

SONGWRITING SERIES

UNDERSTANDING CHORDS

Understanding the basic principles of music,
chords and chord structures,
gives you the freedom to create music
without limitations.

by

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xsnoise.com.au



Understanding Chords
(Songwriting Series)
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First Edition

Understanding Chords

Songwriting Series

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First Edition

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About The Author



Chris Richter is a songwriter, musician and music mentor, inspiring, motivating, recording and teaching singer songwriters and musicians from rural regions in Australia.

Chris Richter has a passion for people to achieve their 'firsts'. First song on the radio, first single, first sale on iTunes and first time someone bought their CD.

With 25 years' experience in the music industry, Chris has worked with artists from their first song, recording their first EP and moving on to recording contracts, performing at major Australian festivals, touring and starting their own music businesses.

Find out more at www.chrisrichter.com.au

Introduction

The Songwriting Series 'Understanding Chords' will give you an understanding of how music is structured. It is a guide to how contemporary music is formed in a way that makes songwriting easier, faster and more intuitive.

Understanding Chords will help you discover, in a straight forward and concise manner, how you can create your own music to support your lyrics.

Developed by Chris Richter, with over 7 years of one on one music teaching experience and over 20 years of performance experience, you will discover how easy it is to create your own music.

Understanding Chords is divided into three sections.

- Form principles
- Chord principles
- Extras

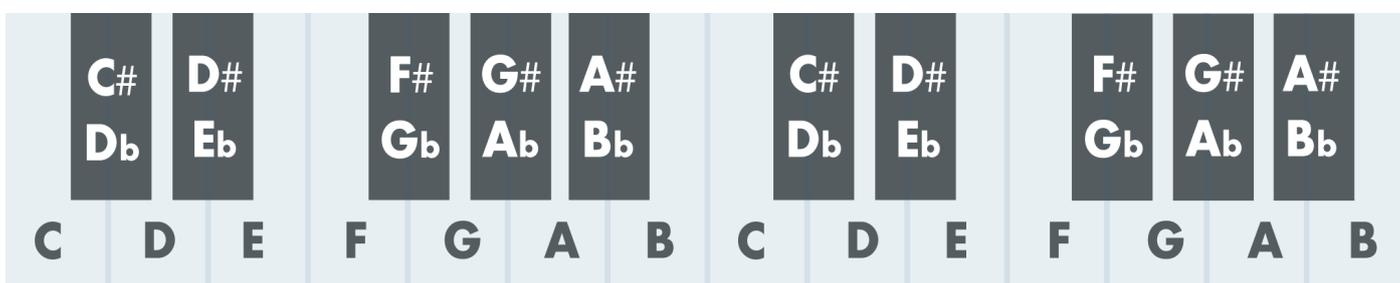
Chord Principles

This section will explain how chords are created, how chords work together to create a song and how you can use this knowledge to create your own songs.

We need to understand how notes work before we can start creating chords. The easiest way to visually look at music notes is to see the notes on a piano.

NOTES

Below is a chromatic scale.



A chromatic scale is a scale created from all the notes that we use in western music.

| C | C# or Db | D | D# or Eb | E | F | F# or Gb | G | G# or Ab | A | A# or Bb | B | C |

Sharps and Flats

Visually on a piano, these are the black notes.

The symbol # is called a sharp. (not Tic Tack Toe or Hastag)

The symbol *b* is called a flat.

The note between C and D has two names, C# and Db. They sound the same and can be written either way.

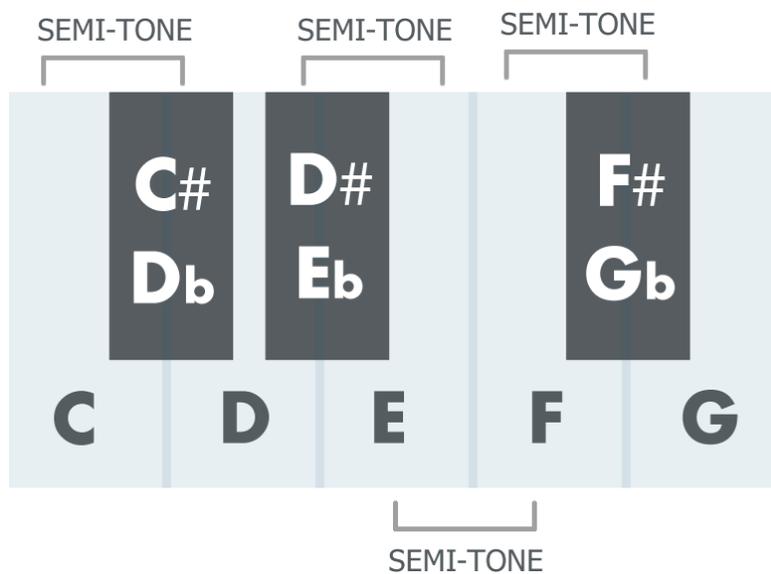
C# is pronounced as C sharp.

D^b is pronounced D flat.

Semitones

To explain the difference in notes, there is a system called tones and semitones.

The distance between a note to its next closest note is called a semitone.

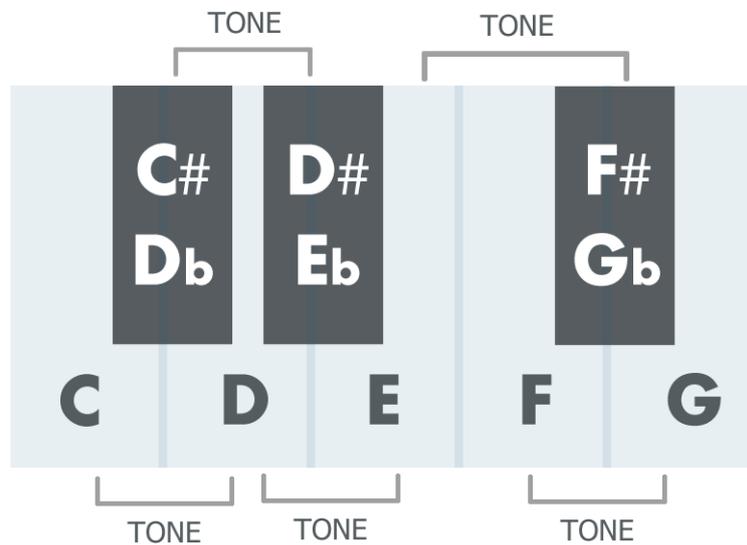


In the example above:

- C to D^b (C[#]) is a semitone
- D[#] (E^b) to E is a semitone
- E to F is a semitone
- F to G^b (F[#]) is a semitone

TONES

A tone is equal to two semitones.



From any note you count two semitones to create a distance of one tone.

From the example above:

- C to D is a tone
- C[#] (D^b) to D[#] (E^b) is a tone
- E to F[#] (G^b) is a tone
- F to G is a tone

Understanding the difference between tones and semitones is essential to understanding how scales and chords are created, which will assist you in creating your music.

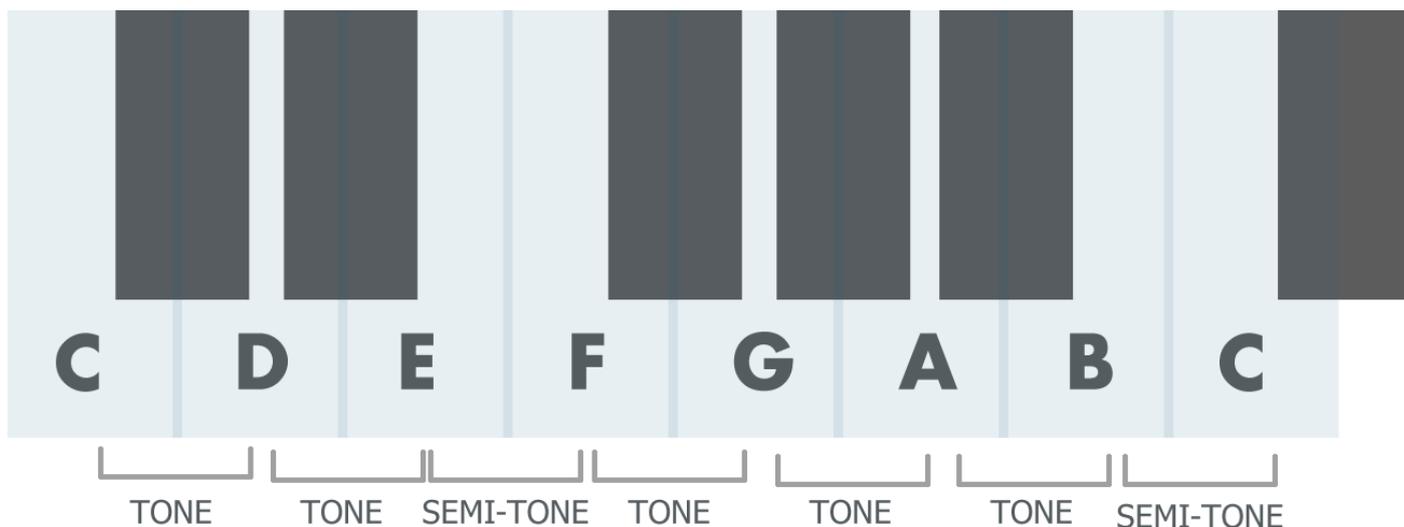
SCALES

A scale is a set of notes that have a set pattern of tones and semitones.

