

harriet schock

becoming
remarkable



This edition includes
her newly released CD

rosebud

for songwriters

and those who love songs

becoming remarkable

*for songwriters
and those who love songs*

harriet schock

Copyright © 1999 Harriet Schock
All rights reserved.

Published by
Blue Dolphin Publishing, Inc.
P.O. Box 8, Nevada City, CA 95959
Orders: 1-800-643-0765
<http://www.bluedolphinpublishing.com>

ISBN: 1-57733-050-1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Schock, Harriet.

Becoming remarkable : for songwriters and those who love songs /
Harriet Schock.

p. cm.

Contains previously published articles.

ISBN 1-57733-050-1

1. Popular music—writing and publishing. I. Music.

MT67.S33 1998

782-4264'13—dc21

98-39921

CIP

MN

Cover art: photo courtesy of Evening*Star Music Group
Index by Brackney Indexing Service

Printed in the United States of America

This book is dedicated to Nik Venet

ON A PAGE IN MY DATE BOOK marked Monday, December 5, 1977, I have a note to myself that says, "Call Nick Venay." I had written phonetically the name left on my answering machine when he called me that day. In Nik Venet's date book, in that same month, my name is written, spelled correctly. It would be 13 years and three months before we met, face to face, at a NARAS local board of Governors' meeting. Six years after that, he showed me the page from his book. He had written, "Harriet Schock—the Georgia O'Keeffe of songwriters." I never really understood what that meant, but I knew he liked Georgia O'Keeffe, so that was enough for me.

Nik Venet believed that with every song, the songwriter should become a better person, because he or she is writing from truth and discovering and uncovering life in the process of writing. It ultimately became impossible for me to differentiate between what I learned from the process of writing and what I learned from the process of writing under Nik Venet's influence. I suspect it was the latter that changed me the most.

Naturally, many of the beliefs Nik Venet embraced about songwriting, I already believed. That's one reason it was such a good creative match. But much of it I had abandoned between the years 1975, when my third album was released, and 1991, when Nik produced my fourth one. Briefly, I had forgotten who I was as a writer/artist. Nik reminded me. And because someone actually seemed to want to hear what I had to say, I allowed myself to grow

as a writer. And I took the gag from my mouth, the rope from my hands, and started communicating again.

Having produced such wonderful writers as Dory Previn, Fred Neil, Brian Wilson, Bobby Darin, and Jim Croce, Nik understood how to get songs out of writers. He also could tell the minute a writer was disconnected from his or her writing, even in one line.

What Nik did for me and my writing was a gift to my soul. It is my hope that when I come into contact with a songwriter, I can help him or her find and communicate that truth that is uniquely his or hers. Writers look at the world a little askew, and that viewpoint helps others see it more clearly.

I will always see the world differently from knowing Nik Venet. And I will see it as a more fascinating place, a more fertile and a sweeter place because of the seven years I had with him.

Table of Contents

Foreword	xi
About the Chapters . . .	xiv
Acknowledgments	xv
Introduction	xvii
PART I — INTEGRITY	
1. Step One: Touch Somebody	3
2. If You're Doing It for the Money, You May Not Make Any	6
3. The Art & Craft of Songwriting	9
4. Songwriters . . . A Community	13
5. Do We Know Where We're Coming From?	16
6. Stop and Look at Who's Listening	19
7. Straight Lines	23
8. Reality: The Training Wheels	26
9. Chimera Is Curable	29
10. Writing from the Inside	33
11. Songwriters Say It All	36
12. Art and Romance: An Analogy	40
13. Do You Read?	44
14. Cookies or Newspapers?	48
15. The New Literacy	52
16. Burning Desire to Communicate	57
17. Some Points to View on Viewpoints	61
PART II — CLARITY	
18. Truth vs. Facts in Songwriting	67
19. When Little Things Mean a Lot	70

20. Listen & Learn	74
21. Character Studies	77
22. You Talkin' to Me?	81
23. Judging Your Own Material	84
24. Everyday Treasures	88
25. Finding the Pony	92
26. He Says, She Says	96
27. Listeners Vote for Communication	101
28. That's Entertainment	104
29. Smoke and Mirrors	107

PART III — TECHNOLOGY

30. Words or Music . . . That Is the Question	113
31. Writing Words to Music	117
32. What, Me Study?	120
33. Melody — The Unsung Hero	123
34. The Rhythm of the Melody	126
35. Reading Music	129
36. Playing It by Ear	132
37. Customs & Critics & Rules (Oh, My)	135
38. But What Do Strangers Think?	139
39. Is There Life Between Songs?	142
40. "That Sounds Like It Belongs in a Movie"	146
41. Subject Matters	149
42. Titles: The Heart of the Matter	154
43. You Oughta Be Write in Pictures	157
44. Writing in the Margins	160
45. Writing in Space	164
46. Playing the Symbols Well	168
47. Cleverness and Subtlety	171
48. Starting with the Song	174

