

**SWR:** Alright, today on Song Writing Routines, I have Michael Rhodes. Is that right, you have a "r" before the Michael?

**R Michael Rhodes:** I do, so for the performing part, yeah, it's R Michael Rhodes.

**SWR:** Okay. R Michael Rhodes. Fantastic. Let's get right into it. So, usually we start with the artist giving a brief introduction about themselves, how they got into music and songwriting and what their inspirations and influences are so go ahead.

**R Michael Rhodes:** Okay, sounds good. Yeah. I've been writing and playing guitar since I was about 14 years old. Actually kind of started down the musical road when I first got out of school but then took a detour and got into the real world, real life, that kind of thing. And then here, recently, my kids have all grown up and moved away and moved on, so I found I had a lot more time for the music and I started kinda getting back into it got hooked up with a couple of songwriting camps type of thing and really got to enjoying that again, so started doing some co-writing, something I had never done before and a lot more performing, a lot more recording, and that's all been within about the last two, two and a half years.

**SWR:** Fantastic. So you say you've started at 14. Were you always into music? Did someone buy you a guitar? How did that happen?

**R Michael Rhodes:** I always loved music. I got my first Rogue guitar when I was about 14. Learned how to play it then started playing everything I could. Started trying to write songs. Had the little garage rock band when I was a teenager.

**SWR:** Fantastic. You say you took a little detour. Tell me a lil bit more cos this is something that's interesting to me-- how musicians are making it, what are they doing for a living, how they're bringing the money in while writing and hopefully, their work is not stressing out their creativity. So maybe you could give me a little bit of information what you did.

**R Michael Rhodes:** Yeah, the ... Got into the computer world doing a lot of computer IT type related work, so that's kind of what paid the bills for most of my adult life. And currently, I'm an IT manager for a company in Denver, Colorado and I work eight to 10 hours a day, like most of us do when we're trying to get things going and whatnot. I always find that even though you're kind of tired at the end of the day and maybe don't want to do anything, when you get to go make music, it doesn't take very long to say, "Wow, I get to go make music now!" So that's not been a problem for me here of late to kind of switch gears and get into the music making whether I'm writing or rehearsing or whatever we're doing so that's been pretty easy for me.

**SWR:** Right. It's yeah ... It's always interesting. I keep telling this to the people that I've interviewed ... I don't know if you've heard of Elizabeth Gilbert, but she has this

talk where she talks about four different words: a job, a career, a hobby and a vocation.

**R Michael Rhodes:** Right.

**SWR:** Right? And somewhere I think is a vocation, it's your calling. Your music is your calling and job is just to make the money to support your real calling, right?

**R Michael Rhodes:** That's right.

**SWR:** So, she also says, "Hey, don't stress out your creativity and force it to make money for you. Go get a job. Do something else, alright."

How to describe what genre you're in right now?

**R Michael Rhodes:** Interesting, I think. So the best I can describe it is kind of an Americana with a bit of a country rock feel. I grew up listening to ... Some of my big influences were like James Taylor, Jim Croce, England Dan, John Ford Coley, Gordon Lightfoot on one side, right. Kinda singer-songwriter 70's thing, but I really loved the Eagles and REO Speedwagon and Head Easton, you know, all that kind of stuff that was going out all at the same time, so it kind of shaped my musical identity, if you will. And then kind of the 90's and 2000's country, I kinda started liking, too. So I had one reviewer of my music one time say, "It's a good thing Mike lives in Colorado because his music lives right between 70's Laurel Canyon and today's Nashville."

**SWR:** I love it. Yeah, that's what I hear when I hear your music. I can definitely hear the James Taylor and I can definitely hear the country and some of the acoustic folk. And I love it. So you're doing your job, your day job and then you come home. What is that time look like, when you say, "Okay, now this is my songwriting time. My music time. What does it look like for you? And how many times a week do you do this?"

**R Michael Rhodes:** From the music standpoint, I usually try to at least practice a little bit, whether I'm practicing vocals or practicing guitar, 30 minutes to an hour everyday, if I can fit the time in and do that. And then we have an acoustic duo that we perform. We do regular shows around the Colorado area and we rehearse once or twice a week with that for a couple hours. And basically what I've been doing as of late for the songwriting is working on the ideas, ideas for song titles. Ideas for concepts of songs. Working on little licks here and there, intros or lead parts or things like that. And then what I do is kind of catalog all of those and then I've been making regular writing trips to Nashville to do co-write, so then I kind of bring all of that with me when I sit down to do the co-write, so from that standpoint I try to prepare myself to go to the co-writes and then that's where I really get into the songwriting. I spent three or four days just kind of sequestered doing nothing but writing. So no outside influence is when I'm doing that. That's what I've been doing for about the last six, seven months.

**SWR:** So, this brings a bit interesting question for me cause I'm always curious about the cities people live in and so Nashville's a working town, right? It's a music town. What's the scene like in Colorado? Do you collaborate with people there or is it just a little tough to find someone?

**R Michael Rhodes:** For me, it's been a little tough to find someone and part of that has to do, I think, with my schedule. I don't belong in any songwriter groups or anything in Colorado. There probably are some, but I just haven't found them yet. And it seems like there's some really, really good writers in Nashville and to get the chance to hang out with those guys and girls and write with them that's been really cool for me. It takes my songwriting to a completely different level.

**SWR:** Okay, fantastic. Do you feel that Nashville's also very structured where I feel people I talk to and going into sessions, it's like, it's almost well-developed in how you'll do this.

**R Michael Rhodes:** It depends on who you're writing with, I think. There's been a tremendous amount of younger, pop-ier kind of people coming to town and doing writing and whatnot. And so when you can get in with someone that's got kind of that genre experience along with a maybe an old-timer, you're talking about the strict in-the-box kind of thing and then you throw all those people in a room together, it can get really fun.

**SWR:** So, have you pitched some of your songs? What has your success been like?

**R Michael Rhodes:** Actually, it's funny that you asked me that. Actually, Sunday I had a meeting with a publisher in Nashville and they're sending me four single song contracts.

**SWR:** Fantastic. Congratulations.

**R Michael Rhodes:** Thank you. So, I'd say I've been doing okay.

**SWR:** You have been. And that was a question ... I kinda sort of looked at your website already and see some of the awards you won and things. How does that process work? Did you reach out to the publisher? Did they reach out to you?

**R Michael Rhodes:** So part of the group that I'm associated with in Nashville, it's called Global Songwriters' Connection, they do a wonderful, wonderful job for up and coming songwriters and they try to put you in positions to learn, to get co-writes, to do publisher pitches. They do a couple times a month, they do what they call a publisher online pitch and you can register for that. It's first come first serve and they bring a publisher in and the publisher will listen to the songs and they'll give you immediate feedback and sometimes, you get a little bit lucky and they decide to take one. And then you kind of develop a bit of a relationship, so the meeting that I had Sunday was the third communication I've had with that particular publisher and had been working back and forth for the last couple of months with them. And then they finally heard something that they liked, so ...

**SWR:** Great.

**R Michael Rhodes:** And I shouldn't say that. It wasn't like they didn't hear what they like. What's interesting when you're talking to the publisher, specifically in Nashville, is they like a lot of stuff, but they're really focused in on what they need right now, and if what you're playing for them isn't what they need right now, they basically pass on it even though they might like it a lot.

**SWR:** Did they put it in a vault or is it like, well, no, maybe pitch later some other time.

**R Michael Rhodes:** They say they do, absolutely, but you know how that goes, right? Again, it's like, would you remember a song that ... You know, if you're listening to hundreds of songs a week, would you remember one from three months ago? I guess probably not.

**SWR:** Yeah.

**R Michael Rhodes:** So, what I'm learning is I'm not afraid to re-pitch stuff.

**SWR:** So, that brings a good question. So you know the genre and the style you're familiar with, so apparently there's some overlap here, right? Or was this ... I guess maybe the question is this, right? You can write a song and it could traverse genres, right? You may choose to perform it in your style but it may actually work for anything.

**R Michael Rhodes:** Right.

**SWR:** So, when you're in talks with the publisher, you said feedback, So, feedback to me is interesting. Do they ask you to tweak stuff or change stuff or ...

**R Michael Rhodes:** Suggestions, certainly. Yeah. Unless they actually have something specific they wanna walk a song over to today, I don't think they would ask you to change anything, but they do give you a lot of suggestions. They say, you know, "That chorus might be a little weak, you might wanna add a couple of elements here or that verse needs some work. It's not clear what you're trying to say. I've had a lot of really good feedback like that from the publishers, too.

**SWR:** That's actually really great, especially since it's sort of almost free. This is a question that I ask everyone: When you get into that songwriting process, number one, how do you know you're done with this song?

**R Michael Rhodes:** That's a great question. What I've learned i ... Or what I'm learning for myself specifically, up until about a year and a half ago, I never really did co-writes. Most of everything I get was just solo writes and I tell the story the way it was in my brain and, you know, I hope people got it and sometimes they did and sometimes they didn't. But what I've learned from the co-writing is your co-writer really holds you to the story and to the lyrics. It's like if it doesn't make

sense to them when they're sitting in the room with you, then it's not gonna make sense to anybody else. So that's really helped me get focused on writing better lyrically and making the story completely that you're trying to say. And I don't know if you're ever done with a song, to answer your question. I think there's probably always something that you could tweak, and I think that just comes from learning and becoming a better songwriter. You can go back and you can go, "Oh yeah, I could've done that way different. I could've done that better." So I'm not sure it's ever done.

**SWR:** Yeah, you can make the edits on the live concert, right? So ...

**R Michael Rhodes:** That's a great question though. I like that question.

**SWR:** Yeah, I mean, to me this is the one thing, right? How do you know you're over and the second part to that question or series of questions that I always have is: Who do you trust to critique your work? Who do you go to for that brutal honest feedback that says, "Hey, Michael, this is eh or this is fantastic, right? I mean you said the publishers are sort of giving you something, but even before you get to the publishers, do you have a set of people you go to?"

**R Michael Rhodes:** I don't anymore. I kinda did that and then what I did was that I let that get in my way. What I'm learning to try to do is number one, trust myself. If I write something, I'm starting to be a pretty good gauge of what works and what doesn't work, so I'm trying to trust myself more and not listen too much to the other people. And when I say that, I mean that from ... What would happen was I would play something for somebody and they didn't like and then I would completely close down that right at that point, it's like, okay, they didn't like that. I've got to go away, you know, so that was holding me back and that was myself holding me back. Oh jeez, they didn't like it. Nobody's gonna like it. If they don't like it, nobody will.

And interpretation of music is really just opinion-based when it comes down to the end of it. It's one person's opinion. So, the thing that I've really done though is it's been great for me because I'm a performing songwriter, I can throw those out there to an audience, so I get pretty immediate feedback. And that tells me a lot.

**SWR:** I like that there's ... It's almost though the comedian style of doing stuff, right. Showing up in no-name clubs and trying material out and then perfecting it and then then going and showing up at a big place and saying, "Alright. I got it."

**R Michael Rhodes:** You know, so we work songs into the show and based on how the people respond to it, I can get a pretty good gauge of this is one I should work a little harder on or maybe abandon that one and try something else.

**SWR:** How long did it take for you to say, "Well, you know, I feel comfortable with what I'm writing and I sort of know I'm 90 percent there."

**R Michael Rhodes:** It's probably just been in the last six, eight months for me cause songwriting is quite a journey and the biggest thing that I think that I did that helped is I finally decided to get out of my own way.

**SWR:** What does that mean?

**R Michael Rhodes:** For me that ...

**SWR:** Or?

**R Michael Rhodes:** For me, that means ... I've written songs since I was 14 years old. I've never really cared too much whether they were any good or not whether anybody liked them or not and then I started having just a touch of success and then it was like, I really like this piece of it so I decided to basically get out of my own way and do the real work that it was going to take to become a better songwriter, a better performer, a better singer, the whole thing, so that's kinda what I meant by that. It's not just gonna be given to you. You can be a good songwriter, but if you wanna be a great songwriter, it's gonna take a lot of work.

**SWR:** Okay. Do you ... So the genre you in, I mean I love it. I love James Taylor stuff. But it's not what's popular today, right? Do you ... When you go to Nashville and do co-writes, is there some sense of, we're gonna try to write to sell for country or Americana, which is still ... I mean, there's still a good following. I shouldn't say that there isn't. It's just not super mainstream, but is there some agenda when you go into a room and you sit with somebody?

**R Michael Rhodes:** Yeah, when I go sit with those writers in Nashville, the number one priority there is to write for country. That's what those co-writes are all about. I'm trying to use that as an opportunity to learn how to write better, to learn from really, really good songwriters how they approach things, why they do something, why did you say that in that manner? What were you thinking or what was that? So, what's been good for me though is, I think, because I'm not a core country guy, I'm getting the opportunity to write with people that are that, but I'm also getting the opportunity to write with people that are more on the pop side, so we kinda get that mix going in there and I've had ... Out of the eight songs that we've done in the last three, four months, three of those are perfect for me.

**SWR:** That's great.

**R Michael Rhodes:** Like you said, jus the arrangement is a little bit different, but if you've got a good song, it'll sustain different arrangements.

**SWR:** So, you said right now you're working on building up titles and books and stuff. Is this in preparation for your next trip?

**R Michael Rhodes:** Yeah. I'm going back again in April, so ...

**SWR:** Okay, so you kinda say, "Guys, I got this box of ideas?"

**R Michael Rhodes:** Yeah.

**SWR:** That's really cool. I never thought of it that way, preparing for a co-write with just like, let me just throw a whole bunch of stuff together. Let's pull it out of a box and see what we get.

**R Michael Rhodes:** Right and that's what been doing as of late and if you get three people that can come with five ideas, you've got 15 ideas to choose from, you can usually get started on a pretty good path pretty quick.

**SWR:** That's ... I mean, yeah, I guess that's a powerful collaboration right there. So what's one of your biggest challenges you're facing today?

**R Michael Rhodes:** The biggest challenge that I have right now is writing in different tempos. I tend to fall into that singer-songwriter ballad or mid-tempo thing is where I'm really, really comfortable, and that's the stuff I really love to listen to. I really love to write and perform that, so getting a more up-tempo thing going is quite challenging for me at this point.

**SWR:** Interesting. It's ... Do you feel, I mean, maybe I'm getting a little at this, but your soul's kind of in tune with that frequency, right?

**R Michael Rhodes:** Absolutely.

**SWR:** And it's just so much easier to come out, so gosh, I'm just saying when I pick up a guitar and there's a set tempo, maybe set bunch of chords that I land on and that is a good and bad thing, right. Like we've become stuck in this boxed pattern. What do you do to get out of it? It is part of the collaboration and someone saying, "Ah, no. I want this to be twice as fast as what you're playing right now."

**R Michael Rhodes:** When you get in the collaborative, it's a lot easier, so if you get a guy or a girl that is really into the up-tempo stuff and they write a lot of that, a lot of times, that's a really good way to go, cause they can bring the music. You can bring some lyric, you can bring some ideas and go down that path. One of the things that I'm just learning about doing that I've never heard of before was I think they refer to it as top-lining, but basically they'll throw logic up on the computer. They'll get four on the floor going and they'll get some MIDI thing happening on it and then they'll start writing to that.

**SWR:** I've heard of a lot of people do that, too.

**R Michael Rhodes:** I've not successfully done that yet. I'm still trying to learn my way around logic, but I get it. I get that idea, so it sets a whole different tone. A whole different

mood if you can do that, and so I'm really interested in getting proficient enough where I can actually try to do that.

**SWR:** Yeah, I think that makes a huge difference, right, especially being able to be familiar with your DAW and just throw stuff together in five minutes and play with it.

**R Michael Rhodes:** Yeah.

**SWR:** I find that that's key with a lot of people I talk to, just becoming super familiar with that.

**R Michael Rhodes:** I've also heard 'em say, you know, yeah, they get a groove going on and on and then they just start trying to write to the groove.

**SWR:** Yeah. That's definitely a practice I've seen frequently in many of the people I talk to. Now one thing I've noticed that some people say is that they're kinda strong in either coming up with a melody or lyrics. Do you feel you have a bias to each one of them or it's like, you know what, I can sort of ...

**R Michael Rhodes:** I'm probably better at the melodies, the music part of it. That seems to be where ... When I good one kind of going, I think it's usually the melody and the music that grab people. But I'm getting better at the lyrics now, after doing the co-writes and understanding how to make things better lyrically. I'm actually getting pretty excited about where I'm gonna be able to go here in the next little bit.

**SWR:** That's so exciting to here. You're actually taking the step to work on your strengths and what you need to improve.

**R Michael Rhodes:** Yeah.

**SWR:** What would you recommend for someone who's just barely starting out at songwriting today. They ... maybe they're doing the nine to five and it's sort of been on the back burner. What would you tell them to do today?

**R Michael Rhodes:** I think it's ... Something I wish somebody would have said to me a long time ago right is if you can get out to the places where the people who are writing songs play, wherever that might be, a lot of open mic nights and coffee shops, you know, those kind of places and listen. Listen to how they're putting songs together. And then if you hear somebody that feels comfortable to you, see if they would write with you. See if you can do some co-writing. I ... Like I said, I didn't even start co-writing about two and a half years ago. And I'm really kickin' myself for that one. I wish I would've started that when I was 18 years old.

**SWR:** What was holding you back?

**R Michael Rhodes:** I just didn't know better ... I just didn't think about ... I just ... It's something I never even really thought about.

**SWR:** I like it. For me, it's just absolute fear. I'm like, oh God, this person's gonna be better than me, which is actually a good thing.

**R Michael Rhodes:** Yeah.

**SWR:** Yeah. Okay, so let's maybe ... If we were to reverse roles and you were talking to a songwriter, what would you want to know?

**R Michael Rhodes:** If I had question to ask, the question that I'm really trying to understand is how they approach rewriting songs. That's something that I'm trying to understand right now where they'll ... A lot of times they'll write these songs. They'll write them in a couple of hours, they'll go away then they'll kind of let them simmer for a while and then they'll get together for another session to rewrite it. And that to me is fascinating right now, to understand how they go about doing that. How they deconstruct it and rebuild it again even though it was pretty good to begin with, but they feel like, yeah, I think we can do that just a little bit better and they take the time to go do that. That just amazes me. That whole idea.

**SWR:** Yeah, me too. I have a hard time just getting it right the first time.

**R Michael Rhodes:** Or getting anything the first time. I just feel glad when I can finish one and the thought of going and tearing it all down and reconstructing it just terrifies me.

**SWR:** Yeah, absolutely right cause there's these parts that you love, part you don't care so much for but then it's like if we change that, will it destroy the good stuff?

**R Michael Rhodes:** That's one of the things I'm really trying to understand is how they, number one, how they let it go to the point where they're yeah, I need to tear that one down. I don't like that part. I'm turning it down and redoing it. But then where do you go? It took me three days to come up with that idea or that phrase or that thought. How do I go tear it down and come up with something completely different?

**SWR:** Cool. Alright. I got one more question. Maybe a couple. I always lie when I get towards the end of the interview. Another question pops up in my head. What is something that you do that's outside of work, outside of songwriting that's sort of sustaining you to keep going? For some people, it's been meditation. I've been talking to someone. For someone, it was riding her horse, right. She has to have that time. What about you?

**R Michael Rhodes:** I think, for me, one of the things that we try to do once a month is my wife and I volunteer at the Rocky Mountain Food Bank and we go spend four hours on a Saturday stacking boxes and filling boxes for food that's going out to low-

income people. So, to get a sense of what good that does for the community and what that makes available because they always count and measure and then at the thing, they tell us how many meals that's going to make out of the work we did that afternoon and then how many people that's going to feed for either a very low price or for free. That's a pretty good feeling. That kind of keeps me grounded a little bit is ... Okay, doing something good because you can is always a cool thing.

**SWR:** