

## SONGCRAFTERS COLORING BOOK

### SO WHAT THE HECK IS “CRAFT”, ANYWAY?

*By Bill Pere*

**O**ne meaning of “craft” is a transportation vessel that takes you from point “A” to point “B”. But ask a hundred people what is meant by songcraft, and you may get some blank stares. However, it can be thought of the same way. Craft is a way of getting songs from point “A” to point “B”. So let’s take a step back--

**A**sk a hundred people what the role of a songwriters organization is and you’ll likely get a hundred answers. In practice, there are many different roles that such an organization could play, thus it comes down to how the organization defines and presents itself. The three broad facets relating to songwriting are: (1) the art, (2) the craft, and (3) the business.

**W**hat would an organization look like if it focuses exclusively on each of these? An arts-based group would be one which emphasizes and supports creative expression in any form, with little application of rules, guidelines, or formats, and which does not judge or evaluate songs in any prescribed way. Members would be seeking affirmation, encouragement, and the opportunity to network with like-minded folks. “Success” is measured solely by the artist’s own internal criteria. Such an organization is likely to be a non-profit entity, functioning as a support group, and discussing topics such as creative process.

**A** craft-based group would have much of the above, but would add a new element. Craft is often misunderstood, for when confused with the artistic focus as discussed above, it may be perceived as “imposing too much structure”, “selling-out”, “compromising artistic integrity”, etc. But exactly what is “craft”? Consider the craft of woodworking – a woodworker is an artisan, and may create what he or she wishes without regard to any rules. However, one can certainly learn about such factual things as the nature of different woods; how to make smooth, secure joints; how to sand and varnish wood; how to use different kinds of hand tools or power tools, etc. This knowledge can be used to build skills which enable the artisan to bring craftsmanship to his or her art. The emphasis here is on education with the objective of providing tools to make the best possible product. Individuals still have their own definitions of success and complete artistic freedom. Craft-oriented organizations may discuss rules and guidelines as they apply to craft (*i.e. how*), not art (*i.e. what*), and may evaluate or critique the execution of technique (*i.e. how*) without judging artistic value (*i.e. what*). Members may be seeking the same types of things as in an arts-based organization, with the added desire for education about tricks of the trade and seeking to create a more polished end product. Such an organization is likely to be a non-profit entity functioning as an educational group centered on the music and lyrics.

**A** business-based group focuses on commercial outcome of the product. The emphasis is on whether or not it can sell, regardless of the underlying elements of art and craft. Success is generally defined in terms of tangible outcomes such as money or recognition, and members would be oriented toward this type of goal. Critique of products is done with commercial outcome in mind, and the information presented usually revolves around marketing strategies and tools. Such an organization is often organized as a business league, and though it itself may be non-profit, it will not typically have a tax-exempt status. Discussions may focus on production and marketing.

**S**o back to the original question of where does that leave a songwriters organization? The answer is that a songwriters group can be any of the above, individually or in combination. It is up to the organization, but what is important is for the songwriter to make sure that their personal goals fit with those of the organization, or at least be aware of where they differ.

**A**mong songwriter organizations, the Connecticut Songwriters Association has always been, first and foremost, a craft-based organization, while encompassing all the elements of an arts association as well. Its charter defines it as “*A non-profit, educational organization dedicated to*

*improving the art and craft of original musical and lyrical composition”*. That has been the clear statement of purpose for 23 years, and all of the programs are centered around this purpose – helping writers craft the best songs that they can, while defining their own personal goals and artistic outlets. CSA clearly acknowledges and addresses the importance of providing programs about the commercial side of songwriting, but that has never been the focus.

If a new writer comes to a craft-based organization seeking only support as an artist or assistance in commercial pursuit, they will likely be disappointed by all the emphasis on the tools and techniques for crafting music and words. But considering that many other songwriter groups are either arts-based or commercial-based, it makes CSA one of the most unique groups around, and one of the best at what they do. They have been here for almost a quarter of a century and have helped many writers find their own artistic vision, craft it to the pinnacle of polish, and go on to reach their self-defined destination of success.

Craft is often not well understood, but it sits right in the middle of that journey from creation to realization to proliferation, and thus it’s hard to get around it, or to get around without it.

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