



# **A Map for the Creative Journey**

## **7 Steps to Experiencing Deeper Fulfillment and Greater Efficiency in Songwriting and Recording**

**By Joshua Pearl**

If you are a songwriter or recording artist, cutting a record of your original music can be a highly individual and personal experience. Though the goal of ending up with a professional product might be the same, the creative process naturally differs from artist to artist and from project to project.

As a producer and a recording artist myself, I began to search for principles that could apply to any artist or project, allowing the songwriting and recording process to become more manageable and efficient, while remaining as enjoyable and fulfilling as possible. I started with the assumption that all of the best art arises from what Zen master, Shunri Suzuki, called “Beginner’s Mind.” This is the state

of being where one is fully present to the moment and free from the limitations that can come from having experience and expertise.

It followed that the challenge was to create a system that integrated the practical demands of the studio with the essential quality of the Beginner's Mind—a mind that is open and receptive to the music that arises spontaneously in the moment.

Drawing from over twenty years of experience guiding hundreds of musicians, spanning dozens of genres, levels, ages, and cultures, I identified a set of general steps—a map for the creative journey—which can be applied to any songwriting or recording project in which the creators care about being connected to the authentic source of their creative expression. By bringing awareness and intention to these steps, you can help deepen your focus, ground your efforts, and affirm your best musical instincts—especially the ones that might go unnoticed while attending to the countless details inherent in the process of putting together a recording.

Before outlining the steps, it is important to mention that the creative process is never completely predictable or linear. You may cycle through some of the individual steps or the entire series of steps many times over the course of a project, whether in pre-production, production, or post-production.

What is most important, is cultivating an appreciation of each step, especially those that might have been taken for granted or ignored in the past.

Below are the seven essential steps followed by a brief description of each of them. For a more in-depth understanding, compare these concepts with your own creative experiences, think about what has worked and why.

**The steps are as follows:**

1. Create the Space
2. Listen
3. Engage the Flow
4. Capture
5. Develop
6. Edit
7. Bring to Completion

**Step 1: Create the Space** (*The Clearer the Space, the Better We Can Listen*)

Thomas Edison said that genius is 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration. In turn, it could be said that perspiration is 99% **preparation** and 1% performance or execution. By carefully and mindfully setting the stage for whatever you hope to achieve, you have the opportunity to empty yourself of preconceptions and distractions, and open yourself to new information, a sense of possibility, and a vision of the resources you will need for the journey ahead. *Creating The Space* can be done through rituals such as meditation, prayer, or contemplation, and it can be accomplished by “setting up” the creative environment—clearing clutter, laying out writing materials, setting up mics, whatever best serves your focus and ability to be fully present.

**Step 2: Listen** (*The Better We Can Listen, the More We Can Hear*)

In this step you attune your ears on the inside, much the way you would tune your instruments on the outside. Listening is a way of settling in to the Here and Now; of allowing things to be exactly as

they are and simply witnessing them as John Cage encouraged audiences to do in his groundbreaking composition *Silence* (4'33'') in which he invited audiences to give their attention to the music of everyday sounds by composing three movements made up of nothing but a performer, an audience, an acoustic space and time (4 minutes and 33 seconds) to listen to all sound that naturally occurred in the space.

Though objectivity is important in many of the later stages of musical creation, step number two is our opportunity to plug in to the heart of our subjectivity, asking ourselves the four magic words: "WHAT DO I HEAR?" While listening, pay careful attention to the sounds around you. Also notice how you interpret them. By first becoming *receptive*, you enter a state of mind that best prepares you for becoming *expressive*.