Let's say that I have a pattern of tones and semitones that look like the following.

tone – tone – semitone – tone – tone – tone – semitone

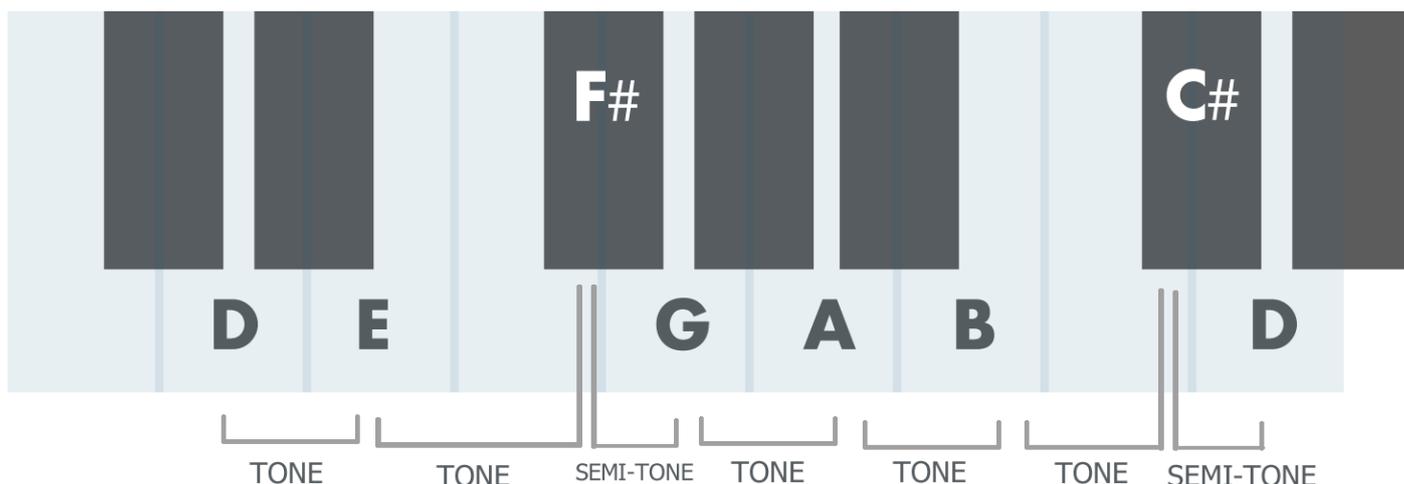
If we look at a piano and start on the note C and use the pattern above, I will end up with the following collection of notes.



This collection of notes is called a Major scale. All Major scales have the same pattern of tones and semitones.



To understand this fully, try starting the same pattern on the note D as shown.



Look carefully at the pattern. By using the Major scale intervals of tones and semitones, we can create a D Major scale. The D Major scale has the notes D-E-F[#]-G-A-B-C[#]-D.

Note: Notice that we don't call F[#] by its other name G^b. When creating most scales, make sure you only use each letter of the music scale once.

Correct: D-E-F[#]-G-A-B-C[#]-D

Incorrect: D-E-G^b-G-A-B-D^b-D

Musically the above notes will sound the same. To make it easier to read you would make sure that there is only one of each note name.



CHORDS

A chord is a group of 3 or more notes that are played at the same time. Chords are typically played on an instrument like a piano or on string instruments like a guitar.

Chords are created in a similar way to creating a scale. By using a combination of tones and semitones, we can create different chords.

Major Chords

Major chords are created using 4 semitones - 3 semitones.

C Major Chord: 4 SEMI-TONES (2 TONES) | 3 SEMI-TONES (1 1/2 Tones)

1 TONE = 2 SEMI-TONES

C MAJOR CHORD

D MAJOR CHORD (D - F# - A)

By starting on any note and following the intervals of 4 tones and 3 semitones, you can work out the notes in all the Major chords.

