

THE INSPIRATION BEHIND: STRANGER IN MY HOUSE



LESSON SUMMARY

Every song is in its own way a little movie. You are painting a visual, putting someone in a place physically and emotionally.

In this lesson Mike pulls the curtain back on the inspirations behind one of his biggest hit songs, Stranger in My House, recorded by country music artist Ronnie Milsap. It was released in April 1983 as the first single from the album Keyed Up.

KEY TAKEAWAYS & QUOTES

- You don't have to love poetry, but it can provide you with 'musical experiences.'
- Find an approach to your song that gives you multiple emotions and behaviors to draw on.
- "I thought the words would sing well."
- Do your lyrics lack drama? Explore alternatives way to approach your concept.
- Sometimes songs require you to draw on both direct and indirect experiences.

"You have to believe your song down into the depths of who you are."

It would go on to win the Grammy Award for Best Country Song of 1984. The song tells the story of a man who begins to suspect his wife is fantasizing about being with someone else. The "stranger" takes on multiple meanings in this song, a concept Mike had to explore deeply before bringing it all together. But it began with a simple phrase that struck Mike as musical. The story of writing Stranger in My House is a story of beginning with a small concept and building upon it until you feel it says something interesting in the way that you meant to say it.



MIKE REID

INSTRUCTOR

AFTER A PRO-BOWL CAREER FOR THE CINCINNATI BENGALS, MIKE TURNED HIS FOCUS TO MUSIC AND WROTE HIT COUNTRY SONGS AND MUSIC FOR THE STAGE.

CREDITS

- Grammy award-winning songwriter
- Co-wrote "I Can't Make You Love Me"
- US Country #1 Single "Walk On Faith"
- Inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame

KEY POINT



Poetry is music.

You don't have to like poetry. You don't have to understand poetry. But poetry can introduce you to inspirational, musical thought that allows you to observe the musicality of phrases you hear or write.

KEY POINT



Make a little movie.

Some songs call for a narrative and visual flow that take your listener on a journey from beginning to middle to end. What's in your movie?

FULL TRANSCRIPT

Let's talk specifically about a couple of songs. Many years ago I recorded a hit with Ronnie Milsap called, *Stranger In My House*. It's a different kind of song in the sense that now it would be tough to hear a song like that because for one thing, it's in a minor key. For some reason, country singers don't want to sing in a minor key anymore. Right? And it's a cheating song. It's a song about a guy who suspects a lack of fidelity in his relationship. I know the inspiration for that song came first and foremost from the sound of those words. *Stranger in my house*, I simply liked it. Whether I can justify it or not, I don't know.

I can't, it's nothing I can prove. I just heard music in that phrase. It's one of the reasons I read the certain poets that I read. You don't have to love poetry and you don't have to understand poetry, but I really strongly



recommend you familiarizing yourself with poetry and all kinds of poetry, if not necessarily to understand what the poet is saying. Wallace Stevens is a favorite of mine. I've read Wallace Stevens for 40 years. I understand 5% maybe of what he's saying, but there's such beautiful music in so many of the phrases. So often I will read poetry for the musical experience, not just the ideas of it. I loved the musical sound of 'stranger in my house.' I just thought that would sing, that would be a phrase that would sing well.

So at that point you begin to make a little movie. You begin to say, okay, what is the movie? Why would someone come to a moment in a story or a song and say, there's a stranger in my house? Okay, a couple of ways. Here are the obvious ways: somebody's broken into your house and you can hear them rummaging around, right? You're in the bedroom, they're in the kitchen. There's a stranger in my house. It's an obvious way to go about it. It lacks drama to me. Not a lot you can say. Someone's broken into your house. So what? You have to be mindful of

KEY POINT



Your song has to be interesting to you first.

You have to believe in your song down into the depths of your soul. How can you ask anyone to believe in your song unless you believe in it? Write about what you think is interesting.

KEY POINT



Explore a library of emotions.

Play with ideas that allow you to access a multitude of emotions, things and human behaviors. This will add complexity and layers to your writing..

that too. When you make your movie, can you make your whole movie out of this? Now there's a stranger in my house and it's from the male point of view. There's a stranger in my house and it's you, meaning his wife, because we've grown apart.

Okay, we've grown apart. That's one way. Gee, there's a stranger in my house. I don't even know who you are anymore. For whatever reason, that seemed to be an obvious way that again lacked enough dramatic energy that I could make the story interesting for myself. Your song has to be interesting to you first. And you have to believe it. You have to believe your song and what you're saying down into the depths of who you are. Because otherwise, how can you ask anyone else to believe it?



The other way is, there's a stranger in my house but I can't prove they are there. And to me it was the most fun way to write it. He starts to get paranoid and he starts to observe the silence between himself and his wife. She seems not present in their relationship. So "there's a stranger in my house" became this other man he imagined that was on her mind, that she was thinking about. And I remember thinking that once I had that approach, that seemed to be rich because now you have a whole library of things, emotions and behaviors to draw on. She seems a little distant. When I talked to her, she doesn't look at me. Now you have her behavior, and you also have his imagination. Who is this? Is there somebody really, I don't know. There's a stranger in my house. It's this person that seems to be coming between us. It requires you to draw on your experience in your life. What do you know about relationships? What do you know about intimacy in relationships or the lack of it. Where does it bother you?