Basically, you bring to the table what you do best, whether it's a strong melodic or lyric sensibility or really good technical skills. You can't be too worried about not being able to do everything. I think the future of songwriting in America will be collaborative. To make a hit record these days you need a great lyrical idea, great hooks, *and* a hot track, and then marketing. It's definitely possible to do it yourself but it's a lot more time-efficient if you can do that as part of a group.

How does a songwriter get paid?

There are three streams of income. The first is the mechanical royalty for record or Internet sales, which would be halved if you co-write a track with someone, and half of your half will go to a publisher if you have one. The second is performance income, which comes from radio, which is paid through ASCAP, BMI or SESAC in this country and PRS in the UK. That's basically it, so the game is to get a song on the radio that gets played a lot, and/or once the song is promoted through radio that people buy the record. I prefer to concentrate on songs that engage radio, because that's a more reliable source of income than record sales. The third stream is synchronization licenses for songs in films or TV, but that's ancillary income, so I tend to concentrate on the first two.

You've worked in the US and the UK. What do you think are the differences between them?

The UK marketplace today is generally more pop-driven, although that may be changing at the moment. I find that the UK is much more open to eclecticism

when it comes to pop music styles, and labels and people in the industry are still not afraid to state their opinion on whether they like something or not. Here in the US, it's such a huge financial risk for the companies to mount something that they have to be completely convinced that it's a sure-fire hit before they even spend the money on it, and it costs a lot of money to break an act here. You can get things to happen more quickly and more reliably in the UK than here. In the American market these days, you basically have to write in one or more categories to get cuts: pop, urban, rock or country. But in the UK, if it sounds hot and it has a great hook, you can do it.