Try creating the following Major chords:

- E
- G
- A
- F
- B^b

Compare your results to the chart below

E	E	G [#]	B
G	G	B	D

A	A	C [#]	E
F	F	A	C
B ^b	B ^b	D	F

Minor Chords

Minor chords are written using a small *m*. C minor would be written as C^m.

The pattern for minor chords is 3 semitones - 4 semitones.

C^m
Minor Chord: 3 SEMI-TONES (1 1/2 TONES) | 4 SEMI-TONES (2 TONES)
D^m

C MINOR CHORD (C - Eb - G)

D MINOR CHORD (D - F - A)

Try creating the following chords:

- E^m
- G^m
- A^m
- F^m
- B^{bm}

Compare your results to the chart below

E ^m	E	G	B
G ^m	G	B ^b	D
A ^m	A	C	E

F^m	F	A^b	C
B^{bm}	B^b	D^b	F

Other typical chords

Creating other chords is now straight forward. Once you know the tone and semitone intervals that you need to use to create a particular type of chord, you can create many other chords that you see written on music.

C^7 (seventh):

4 semitones - 3 semitones - 3 semitones

C^{m7} (minor seventh):

3 semitones - 4 semitones - 3 semitones

C^{Major7} (major seventh):

4 semitones - 3 semitones - 4 semitones

C^{sus4} (suspended fourth):

5 semitones - 2 semitones

C7 7 (Seventh) Chord

4 SEMI-TONES | 3 SEMI-TONES | 3 SEMI-TONES

C SEVENTH CHORD (C - E - G - Bb)

Minor 7 (Seventh) Chord **Cm7**

3 SEMI-TONES | 4 SEMI-TONES | 3 SEMI-TONES

C SEVENTH CHORD (C - E - G - Bb)

Cmajor7

4 SEMI-TONES | 3 SEMI-TONES | 4 SEMI-TONES

(C - E - G - B)

Csus4 (suspended)

5 SEMI-TONES | 2 SEMI-TONES

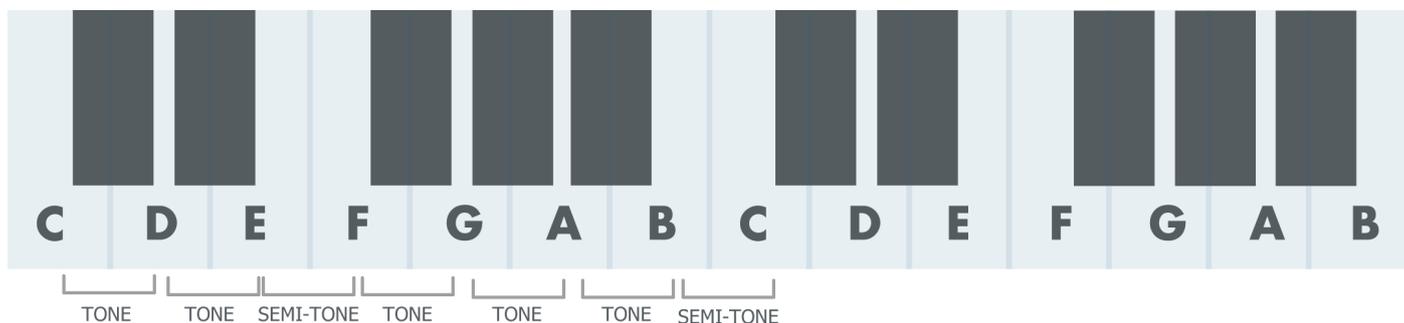
(C - F - G)

Chord Groups

This is the most critical part for songwriters to understand.

When you write a song, there is a set of chords that typically go together. By understanding the way a scale is created using tones and semitones, you can understand how groups of chords are created and use the chord groups in your songs.

Remember that a C Major scale is created by the following notes.



By creating a chord starting on each note of a Major scale we can create a collection of chords.

Let me explain. Let's start on C in the Major scale above and build a 3 note chord. If we start on C then skip a note to E then skip a note to G, we have the notes C - E - G.

We can create other 3 note chords by starting on any note in the C Major scale.

Starting on D, skip a note to F and skip another note to A, we have the notes D - F - A.

What does all this mean?

