



SONGWRITING & COMPOSITION

WITH *Michael League*

COURSE BOOK

SCOTTSBASSLESSONS.COM

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SONGWRITING & COMPOSITION

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Introduction



If you're new to songwriting, it's easy to feel overwhelmed when you're staring at a blank page wondering where to begin. In this course, Michael League, the mastermind behind the genre-crossing Snarky Puppy, talks songwriting, and how he brings a composer's mentality to his Snarky Puppy bass lines. You'll discover the stories behind some seminal Snarky Puppy tracks, and learn practical tips to help you simplify the process and unleash your own creative potential.

Michael League is bassist and bandleader with the Grammy Award-winning collective Snarky Puppy. A composer at heart, League formed Snarky Puppy in his freshman year at the University of North Texas, and his mastery of songwriting and composition has made him a true bass hero.

Lesson 1

Bass Is The Place

"I always say, 'It's not a C chord until I play a C,'" Sting once told Bass Player Magazine. "You can change harmony very subtly, but very effectively as a bass player. That's one of the great privileges of our role and why I love playing bass." In lesson 01, we're going to apply that same principle using a static C major chord.

The most common type of chord that beginning pianists learn is called a triad, which is a three note chord that consists of a root note, the third and the fifth. Triads are usually played with the root note doubled in the bass. For example, a C major triad will typically be played with C in the bass, but what if we were to change the bass note?

Changing the bass note of a chord can completely change its sound and even its implied function within a chord progression. The more you play around with different combinations, the more ideas you'll come up with and the more intuitively you'll begin to use this idea with your songwriting.

continued →

LESSON 1 (continued)

Example 1

Video - 00:41

Example 1 displays 11 chords in 4/4 time, arranged in three rows. Each chord is shown in both treble and bass staves. The chords are:

- Row 1: C, C/A, C/E, C/F
- Row 2: C/G, C/B $\flat$, C/A $\flat$, C/F $\sharp$
- Row 3: C/B, C/D, C/D $\flat$

The notation includes the chord name above the staff, the treble staff with a grand staff brace, and the bass staff with a grand staff brace. The bass staff notes are often written as whole notes with a flat or sharp symbol below them to indicate the bass note.

Lesson 2

A Songwriter's Toolkit

In lesson 02, we're going to take a closer look at a Snarky Puppy track called *Flood*, which appears on the 2009 album, *Tell Your Friends*. It's a song that uses very simple, repetitive harmony, but note how Michael manoeuvres the bass notes in order to create a backdrop for the rhythm and the harmony in each section.

Example 1 - A Section

Video - 02:12

The main riff in the A Section moves between an Emaj⁹ and Amaj⁹ chord, with the bass playing a more rhythmic part underneath. "Most of the time, I start with either a chord progression on keyboard or a figure on guitar," says Michael. "From there, I think of a groove, and then generally I come up with the bass line because that comes to me the easiest."



continued →

LESSON 2 (continued)

Example 2 - B Section

Video - 05:53

The B section starts with the same Emaj⁹ voicing, but moves the bass note from E to C#, which creates a minor sound. The melody also moves to a more arpeggiated pattern. “The essential element for me is that I never sit down to write without first thinking of a concept. That way it’s not just random sections put together, but one full story that develops throughout.”

The musical notation for Example 2 - B Section consists of two systems of piano accompaniment in E major (three sharps) and 5/4 time. The first system shows four measures. The right hand (treble clef) features a melody of eighth and quarter notes, while the left hand (bass clef) plays a bass line with dotted half notes and quarter notes, often beamed together. The second system shows five measures, continuing the pattern and ending with a double bar line. The bass line in the second system includes a C# note, which creates a minor sound as mentioned in the text.

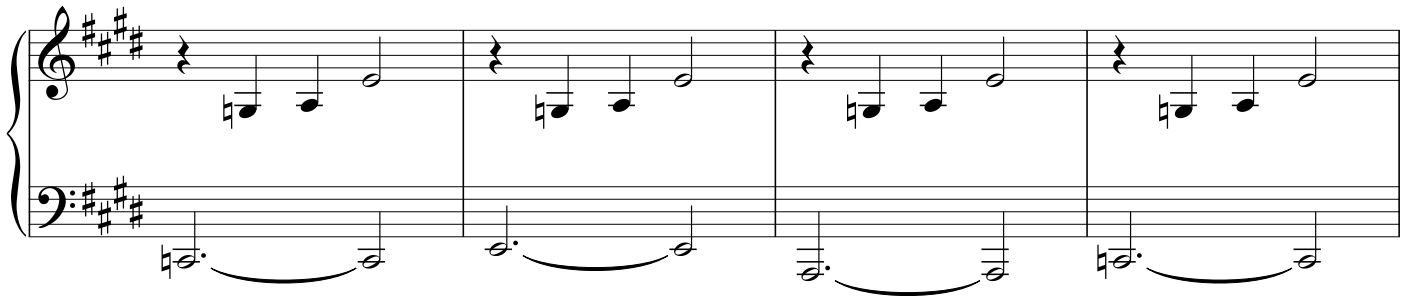
Example 3 - Solo Section

Video - 14:03

The Miles Davis-inspired section that forms the backdrop for Robert ‘Sput’ Searight’s drum solo finds new ways to develop the original theme even further. Michael starts by moving the bass line around, landing on the 1-3-6-3 scale degrees of E major, C major and A^b major. There are various techniques for developing a theme like this. As a songwriter or composer, it’s a good idea to embrace routines and practices that help you to find whatever sparks your creativity.

continued →

LESSON 2 (Ex. 3 continued)



Lesson 3

Writing Songs Using Rhythmic Motifs

It's often worth putting in the time and effort to come up with a central theme that really carves a place in a listener's memory. A strong, supporting rhythmic phrase or motif can often give a song its entire signature. This lesson centers around a composition called *All The Way Home*, which Michael wrote with vocalist Malika Tirolien for the 2018 Bokante album *What Heat*.

