

# On writing lyrics for the National



Writer and editor Carin Besser on collaborating with her husband Matt Berninger, finding the right words for a song and a singer, and how a band is like a family.

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 1972 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#), [Time management](#).

**What's your process generally like for writing lyrics? Matt [Berninger] mentioned to me that you had an even bigger role on the new album. Does the band give you an instrumental to write lyrics to? Or does Matt start a draft and you revise?**

It has been different on every record, but it almost always starts with a musical sketch from the band. Maybe some ideas and phrases have collected and are hanging around in notebooks, but usually those are just things to start with, or play around with. They almost always have to change into something else before they'll work in a song.

On every record there have been a handful of songs that Matt and I work on together—sometimes he's put something aside and I pick it up for a while. Sometimes he'll have just a chorus and I'll try to write verses, or sometimes there are just mumbles and nonsense words that we both record and trade. Maybe I do some mumbles, and then he'll go and sing over it and say, "Look what you wrote!" He's very encouraging like that, especially when he doesn't want to work all alone on something.

When we became parents, we got into a habit of handing off lyric-writing. Sometimes it's about letting the person who is not working find a way to truly relax, like, "Don't worry, I'll work for a while." It's stressful when you're a little in love with what you have so far, but stuck.

What was different on this latest record was that we were writing for other singers. I realized early on that that meant I should try a little harder. Matt has long been encouraging me to try a little harder. So I worked more and more separately from him, and stewed over things by myself for a while. That way he couldn't really tell if I was working hard or not. And then we heard these other singers already fully owning parts of early demos and it was like, "Oh, hey, maybe there really is a lot more to do." Like finding a whole new wing in your house. There's so much magic and layered thinking in the music already, before it gets to us, and there's so much to do with lyrics, and with the drama of the character, but what about when you feel another kind of psyche singing at you, too?

**Can you walk us through the process—maybe on a particular song on the new album, or a classic? I imagine some songs are harder than others. I'm mostly curious about the back and forth you mentioned. It makes me think of Gordon Lish.**

Typically Matt writes most of the record and I start writing for very specific reasons toward the middle or end of the process—usually it's because I think he might not finish one of the songs I hope will make the record or

because I have an idea for a melody and Matt will often only hear me out if I have words in there, too. This was a way of working that we started around Trouble Will Find Me. Once I had to try singing my ideas, too, I became much more sympathetic and a bit less clueless as a partner.

And then by the next record, I think we felt like his character could use a little external relief or something. A meaningful dialogue or two. We wrote "Nobody Else Will Be There" as an exchange—that song is partly a set of complaints we have about each other. He wrote, "My faith is sick and my skin is thin as ever," and I wrote "Goodbyes always take us half an hour"—and that's kind of exactly a writing fight, too—like, "Does it always have to go the bone?" Maybe sometimes one or the other of us is finding the other one a smidge too much and writing in a joke.

On this most recent record I was terrified of writing for it because I knew I really should, and when I get a little frozen, it's hard to write alongside Matt who is so fast and so funny and authentic so quickly. It can be daunting to try—but I was like, "Oh, crap who cares?" He sounds charming when he's singing a half thought-through line that he didn't write himself. Maybe he's sillier and more relaxed.

On Sleep Well Beast—there were so many moments that came together so quickly, that I couldn't worry too much. The most last-minute back and forth we had was on the song that became "The System Only Dreams in Total Darkness." Up until the last day of recording vocals, that song had different lyrics and vocal melodies. There was something about an earlier version that I was hung up on—melody-wise—so I went back and found a set of Matt's mumbles and wrote lyrics all in one night, and sent it to Matt. I didn't really care about the lyrics—I just wanted to try to make an older melody work, one that he had mumbled his way through in a take and then forgotten about. It was maybe not the best idea to send a whole new approach on the last night, but we were writing a lot up until the last minute on that record—they were working on a lot of songs at once—and so in the end it was the only time I found to do it.

I wrote quickly from about midnight to 3am and then sent it. This was just after the election. The music was so full of joy and friction and a kind of electric vulnerability. I was trying to write lyrics that sounded a little like cheerful machines were writing them for us, probably because I was tired. I think very little of this idea was coming through, but it made me feel like I should keep going. Matt was never going to write a song in the voice of a cheerful machine! In the end, Matt took what I did and quickly found a way to make it all sweeter and creepier and less nonsensical.