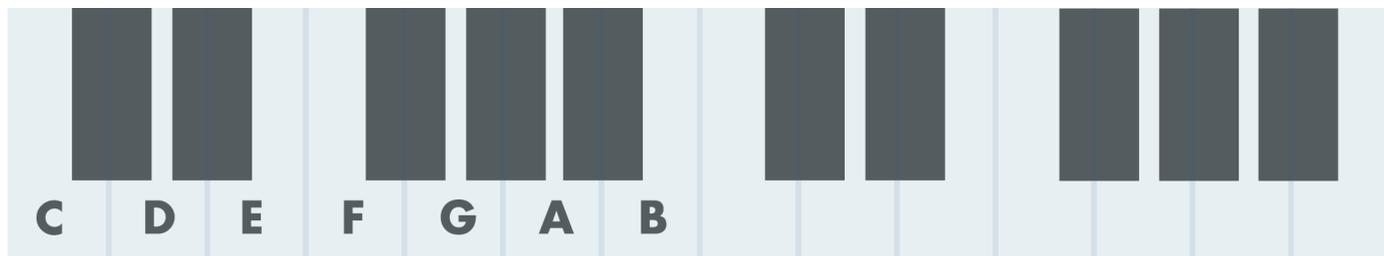
If we repeat this for all the notes in the C Major scale we have the following collection of chords.

Starting on			
C	C	E	G
D	D	F	A
E	E	G	B
F	F	A	C
G	G	B	D
A	A	C	E

By looking at the tones and semitones between the notes we now have, we can find out what type of chord we have.

C	4 semitones	E	3 semitones	G	C Major chord
D	3 semitones	F	4 semitones	A	D Minor chord
E	3 semitones	G	4 semitones	B	E Minor chord
F	4 semitones	A	3 semitones	C	F Major chord
G	4 semitones	B	3 semitones	D	G Major chord
A	3 semitones	C	4 semitones	E	A Minor chord

What this now shows is that if we use a C Major scale, which means we are in the key of C Major, we can use the following chords and they will work well together.



C	D	E	F	G	A
E	F	G	A	B	C
G	A	B	C	D	E
—	—	—	—	—	—
C	Dm	Em	F	G	Am

**A song can be created
by using the chords
C, Dm, Em, F, G, Am**

The following shows an example of chord patterns based on the chords in the C Major scale.

C	A^m	F	G
C	F	G	C
C	A^m	G	C

| A^m | F | G | C |

| C | D^m | E^m | F | C | D^m | F | G | C |

By following the same pattern for each major scale you can discover the chords that work together.

C Major	C	D ^m	E ^m	F	G	A ^m
D Major	D	E ^m	F ^{#m}	G	A	B ^m
E Major	E	F ^{#m}	G ^{#m}	A	B	C ^{#m}
F Major	F	G ^m	A ^m	B ^b	C	D ^m
G Major	G	A ^m	B ^m	C	D	E ^m
A Major	A	B ^m	C ^{#m}	D	E	F ^{#m}
B Major	B	C ^{#m}	D ^{#m}	E	F [#]	G ^{#m}

SO HOW DOES THIS HELP A SONG WRITER?

By understanding the chords that work together, a songwriter will find it easier to create their own songs.

By starting on the first chord, you can build the order of your chord chart.

Starting with a G chord, you can use any of the chords in the key of G Major - G, A^m, B^m, C, D or E^m.

This is not a set rule. You can be creative and use chords that are not in the same group to make your music interesting.

Form Principles

When people listen to contemporary music, there are distinct patterns in how the music is formed.

In general, most people will recognise that a typical pop song is divided into sections, usually at least a verse and a chorus. This may seem obvious, but there is a reason why this structure is used and it is a formula that has become accepted as the standard by most contemporary music songwriters.

Each section can be described as any of the following.

- Introduction (Intro)
- Verse
- Pre-chorus
- Chorus
- Bridge (Middle 8/16)
- Solo
- Ending (Outro)

The sections of a song can be placed in any order depending on the lyrics and music and how you intend to develop the song. How you change the structure of the song can change how people feel or react to the song.

Examples of song structures are:

- Verse - Verse - Verse
- Verse - Chorus - Verse - Chorus
- Verse - Chorus - Verse - Bridge - Chorus
- Intro - Verse - Pre Chorus - Chorus - Verse - Pre Chorus - Chorus - Chorus
- Intro - Verse - Pre Chorus - Chorus - Verse - Pre Chorus - Chorus - Bridge - Solo - Chorus - Chorus - Outro

Musically verses have the same or similar chords as each other. Similarly each chorus will often use the same chord pattern.

Deciding on the correct form of your song can take time and experimentation. Sometimes the song just 'works' when you choose the right form. Other times you have to experiment and change the form until it works correctly for your song.

