



A City Songwriter Gets Personal

BY ANGELA BARBUTI

December 30, 2015 10:26 am ET



Michael Graetzer is not your typical songwriter. A Song Just for You, the business he started in 2007, has him creating personalized songs to commemorate life's special events.

The process starts with an in-person interview during which Graetzer picks up on details that make his subject's story unique. He then writes lyrics that sets to music based on the client's taste. The icing on the cake is that he will perform the song at the wedding or special event for which it was composed.

Graetzer, who has written 150 songs in his career and won an award from the Nashville Songwriters Association International, is often moved, sometimes to tears, when hearing his clients' stories. He takes pride in crafting the perfect lyrics to add a unique and lasting touch to memorable moments. "People are just so thrilled to hear very personal details set to music," he said.

How did the idea for this business come about?

I was a songwriter for all of my life and went to Berklee College of Music as a songwriting major. Then I moved to Nashville for a while and wrote songs there and then moved to New York. When I was in New York, to make some extra money, I started working in advertising. And in advertising, as a writer, you're always writing to very specific parameters. "This is the unique thing about this product; this is the demographic; this is what they already think about for. It's not just

free, creative writing. And, you know, I got pretty good at it. And then I thought, "Why don't I do this for other people, for their special events?" Actually, a woman who I worked with, Lynn Edlen-Nezin, she would do ideation exercises to help us understand what people really think. So I kind of incorporated some of that into my interviews with people to draw out of them what would be an interesting song.

Fifty percent of your work involves writing wedding songs for couples.

Couples usually start off telling me about the big things about the relationship which are completely useless for a song, like, "I'm not happy unless she's happy" or "I'm not happy unless he's happy." But then they'll sneak in little things and don't realize it. Like, "When we were picking apples..." They have these very unique, individual stories that totally make good songwriting material.

What questions do you ask during the interview?

I'm looking for something that I can write a song with. My ears are picking up things that are unique or interesting or very specific. Like, I did something for a 9-year-old's birthday party. "Well, she used to like Hannah Montana, but now Bon Jovi's got her heart." Just ordinary things, but very specific. Maybe with a couple, I would start off saying, "So when did you first meet? Where did you meet? What was your first date?" And once they get over trying to talk about their relationship in a global sense, then they get loosened up and trust me more. Because it's a real trust thing, to open up about something very personal. But once people get started, I cry. Because they're telling me stories they've never told their friends. No one's ever asked. It's very, very moving.

What's one song you've done that sticks out in your memory?

One that sticks out in my head a lot was where the truth was made for a song. This guy took his girlfriend up to Maine to where his family gathering was and they carved their initials in a heart on this tree. And then they went back the next year to the same place, but he snuck out early in the morning. And on the other side of the tree, he carved, "Will you marry me?" And then he brought her to the tree and they saw where they carved before and then he said, "Sometimes when you talk to a tree, the tree talks back." And he took her around to backside of the tree and she carved, "Yes." It's just so touching; you couldn't make that up.

Where are your favorite places to write?

I have a music studio in midtown that I run with two partners. That's certainly a place I record. But writing can happen just about everywhere. I've tried coffee shops; that doesn't really work for me. I would say, when I'm in bed, late at night or early in the morning, I'm thinking about the song. I'll have my little handheld recorder next to me and my notebook and I'll write things down. Walks in nature, like in Central Park. I've written a lot sitting in Central Park on the benches. Those two things are probably the best for me.

Who are some singers and songwriters you look up to?

I like David Byrne, Don Henley. Leonard Cohen, I was really moved by for many years. Bright Eyes is a young band that I like a lot. Hall & Oates are an old favorite of mine. Kansas, back in the day, were amazing.

What are your future plans?

I think to put out some videos because it seems, for the last five years, everything's just been moving towards video. And I haven't put attention to that. I put more attention to the writing of the song than anything, especially the lyrics. Melodies and music come very naturally to me. I don't have to work at that very hard. Lyrics, I do really care about, so I work at that, probably too hard. [Laughs] But video, I think, would be the next step for me. To get more videos out there of my songs and me doing various things.

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