**Do you have a favorite line from the lyrics you've written? Or a favorite song?**

I don't have any favorites, but I do feel most surprised by the lyrics in a song called "Hey Rosey" on the new record. I really liked the sketch for this one, but I didn't know if Matt and I would be able to find an idea as good as the music already was. It was late in the process. I was trying to write lyrics that were simple and bold, because this was a feeling I was getting from the work everyone else was doing—some sense of appreciating simpler pleasures, or maybe something about finding out that the simplest pleasures really are the most profound—somehow that's what the record, and the film Mike Mills made with it, had me thinking about. And there was something I'd been noticing about how both Matt and Aaron work—as restless and hardworking as they are, as much as they like to do so many things, send out so many arrows—everything they do seems to deepen their sensitivities rather than dull them.

So I wanted to write lines that were kind of blunt and exposed, and I fell right into the music, which felt to me warm and dance-y, but with an undertow. I was trying to channel a Madonna character from the '80s, or a Leonard Cohen character, like the love/faith supplicant. I like that the chorus says, "I think I know just what the feeling is" and then never names the feeling. It just climbs and climbs, which is how the music feels. For me it's about trying to achieve a moment of bliss via some feeling of perfect understanding with another person, but it's vague. I kept expecting to go back and make it less vague.

**You have a background in poetry and as a writer and editor. How is lyric writing similar or different than what you've done in the past?**

I think I probably like the same thing about poems and song lyrics. When I read poems or listen to a song I love, I get very hung up on certain lines, especially lines I both don't and do understand. I love that. But it's not that impressive. It's like being attracted to sequins. I don't really understand story or plot well, but I love a way of finding that compressed or cock-eyed way of saying the thing, so that you can kind of re-hear the thing, or so that you can hear the feeling of thought on its way.

Any kind of language on the way to an idea, I tend to like. It's mysterious enough to me that I stay interested. I also love songs where the singer is rambling on and almost doesn't seem to hear what the song is doing. Or when a vocal melody slides around in order to make a point. I also sometimes feel like with song-making, there are all these bags of fireworks laying around, so many ways in a song with a singer and against the backdrop of all the musical ideas, so many ways to try to make an impression.

**Are you still writing poetry, too? Do you find the lyric writing helps you in your other creative pursuits?**

I hope I'll write more poems someday. It feels so good to be able to collect and sort your own ideas like that. And I do think lyric writing might have helped, yes. It's like it forces the writing to be just a stop along the way, which it always is anyway. It's also the thing I do with other people, and these are the collaborators I most wanted to learn from. I still don't understand how any of them do what they do, and I can never predict what choices they'll make along the way. They are all able to stay so inventive through multiple iterations of a song, and everyone has learned by now how not to get too long delayed inside their own mind-castles, which is hard to figure out, and it means that now when they are working on an album there is a lot of energy and pretty constant forward momentum.

**Do you feel, in a way, like a secret member of the National?**

No. It's much easier not to be a member of the National. I'm too lazy. They all work so hard. But I do feel like a member of some kind of club or outer structure, some group of people around the band that have been around for so long that the band is now an ivy growing over all of us. The big family of people who have been seeing each other backstage and in studios and radio station lobbies for a long time, now with babies and toddlers and soon-to-be teenagers. The families have been a big part of the band all these years. I think that's a little bit what the new record is about.

**Carin Besser Recommends:**

**(More than) five things I have loved recently-**

A Podcast: New Yorker Fiction Podcast. In particular, Emma Cline Reads Miranda July and Etgar Keret Reads Donald Barthelme and Dave Eggers Reads Sam Shepard and George Saunders Reads Grace Paley and Barry Hannah

A Book: Lissie Habie, A Life in Pictures by Christian Viveros-Faune

Another Book: Eleanor, or, The Rejection of the Progress of Love by Anna Moschovakis

Board Game: Ghost Blitz

A TV Show: The Shivering Truth

A Poem: "Four O'Clock, Summer Street" by Medbh McGuckian

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Vocation

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Hope Hall