Example 1

Video - 03:24

If you have a go-to instrument to write all of your songs, you'll likely run up against a problem: all your songs will start to sound the same. The solution is to switch instruments as frequently as possible. In this example, Michael highlights how an unfamiliar instrument can help you discover the perfect sound to complete your next composition.

Tuning:

(low to high) B-F#-B-E-A-D

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

T
A
B

continued →

LESSON 3 (Ex. 1 continued)

First system of musical notation. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). It contains a melody of eighth notes in the first measure, followed by a half note, and then a quarter note. The bottom staff is a guitar TAB with two lines. The first line contains a series of zeros (0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0). The second line contains a series of zeros (0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0). The system ends with a double bar line.

Second system of musical notation. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). It contains a melody of eighth notes in the first measure, followed by a half note, and then a quarter note. The bottom staff is a guitar TAB with two lines. The first line contains a series of zeros (0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0). The second line contains a series of zeros (0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0). The system ends with a double bar line.

Third system of musical notation. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). It contains a melody of eighth notes in the first measure, followed by a half note, and then a quarter note. The bottom staff is a guitar TAB with two lines. The first line contains a series of zeros (0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0). The second line contains a series of zeros (0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0). The system ends with a double bar line.

continued →

LESSON 3 (continued)

Example 2

Video - 08:46

The second example outlines the change in direction that happens at the bridge. The key centre modulates from B minor to D minor, and there's also a variation in the rhythm. These are both great tools for allowing the listener to keep track of where they are in the song, and where they are headed next without losing their interest.

Tuning:

(low to high) B-F[#]-B-E-A-D

Lesson 4

Counterpoint as a Compositional Device

Counterpoint is a technique that involves combining two or more independent melody lines. It's one of the characteristic sounds of Western classical music. Bach wrote a ton of it, and in this lesson we're going to use some of the ideas from Michael's Latin-influenced composition, *Semente*, from Snarky Puppy's 2016 album, *Culcha Vulcha*, as a vehicle for getting started with the concept as a composer.

continued →

LESSON 4 (continued)

Example 1

Video - 06:00

In Example 01, we're going to take a simple melody and create a counter melody in the bass that fills in the gaps without distracting from the original. Each line works on its own, but the whole is more than the sum of its parts.

The musical notation for Example 1 consists of three systems of piano accompaniment. Each system is written for a grand piano, with a treble staff and a bass staff. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is 4/4. The first system shows a simple melody in the treble staff and a counter melody in the bass staff. The second system continues the melody and counter melody. The third system concludes the piece with a final chord.

continued →

LESSON 4 (continued)

Example 2

Video - 08:12

A common use of counterpoint is to create bass vs melody lines, but what happens if we flip these parts around? Instead of having a melody line and a bass line, with one serving a supporting role to the other, each voice feels equally important in serving the composition.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for piano accompaniment, written in 4/4 time and the key of B-flat major (two flats). The first system consists of two staves. The treble staff begins with a whole rest, followed by a half note G4, a quarter note F#4, and a half note E4, all beamed together. The bass staff begins with a half note G2, a quarter note F#2, and a half note E2, all beamed together. The second system also consists of two staves. The treble staff begins with a half note G4, a quarter note F#4, and a half note E4, all beamed together. The bass staff begins with a half note G2, a quarter note F#2, and a half note E2, all beamed together. The notation is clean and professional, with clear note heads and stems.

Lesson 5

How to Beat Writer's Block

Sometimes, creativity just dries up. You sit down at the piano, stare blankly at the keys and time just passes. In our final lesson, Michael rounds up 3 tips to help you overcome writer's block.

Clear Your Head

It can often be good to step away from the frenzy of the writing process. Also, a timeout is a great opportunity to recharge your batteries. A good idea is to carry a portable audio recorder or get an audio app on your phone, to quickly capture ideas whenever they come to you.

The Listener Experience

Imagine yourself in the audience. Ask yourself if the music is accomplishing what you set out to do in the first place.

Creative Singing

Keep your ideas singable. This is especially true if you are composing with your instrument. Bass lines or melodies that you can sing will feel more natural.

Course Summary

Writing a song from scratch can be a pretty daunting task, especially if you consider all of the different elements that go into making music. But if you follow some of the ideas that we've covered in this course, you'll find the process a lot easier. These ideas are meant to keep your creativity flowing, but don't forget part of the journey as a songwriter is to discover your own process of making music. What sparks your creativity? Hopefully these lessons will help you to start that journey.