Appendices

Publication Dates	177
Chapter Topic Guide	179
Lyrics	185
Index	205
About the Author	213

Foreword

My father originally intended to write the foreword to this book. Because he passed away in January, 1998, he was not able to. In March, I found this piece among his writings and correspondences. It's less about Harriet, the teacher and author, than it is about the writer/artist. But as my father always said, it's impossible to separate the two anyway, in her case. Her teaching is an art and in her art, she teaches.

—Nik Venet, Jr.

WHAT SHE DOES NOT KNOW is as important as what she does know. She does not know she collects. She does not know why she protects and holds all the small things that make her Harriet.

Harriet never noticed the things she collected the way I notice it. I wanted to tell her, often, quietly and without asking her to respond. I just wanted to hear my voice place these words into her writing universe. Like a gift to her for being who she is as a being, at that very moment. To most eyes the clutter of objects may have seemed like ordinary junk, broken parts, odd things with nowhere else to be stored. With eyes like mine, that watched her dance out of a room, sing to herself while writing, laugh when she had been fooled, my eyes saw these things as sacred objects. Surrounded by circumstance, the drawers were small boxes in the tradition of the Ark of the Covenant . . . all bundled and stashed like Emily Dickinson's forty-nine bound packets of poems, found stashed in a dresser drawer. Carefully written and stored, her

sacred writings were also preserved with ritual ribbons tied around odd scarves. Her books of notes and Harriet's boxes of sacred clutter were like birds in search of a cage.

Harriet has enough of the past stashed, bound, and wrapped like notes, for a volume of dreams. A heart saving diary, an album of photographs, small locked boxes that no longer unlock, small unlocked boxes that no longer lock, like lovers separated by small indifferences, all containing the same sum of parts. All of her somethings, saved in a small, sweet, significant way, making everything once common sacred.

All these things are so far removed from the human situation as to be almost worthless to a lesser spirited person. Harriet has saved all of it, as if she were collecting the butterfly wings from points in time. A small diary in metaphoric and symbolic shorthand. Part of her future songs and past proof of a heart's many instant decisions and reasons to keep the bird's cage door open.

Harriet's infinite inner space of song story line, whether from her religion or from a common experience, is its soul. Most songwriters deprive the story of their mystery, leaving the listener with an empty box of fact, one level of a single meaning. Schock, as a literate and practiced professional, allows the song its soul, so we can discover our own depths through it. Most students, through their writing, blame their parents for everything they have become. Schock changes the situation by seeing through the childhood stories, writing through the self-made myth, pulling out their poetry, and allowing the mysteries of it all to sing through the lyric.

Schock, in her songs, never becomes the main character of her songs. She does not allow herself to become the current cultural definition of her art. Her soul is more interested in particulars than in generalities. She brings order to her imaginings, like her saved clutter of mementos, she writes order to her chaos of life. Each person, in each verse, in every song that she writes has a special story to tell, no matter how many common themes are contained in her songs.

It is never easy to work with an artist like Harriet Schock. It is work. But care of the soul requires work. The songs we work on come from that place we would rather not visit, but that is the most honest place to find a song. Looking in that place in ourselves will always give the songwriter the true, naked image of the concept. The work may be intense, but it is also the source of the songwriter's soul.

My father often told me that dreams are the mythology of the soul, and working with them, as an artist, makes life more artful.

As a producer, I prefer to work with Harriet Schock as a songwriter, writer, and artist, because each of her songs tells the story of a soul rather than a life. I believe in her and I believe in her truth. I am always honored to be a small part of greatness.

Nik Venet
July 19, 1996

About the Chapters...

I organized the forty-eight chapters as follows:

1. Integrity (articles that emphasize WHY songwriters express)
2. Clarity (articles that emphasize WHAT songwriters express)
3. Technology (articles that emphasize HOW songwriters express).

I realize that many of the chapters contain all three aspects; I decided to place them in one category over the others by which aspect was emphasized the most.

I offer this as a fresh way for us to look at this wonderful material; I hope that it is useful. The wisdom, encouragement and practical insights that Harriet Schock communicates so clearly have helped me to become a better songwriter and a better person.

—Naomi Healing

Acknowledgments

I'D LIKE TO THANK John Braheny for asking me to write, regularly, about songwriting for the *Los Angeles Songwriters Showcase Musepaper*, later published by the National Academy of Songwriters. Over twenty other cities subsequently asked to publish these writings in their songwriters' periodicals.