### **Step 3: Engage the Flow** (*The More We Can Hear, the More We Can Express*)

Lyricist Robert Hunter wrote: "Let it be known, there is a fountain, that was not made by the hands of man." Think of this as a reminder that creation is as much about *channeling* a benevolent, mysterious force of nature as it is about *doing* anything. At this stage of the process the goal is to welcome *inspiration through improvisation*: onto the page, into a recording device or simply into the ears of a witness. Inspiration can be found anywhere and everywhere—it can come from sources outside yourself such as the environment or by listening to recordings of other artists, or it can emerge from within—appearing as an instinct or a flash of imagination. By giving yourself

total permission to let it out, you begin to liberate your relationship with your muse.

At this point in the process do not worry too much about the quality of what is being expressed, simply allowing your feelings and ideas through is enough at this delicate stage.

**Step 4: Capture** (*The More We Can Express, the More Raw Material We Can Create*)

Using all available tools at hand, this is the step where you become intensely curious and begin your hunt for valuable material upon which to grow compositions. Like a painter, you may choose a theme or idea and do sketches and studies in which you explore the creative possibilities. You may see forms and structures begin to emerge out of the chaos of your free improvisation. It is important to choose methods of capturing (personal recording devices, notebooks, manuscript pages...) which are quick and efficient so as to not slow down the creative flow.

**Step 5: Develop** (*The More Raw Material We Can Create, The More Music We Have to Shape and Mold*)

Trusting your positive instincts, you can now begin to transform the four magic words from step number two (“What do I hear?”) into the six magic words of step number five: “What do I **WANT** to hear?”

In the **development stage** you consciously **increase choices** by bringing out more information from the raw materials you recorded in step number four. A single melodic motif, scale, or rhythmic pattern can be explored, improvised upon, expanded, or simply

repeated over and over again until it begins to change into something else. Often musical ideas take on a life of their own and start to magically reveal themselves. At that point, your job becomes to transcribe rather than to create—a very exciting change of roles!

After a while, in order to help focus this process, try to create “musical scaffolding”—temporary structures that will encourage (as well as contain) new musical and lyrical ideas. You can experiment with a variety of tactics: song structures, visual pictures, sound palettes, and story lines, just to name a few.

Just remember that it is essential to keep final judgment out of the picture and stay connected to your instinct and imagination at this crucial step. The “inner critic” will have its turn next.

**Step 6: Edit** (*The More Music We Have to Shape and Mold, the Closer We Move Toward Producing*)

It is at this stage that pure judgment can finally enter the process. By engaging the critical parts of the mind you begin to choose “this” over “that.” This step is where you sketch and then finalize charts, design plans, and constantly make musical adjustments that lead to a process of **decreasing choices**. The goal of editing is the same as the sculptor who seeks to chip away all that is not essential to the finished form. Too often, artists may be tempted, and are even encouraged, to bring the editing mindset into the creative process prematurely. By suspending judgment until this point, you allow your critical thinking to inhabit its rightful place where it can enliven and ground the creative process, rather than inhibiting it, as it would have done during the earlier stages of growth.

**Step 7: Bring to Completion** (*The More We Produce, the More Space We Have to Create Again*)

All of the final details from copywriting to mixing to mastering to securing a bar code for the CD package must be attended to with the same devotion and commitment as the earlier, more “creative” steps. By following through to the end, you achieve two purposes: (1) you now have a finished product, and (2) by releasing your musical expression and giving it form, you have created emptiness again. Letting go of a recorded product is akin to giving birth. The music now exists apart from the musicians and the cycle can begin again.

By paying attention and giving focus to each of these steps, you can settle into whatever stage of the process you happen to find yourself in. This seven-step cycle can be seen at work over the course of one session where the finished product may only be a rough mix or a three-page sketch of stream-of-consciousness ideas. It can also apply to the course of an entire project.

The more you can give yourself the gift of valuing every step of the creative process, the more you will experience greater freedom, ease, and musical fulfillment over the course of your musical life. You will be able to summon the Beginner’s Mind as your experience and expertise grow.

This is how we work at Let It Out Productions and how we encourage all songwriters and artists who have the impulse to produce music that comes organically from the source of their creativity.