Extras

HOOK

A hook is a part of the song, often a chorus that gets people in and makes a song memorable. This could be a melody line, a riff or lead part that is easily recognisable and hopefully unique.

Think about songs you have heard, after hearing the first 2 or 3 seconds you know exactly what song it is, this is a hook.

Creating a song that is memorable is something that many writers strive to achieve. There are many songs that the lyrics are the focal point of the song, but by adding a recognisable hook, you can make your song musically memorable as well.

By concentrating on the introduction and the chorus, you can make a song easier for people to remember and enjoy.

It is not essential to have a hook, but it is worth taking it into consideration when writing your songs.

INSTRUMENTATION

Deciding on the instruments for your song can be influenced by many factors including the list below:

- The sound that you want for the song
If you already have a sound that you want, then you should already have a good idea of the instruments that you will need for the song. Listen to other music similar to what you are trying to achieve and take notice of the instruments used in the songs.
- Availability of musicians
Who you have available to perform live or record the parts for your music, can have a major impact on how you choose the instruments for your songs. The more instruments you have the more people, time and cost that can be added to your songs.
- Target audience
The audience and venues that you intend to play in can also help decide what instruments you will use. If you plan to perform in restaurants, it may not be sensible to have a big Marshal stack and drum kit with double kick drums and 48 cymbals. Instead, a piano may be all that you need. Look at the possible venues and the potential audience, see where they would go to listen to you and choose your instrumentation accordingly.

- Live versus Recording

A common issue musicians have is to decide should they make their recorded music the same instruments as their live music. For example, if you perform with a guitarist, bass player and a small jazz drum kit, then should you only use those instruments for your recordings? The answer is simple, it depends on you. There is no wrong answer, as long as the audience knows what to expect. If you set the expectation that the live and recorded music will sound the same, then the audience will expect that. If you set the expectation that your live performance and recorded music will be different in relation to the instrumentation then people will expect the difference. As long as people know what is happening there usually isn't a big issue.

Typical instrumentation selections can be:

- Vocal and piano
- Vocal and acoustic guitar
- Vocal, piano/guitar, bass and drums
- Vocal, acoustic guitar, electric guitar, bass and drums
- Vocal, acoustic guitar, electric guitar, pedal steel, bass and drums
- Vocal, acoustic guitar, electric guitar, fiddle, pedal steel, bass and drums
- Vocal, piano, guitar, brass section, bass and drums
- Vocal, piano, string section, bass and drums

Any other combination or additional instruments can be used, especially extra backing vocals.

Writing parts for each instrument can be time consuming and expensive but the benefits of working with studio musicians, an arranger or your own 'band' can often help produce more creative and professional results.

DEMO RECORDING

It is worth recording a demo of your song and asking trusted friends, musicians or mentors to critique what you have written. By recording a demo, you get to hear your song as a listener and also give others a chance to comment and add constructive ideas to improve the song.

When you are really close to a song, you can often miss obvious mistakes or not see better ways of 'working' the song.

Always be aware that some people may want to take your songs, but the risk is often worth it for the constructive feedback and improvements that you can make to a song.

Remember that some people will give feedback and then want songwriting attribution. That means they want to own part of the song. This is ok if you already agreed on this and preferably have a written writer's contract. Be upfront first to make sure everyone understands your expectations and assumptions, especially when it comes to writing and sharing any part of the music.

It is important to be open to criticism

PRE-PRODUCTION

Now that you have your song or songs written and have an idea on the instrumentation, it is time to start the pre-production process.

Pre-production means different things to different people, but the process is really all the things you need to do prior to starting the process of production. That is, recording, mixing and mastering your music.

You have already been doing part of the pre-production process by writing and arranging your music, but there is more to do before you get into the studio.

These are some of the areas you will have to consider:

- Writing out chord charts
- Choosing musicians
- Rehearsing with musicians
- Arranging additional parts
- Organising a recording studio
- Schedule the recording process
- Booking mixing and mastering engineers
- Costing the project
- Cover design
- Digital distribution
- Physical distribution

- Duplication or replication of CD's

Can I Ask A Favour?

If you enjoyed this book, found it useful or otherwise, then I'd really appreciate it if you would post a short review on Amazon. I do read all the reviews personally so that I can continually write what people are wanting.

Thanks for your support!

Chris Richter

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What next?

Now that you understand the basic chord theory required to start writing your own songs, join our group of musicians and songwriters at www.xsnoise.com.au/songwriters for ideas and courses to help you improve your songwriting.



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