This accomplished a number of things for me: It put me in touch with songwriters all over the world, many of whom became my private students. It also helped me chronicle my thoughts on, observations of, and discoveries about songwriting from May 1991 to March 1997. More importantly, it helped me chronicle many observations of Nik Venet's, which can be found in almost every chapter of this book.

I also very much appreciate the work of my editor, Naomi Healing, who had the original vision and desire to organize the book into chapters as you see here and to provide the chapter topic guide. She did the job with the kind of caring, wisdom, and sensitivity that she applies to all parts of life.

I'd like to thank Mitch Santell, who brought the manuscript to Blue Dolphin, and Paul Clemens and Linda Maxwell at Blue Dolphin for all their work in getting this book out and into your hands.

And finally, I'm extremely grateful to the songwriters whose lyrics I quote in these pages. Many excellent novelists, poets, screenwriters, and songwriters have contributed to my growing understanding of what "becoming remarkable" means. Those

I hope I am still traveling on the road to becoming remarkable. I also hope that the observations I've made on this road will help bring you a few steps closer to that glorious, elusive destination.

Introduction

SOME PEOPLE BELIEVE that art and commercial success are in conflict, and sometimes they are, but I believe one does not necessarily preclude the other. This book is not about becoming a financial success through songwriting. It's about becoming remarkable. Sometimes those things coincide, as in the case of great songwriter/artists like Joni Mitchell, Don Henley, Bob Dylan to name just a few. Time will tell which of the newer writers are true artists and which ones are chasing the tail of the music industry.

I've observed two things about remarkable songwriters. 1) They come from truth. I don't mean their songs are necessarily factual, but they always contain truth (see Chapter 18, "Truth vs. Fact in Songwriting"). The truth simply has more emotional impact because when the writer writes it, it has a ring of authenticity, and when the listener hears it, it has a ring of veracity, both musically and lyrically. Telling the truth as an artist can be a lifelong pursuit as the truth reveals itself more and more by the lives we lead. 2) They have mastered the language of songwriting and can speak it fluently. This mastery is also not an overnight endeavor, but like any language, there are certain principles and techniques that can be applied to expedite the process. Both of these ingredients seem to be necessary for remarkable writing. Without fluency in the language of songwriting, writing from truth can seem self-indulgent and downright embarrassing. Without the truth, the master craftsman only crafts another good song, which will not deeply touch anyone's life and will not be remembered.

who were not mentioned by name may simply not have come to mind to illustrate a point in the writing of these chapters.

Part I

Integrity

/

Step One: Touch Somebody

THINK BACK TO THE FIRST TIME you wrote a song for someone and then played it for that person. Did it have an effect on him or her? And wasn't that a thrill? At that moment, you may have realized that the whole thing is about communication. And if it was real enough to make someone smile, or cry, or say "thank you," then who knows? It might be real enough to move millions of other people.

I live in a duplex. My only contact with the upstairs neighbors had been when I discovered my music room was directly under one of their bedrooms. Being quite elderly, they go to bed at about 9:30, so I moved my music studio to another room, directly under their spare room. They were very grateful and sweet about it. Last week, I called them to ask them something about the television antenna. They invited me up for fruit. I spent an hour and a half hearing them speak of their life, their many pets through the years, their children and grandchildren. I was so moved by the experience, I couldn't stop thinking and feeling about it. So I started writing. . . .

"The television looks like it's from the fifties,

Except that there's a cable in the back.
He sits in his special chair,
Half awake and half aware
That she is in the room somewhere,
That is his pivotal fact."

I realized that, in the middle of a million things I was supposed to be doing, I was writing a song about my upstairs neighbors. Not knowing them very well, I didn't know how they would feel about having their love story immortalized by the night owl below them, but I knew I was hooked and couldn't stop.

I called them up and told the wife I had written a song of tribute to her relationship with her husband. She then said one of those things that will forever stay in my memory, not only as a comment, but as a life's lesson. She said, "Well, it certainly can't harm the relationship. Everything only makes it better." I knew, at that point, here was a lady who had made some sane decisions. I really wanted her to like the song.

They came down this morning and I played it for them. They smiled and thanked me. Then she asked me to read the lyric to her. I did. We had a nice visit and they left. They had asked me for a copy of the lyric, which I gave them. But I made them promise when their children and grandchildren heard it, they'd let me play it with the melody, not just read the lyric. They agreed. Ten minutes after they left, the wife called me and told me that after she read the lyric, she realized what it said, how moved she was, and that her husband had tears in his eyes as well. They just couldn't hear quite well enough to make out the words without reading them. Then she said she didn't know how she could ever thank me enough for what I had done. And I thought to

myself, I should be thanking them for the inspiration. What a rare couple it is who can instill that kind of feeling in someone.

My point here is that, yes, it's exciting when I hear a song of mine on the radio or in a film for the first time. But that's sort of a wild excitement that's directed outward. I've actually been known to go up to bikers in restaurants and tell them my song was playing, only to be thrilled that they were actually familiar with it and equally pleased that they weren't offended I had spoken to them. But the kind of reward I'm talking about is of a deeper, more inward nature. It comes from playing a personal communication to someone.

It's such a wonderful gift to be able to put something into music and words in the first place. And to offer it to someone as a validation of something he or she did—that's really quite a gift also. And if you've never done it, you're really missing something. On my second album, I had a song called "Mama," which was covered by Helen Reddy, after she'd had a hit with "Ain't No Way to Treat a Lady." When Helen was touring, she went through Dallas, and my mother went to see her. Afterward, my mother proudly announced that she was the "Mama" the song was written about. Looking back now, I'm so happy I had the foresight to write that song when I did.

So, as I tell every class I teach and every seminar I give, there are many reasons to write songs. Getting on the charts is just one of them, and usually not a very inspiring goal. Money is cold and generally doesn't get the kind of juices flowing that inspire art. But there are many lives to be touched by the gifts we have as songwriters. You might find that giving one of these gifts is as rewarding to you as to the recipient, if not more so.

2

If You're Doing It for the Money, You May Not Make Any

SOMETIMES I HAVE TO PINCH MYSELF and remind myself it isn't Kansas anymore-or wherever I came from way, way back, when I formed the belief that everyone shot straight from the hip, or at least straight.

Last week, one of my Advanced Class students said something which has bothered me ever since. It's not that I haven't heard it before-in fact, I've heard it much too often-but usually from business executives, and jaded ones at that.

The whole thing started when I commented that a number of songs on the radio recently have sounded quite a lot like another song called, "Old Time Rock & Roll." The student defended them with the statement that they were making money from these clones. I suggested that integrity might enter the picture somewhere (he was a new student, so I was more tactful than I might have been on his 4th week). To this he responded with the line in question, "Integrity doesn't pay the bills."

First of all, I can understand the attention a person might

have on paying the bills, especially in this economy. But I feel it's such an incredibly dangerous viewpoint for an artist to have, I wanted to address it—or undress it—publicly. The student who said it is talented and bright, and I don't think he actually embraces this as a heartfelt philosophy. I think it was an offhanded remark. But since he said it, here goes.

Check out the definition of “integrity.” It's not just honesty or incorruptibility. It's also “wholeness,” “soundness.” It's in the writer's nature to put things together to form a whole—and that's the main meaning of “integrate.” I've observed many writers—colleagues, mentors, students—some hugely successful, some total unknowns. But one thing I've noticed is that the ones who are doing it because they love it and have something to express are generally the ones being successful at it. The ones who got into it to make money usually never did. It's sort of like a guy who takes a girl out just to go to bed with her and can't figure out why he never gets to.

It's not that you're getting punished for being mercenary, or anything else so linearly Puritan. It's simply that you're coming from the wrong place and that's where your attention will be—on the money, not on the music. You'll make decisions based on that; your passion will be centered somewhere away from the song. It's like trying to get turned on by the person you married for money. You've created your own prison.

Now somewhere, some songwriter is reading this who has made a lot of money with his/her art and he/you may be smiling. But think back to when you first started writing. Weren't you doing it for the love of the process, the heat of the communication, the thrill of the music? And when your attention is on writing “something that will sell,” do you like what you come up with as well as you do when you write

because you really want to say something or get that musical idea on tape?

I have heard my producer, Nik Venet, say that even though McDonald's may be the biggest restaurant chain, one would not ask to meet and compliment the chef there. Similarly, Citizen Kane never made its investment back, whereas Love Story made millions. But which one do we remember?

In my own experience, songs I wrote from that burning desire to communicate were always my most successful copyrights. And here I'm talking about songwriting-not assignment writing for films or records, because that's a whole different subject. They are commissioned anyway. I'm referring to those songs that are an extension of who you are as an artist-that you would perform yourself, proudly, if you sing.

"Integrity doesn't pay the bills" may be true. But neither does chasing trends, writing at the radio, ripping off other songs, and focusing on writing something that will make a lot of money. To make a lot of money, it has to sell a lot or be played a lot or both. That means lots of people have to hear it and buy it. That means it has to move people when they hear it. Now, if you think you're good enough to write something that's going to move all those people, while you've got your attention and your passion over there on your bank statement, be my guest. Give it a try. But your craft had better be unbelievably good to pull that one off. And between the time you start and the time your craft is THAT good, there's a lot of dues paying and songwriting you'll have to do. So you might just as well do it for the love of it. Maybe you'll even discover in the process that integrity has fewer bills to pay.

3

The Art & Craft of Songwriting

I'VE RECENTLY COME TO THE VIEWPOINT that it's necessary to understand all art in order to understand any art. I've noticed that people who have an appreciation for the visual arts, literature, dance, etc. also approach music in a more vulnerable way. And, conversely, those who are virtually illiterate, and pride themselves on the fact that television is the height of their artistic appetites, may even make a living in music, but they appear to be unmoved by it, unchanged by it and approach it as a product, in much the way the commercials they watch deal with their products.

As my writer friend, Thomas Lane, pointed out after looking up the derivation of "art," the word comes from "ars artis" meaning to join together. His "Artist Manifesto" is being published shortly and it makes a very strong point about the necessity of artists in all areas to join together. He also places the responsibility for the condition of the arts back into the hands of the artists—which will rob us of our self-righteous whining and give us a pretty huge job to do.

Reading Tom's Artist Manifesto had a powerful effect on me, as it will all of you when you read it. And combined with the recent inspiration I have experienced by listening to the

National Academy of Songwriters Gold Songwriters showcase at Genghis Cohen, I am beginning to believe those around me who insist we are at the threshold of a Renaissance in the music business. I certainly hope this is true, not only for selfish reasons, but because of the quality of songwriting I see around me, from my colleagues, my students, my friends.

I was pondering this possibility when I heard a statement from my producer, Nik Venet, which I feel I must quote. In fact, I keep it at eye level much of the time when I'm writing, or singing. It goes like this:

“Everyone writes.
Everyone sings.
Not everyone tells the truth.
It's the truth that touches people.”

—Nik Venet

He just said it in the studio, in passing, when he was trying to get me to perform the songs we're cutting, LIVE, and by that I mean playing and singing at the same time in a total performance, as opposed to overdubbing and making it “all perfect.” You have to remember, I'm from the South (or Southwest if that's where you consider Dallas to be) and I was brought up on advice like, “Look your best even when you're breaking up with him,” so you can imagine how hard it's been for Nik Venet to convince me to do things live. It sometimes feels like I'm being asked to stand in my underwear in bright sunlight with no make-up on. Sure it's real, but so is a train wreck.

I recently read a quote from the London Times that discussed the John Stewart Phoenix Live album, also produced by Nik, that has re-charted this month in England.

John voiced the same insecurities when Nik first urged him to release it, “flaws and all” because it’s real, it’s human, and it’s truthful. The effect it created and is creating again is amazing. I suppose if it had been overdubbed to make the performers feel good, the listener would have felt much less.

But back to the point I opened with—that of appreciating all art in order to really “get into” one form of art. I went to an exhibit of Modern Art, yesterday, at the county museum on Wilshire and I studied two paintings by John Singer Sargent. I was completely awed by them. In order for him to create the picture you get when you stand across the room, from the close distance where he painted it, he had to have the craft down totally cold, and then he had to be so free of the craft, he could express himself directly and communicate without attention to technique. As songwriters, that’s the point we must arrive at, so that we don’t pull the listener into our struggle with the form, or into our cleverness with it. When I mentioned all this to Venet, he faxed me a transcript someone took off a tape of a lecture he delivered at UCLA in 1984, where he taught record production to a class that achieved some renown for having started with 30 enrolled, and having ended up with over 300.

This quote actually says exactly what I want to say on the subject, so rather than paraphrasing, I’ll just give it verbatim:

“Sampled, crystal clear records, void of the human condition, cannot compare with a live performance captured on tape or a real-life experience placed on paper . . . to be sung from the heart. Only a few have the bravery to do it honestly, using their years of dues-paying craft study to free their fingers and voice from the mind . . . so that the soul, without obstruction of form, dictates the words, music and paint strokes and how they will be shared.”

The entire transcript of this speech is phenomenal, but I

wanted to quote salient parts of it here, because it articulated beautifully something I've been trying to say to my advanced students, in answer to the sometimes unspoken question, "When is it finished? When am I good enough? When can I stop working at it and just enjoy it? What is craft, anyway? And what is art?"

So our job is to become good enough at the Craft that we can become free to engage in the Art, and take enough responsibility for the Condition of the Arts to make sure there's someone out there capable of not just hearing—but listening. And once we know they're listening, to give them the truth.