

By Alex Sturbaum

When I think about what makes a good folk song, I often come back to a quote from Irish singer Frank Harte: “Those in power write the histories, those who suffer write the songs.” Traditional music provides stories that you can’t find in other places—stories of struggle, stories of hope, or just the stories of ordinary humans who didn’t make it into the history books. There’s a depth to the music that is hard to find anywhere else, and while that depth is a truly beautiful thing, it can be daunting when one is attempting to write new songs within the tradition. Capturing that essence, making a new song sound timeless, is *hard*, and I don’t profess to be an expert or an authority. That said, I’ve written within the tradition for nearly twenty years now, and I’d love to share what tips I have.



The first step to writing a folk song is defining what, to you, constitutes a folk song. The term is nebulous, and many people have different definitions (all of which are arguably correct). There are a few things, though, that I’ve found universally true. First, a folk song is a song of the folk—it belongs to nobody because it belongs to everybody. Second, it’s music with a job to do; whether that job is telling a story, building community, coordinating work, or even just being fun to sing, a good folk song pulls its weight.

So once you’ve decided your criteria for what makes a folk song, how do you go about writing one? The first and most obvious step is to really engage with the tradition by listening to a lot of traditional songs, learning the words, and thinking critically about what you like about them. As you learn more songs, you will begin to notice recurring tropes, both in terms of strong structure (the second line of every verse being a refrain, call-and-response patterns, a space in the chorus featuring a line of the preceding verse, etc.), and narrative (leaving a loved one to go sailing, drinking, shipwreck, murder, and so on). Building on these tropes is an excellent way to write a folk song; a nice thing about working in the tradition is that you don’t have to reinvent the wheel. You can also take a common trope and subvert it to create something new.

The second step is deciding what to write about. My advice here is simple: write a song you want to sing. Many of my songs have come from wishing that a song existed and not finding it. Despite the richness of the tradition, there are a lot of stories that still remain untold, and a new folk song can help change that. (The song attached to this article, “Sweet Mary Starbuck,” was written to add a bit more queer representation to the tradition.) Folk music’s specificity is very effective at responding to issues of justice—for example, a song that says “capitalism is bad” feels vague and removed, but a song like “Aragon Mill” hits like a gut punch. That said, don’t pressure yourself to write something deeply profound and intense right off the bat—that’s a good way to stare at a blank page for an hour. Feel free to go small; you can write a pub song about the bar where your pub sings happen, or about a story from history you like, or about mining for toads. All are valid. It’s perfectly acceptable to tell a story that has already been told; there are dozens of versions of some songs for good reason. This also gives you the

opportunity to tell a story from a different perspective or subvert a problematic trope. (In the latter case, though, the song must still stand on its own; a song that exists only to rebut other songs will be nigh incomprehensible to someone who hasn’t heard the songs it’s rebutting.) It can help to start with a setting, a character, or even a call to attention (“come all ye...”), and see what comes from there.

Once you have a topic for your song, you have to write the dang thing. There’s no one way to go about this, but I have found it helps to keep three criteria in mind at all times. The first is accessibility: the song must be straightforward in its language, topic, and message. I always aim for a listener to be able to “get” the song on their first listen. The second is specificity. I try to make my songs sound like they are about real people in real places and times. Even if I am making stories up out of whole cloth, or adding fantastical elements, I try to add enough historical or personal details to make them seem real. Third, and most important, is singability. If you’re writing a song for the oral tradition, and especially for social singing, it needs

to be a song that is easy for people to sing. Make sure the rhythm flows easily when sung, as the rhythm is by far the most important component of singability. Don’t get too hung up on rhymes; partial rhymes are fine, and a forced rhyme can be deeply jarring in a song. If I can’t find a good rhyme, I’ll often just change the word or phrase I’m trying to rhyme with.

When I am writing a song, I will often already have a song in mind whose mood or feel matches the one I hope to write. As I get words onto the page, the new song takes on a life of its own but retains some characteristics of the song that inspired it. This brings me to my final piece of advice: steal vociferously. The trad repertoire builds on itself and always has; as you study the tradition, you may find turns of phrase or melodic lines that repeatedly appear in folk songs. There is no shame in snagging these and putting

them in your own song; after all, this music belongs to everyone, you included.

In a world that is often frightening and isolating, social singing is one of the most beautiful ways I have seen people come together. We as a society can always use another good song, and writing is great fun; I urge everyone out there to try their hand at writing a song and see what happens. With any luck, we’ll all be singing some of them together sometime soon.

*Alex Sturbaum is a musician, singer, and songwriter based in Seattle. They perform solo and with the contra dance bands Countercurrent, Gallimaufry, and the Waxwings. alexsturbaum.com Photo by Brian Lindsay.*

🔊 Listen to Alex sing this song at [bit.ly/SweetMaryStarbuck](https://bit.ly/SweetMaryStarbuck)

## SWEET MARY STARBUCK

Alex Sturbaum

I ma-ried John Cof-fin just two years a - go And he's a fine man, as all  
 7  
 Nan-tuck-et knows And he's bound to make sec-ond mate, or so I hear, if the  
 13  
 Char-les brings home e-nough o - il next year Sweet Ma-ry Star-buck from  
 19  
 Nan-tuck-et Town, if she were the sea I would will-ing - ly drown, and her  
 25  
 voice like a bell on a clear win - ter's day sets  
 29  
 my heart a - ring - ing and wing - ing a - way.

I married John Coffin just two years ago  
 And he's a fine man, as all Nantucket knows  
 And he's bound to make second mate, or so I hear  
 If the Charles brings home enough oil next year

At twenty a mother, at nineteen a bride  
 With a child on my knee and another inside  
 My heart it was broken, and swept out to sea  
 Where my sweet Mary found it and brought it to me

*Chorus:*  
 Sweet Mary Starbuck from Nantucket town  
 If she were the sea I would willingly drown  
 And her voice like a bell on a clear winter's day  
 Sets my heart a-ringing and winging away

At meeting one morning she came to me there  
 With the Nantucket wind in her flyaway hair  
 Her hand, soft and certain, clasped mine in the lane  
 And I felt my heart shiver when she spoke my name

Her words came in whispers, in trembling lines  
 Her cheeks red as roses, her eyes all a-shine  
 Then she kissed me so gently, so soft and so sure  
 The world spun round once, and at once I was hers

*Chorus*  
 On Nantucket our men go to hunt for the whale  
 And they live at the mercy of teeth, sea, and gale  
 But in town life goes on, and it goes on apace  
 With children, and letters, and Mary's sweet face

So when John comes I'll give him a kiss and a smile  
 And a good whaleman's wife I will be for a while  
 And in time I'll stand watching his sail fade at sea  
 Then go home where my true love lies waiting for me

*Chorus*