

## A Guide to Songwriting in a Band

By Jim Kelly for [www.socan.ca](http://www.socan.ca)

If you watched the broadcast of the 2006 Juno Awards this month (April), you saw not only the vast array of Canada's musical talent, but also a wide spectrum of approaches to songwriting and musical collaboration.

For a band like Broken Social Scene, winners for Best Alternative Album, all members of the group share the writing credit, though not always to the same degree. The members of The Arcade Fire, winners of the SOCAN-sponsored Songwriter Of The Year award, take a more collectivist approach, with all members sharing credit equally. And then there was Canadian Music Hall of Fame inductee Bryan Adams, a solo artist who's written songs with a number of different partners, including Jim Vallance and Mutt Lange. All represent different ways of approaching the songwriting process within a band.

So what are some of the different approaches for songwriting in a group, and which is best for you and your band? We've decided to address some of the common questions that arise around this topic. These answers are not meant to be exhaustive by any means, but hopefully they'll provide something of a guide as you navigate these issues.

### **I'm the solo songwriter in a band. Should I share the credit?**

A share of the copyright in a song is meant to reflect a share in the *creation* of the song – as distinct from a *musical performance* of it. If your bandmates contribute to the creation of a song (the lyrics or the music), you should mutually agree on their shares. But you shouldn't "cut in a share" for a bandmate just because they performed on the record as a musician. Songs exist independently of their recordings.

In some bands, only the main songwriter gets the credit. In others, all members share the writing credit, with shares that reflect their contributions. In still others, bandmates may share copyright equally, although their contributions vary from song to song. Any arrangement can work, as long as all bandmates agree.

### **Should I write on my own or with my band members?**

Try it different ways and see what works best. If you have a strong vision of what you want, you may find that you're more productive alone. Others find greater satisfaction in collaboration, which also fosters a sense of shared purpose. Some bands use both approaches, sometimes jamming together on a musical idea until things jell, sometimes having individual members bring in completed songs.

### **Should music and lyrics be considered equally?**

Some bands consider lyrical and musical contributions to have equal merit. It's fairly common for a band to have one member – often a lead singer – who writes the majority of the lyrics, while the other members work on musical ideas. The Tragically Hip is a good example. As for divvying up the credit, if the lyrics are considered equal to the music, a single lyricist could get 50% with the other half split between (for instance) the two members who wrote the music – so, 50-25-25. Or, if all contributions are seen as equal, it could be considered a three-way split in this instance.

### **How do you determine share splits with more than one writer?**

The world's most famous songwriting team, John Lennon and Paul McCartney, shared their credit 50-50. Although every Beatles song written by the duo is credited to Lennon-McCartney, many were composed entirely by one of them.

Another approach is song-by-song, assessing the value of each contribution in the context of an ongoing collaborative relationship. Say Songwriter One brings in an almost complete song, but missing some lyrics. Then Songwriter Two provides those lyrics. The band must determine how it will recognize Songwriter Two's contribution.

### **Do “non-writing” bandmates share credit just by working on songs in rehearsals?**

A copyright share is meant to reflect a role in the *creation* of the song – the composition of the words, melody, or harmony. Drum fills and guitar solos do not typically obtain a share. If you mutually decide that a band member is contributing creatively to the composition, then you may choose to recognize it with a credit.

When songwriting in a band, the most crucial thing is to agree at the outset how the credits will be shared. Many bands have been destroyed by hard feelings, misunderstandings and conflict over credits. Once your songs are registered with SOCAN, the shares stay that way – unless all the songwriters agree to any changes, or if there's a dispute over share, which is then settled.

So be sure you do the right thing when you do the write thing.