THE 4-WEEK SONGWRITING CHALLENGE

WEEK 4: THE CHORD PROGRESSION

This week we're going to write a song based on a chord progression.

1. Figure out the key and write out all the possible chords.

First, pick a key, any key.

For common keys like C or G, you probably already know which chords fall within the key, but this step can be really helpful if you're in an unfamiliar key.

And even if you chose a familiar key, this step can help you make sure you're aware of all the possibilities, and you're not falling into patterns of playing the same chord progressions you're used to. (I know I do that a lot on guitar!)

Write out all the chords in order, starting on the first note of the key and think through the different roman numeral chords. (If you're not familiar with roman numerals, that's fine! As long as you've got the 7 chords right, you're good to go.)

Here's the pattern for a major key: Major, minor, minor, Major, Major, minor, diminished.

For example, in the Key of G, you would have:

G major (I chord)
A minor (ii chord)
B minor (iii chord)
C major (IV chord)
D major (V chord)
E minor (vi chord)
F# diminished (vii° chord)
(If you don't know how to do this, go here and download the chord-finder worksheet at modernsongstress.com/free-resources and work through the step-by-step instructions on how to fill it out.)

2. Choose your Verse and Chorus Progressions

Try to create contrast between the verse chord progression and the chord progression. For example, choose a simpler chord progression for the verse and a more powerful chord progression for the chorus.

Of course a lot of that's subjective, but here are some ideas:

Use fewer chords in the verse. (ex, alternating between 2 or 3 chords in the verse, 4 chords in the chorus)

Have a slower-paced chord progression in the verse. (ex, each chord is held out 2 measures in the verse, and 1 measure in the chorus.)

Leave out important chords until the chorus. (The I chord and the V in a key are usually the most important chords in a key. Try avoiding using either one (or both!) of them in the verse, and then when you finally hear them in the chorus, they will be even more impactful.)

3. Choose your Pre-Chorus and Bridge Progressions

Now that you've chosen your verse and chorus progressions, decide if you need a pre-chorus to transition between the two, or if it flows well without one.

If you do choose to have a pre-chorus, remember that the purpose of the pre-chorus is to create tension, or build suspense. Because of that, the IV or V will work really well in a pre-chorus. See what you think! What chords sound the most suspenseful to you?

Now I'm sure you know the bridge is all about contrast. So if you choose to have a bridge, think of some ways you can create contrast in the bridge.

Maybe use one of the methods I outlined in the chorus/verse section? Maybe throw in some non-diatonic (outside of the key) chords?

Or maybe hold only one chord for the entire bridge? Or take it a step further and have all the instruments drop out for an a capella bridge?
3. Put it all together

Now that you have your chord progression, try using one of the other methods in this challenge to fill out the rest of the song. Maybe improvise a melody over the chord progression? Or outline the overall story of the song next.

Whatever way you choose to finish the song, now that you've built a good structural foundation in the chord progression, the song should come together really well.