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Professional songwriting

Pam Sheyne on her songwriting success

Professional song writer Pam Sheyne is responsible for the world-wide hit record 'Genie in a Bottle' sung by Christina Aguilera. She was also one of the teachers on Fame Academy, helping the show's students to make the most of their song writing. We talked to her to find out what life behind the lyric is like.

What route did you take into song writing as a profession?

I started out in the music business as a singer and played guitar in a covers band before moving into session work as a backing vocalist. But it was writing that gave me a huge buzz. I loved the feeling at the end of the day listening back to a song that hadn't even existed that morning. That's when I thought I would concentrate on being a songwriter. It did take a few years to achieve a bit of success and a very understanding bank manager to get there.

Did you want to be a performer?

I desperately wanted to be an artist but for one reason or another it just didn't happen. I let go of that ambition and once I'd had success with my song writing it didn't seem to be as important anymore. I loved the fact that you could have a life and keep your anonymity. However, my singing experience has definitely helped my song writing career. As a vocalist you do have a sense of what feels natural and you can explain to an artist by singing them what you hear, also my backing vocal work has helped me with arranging and producing.

Do you write to order, with a particular artist in mind?

I tend to write with a specific artist in mind as cold pitching a song is getting more and more difficult these days. Most record companies have their favourite producer teams and ask them to write and produce to order so very few take outside songs. My songs are then demoed by myself or session singers.

Do you find that the interpretation of the session singer can influence the creative process?

Yes the session singer can definitely influence the artist's performance (depending on how good the singer is of course). The better the demo, the better your chances are of getting the song cut. These days you have to deliver a master for the record company to see the 'whole picture'.

Do you have an agent, or is it up to you to make connections and find work?

No I don't have an agent. I would say that a manager or publisher would be the equivalent. My husband has been my manager since 1992 (he was actually my first publisher, which is how we met) and we have both built a network of contacts together over the years. We started doing writing trips to the US in 1995 then further afield and have increased our connections. Also my publisher, Warner Chappell, have been a great help with hooking me up with other writers/artists around the world.

How do you find people to write with?

I have built up a network of people I enjoy working with, so a lot of the time I will work with the same people. Sometimes I will hear a song and love it so much that I will say to my manager

or publisher "I would love to write with that person" and hopefully they will be able to hook it up. I also hear through other writers recommending new people to work with which is often the best way to meet new 'up and coming' writers.

How long does the compositional process take?

Similar to 'how long is a piece of string'. You cannot define how long it will take each time you write a new song. It depends on how inspired you are, what the chemistry is between you and your co-writer/s and how much time you have to get it finished. It could take a couple of hours to a week, though if the pressure is on it's amazing what you can come up with in a few hours

Do you have any tips for people who would like to go into this as a profession?

Just remember every time you get a song rejected it is only someone else's opinion and that they are not always right, often there are politics involved that you never even know about. If you believe in yourself enough the knocks will strengthen you and make you even more determined to succeed. Finally every songwriter that I've ever known has had good and bad years, the trick is in learning how to ride the 'peaks and troughs'.

In How to...:

Songwriting basics

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio1/onemusic/startingout/writingp01.shtml>

Approach publishing companies

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio1/onemusic/management/publishp01.shtml>

Publishing agreement main terms

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio1/onemusic/legal/pubishagp01.shtml>

In Music exposed:

Goldfrapp

Alison Goldfrapp offers some songwriting tips

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio1/onemusic/exposed/goldfrapp317p01.shtml>

Sinead

What did she learn in the Fame Academy house?

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio1/onemusic/exposed/sinead307p01.shtml>

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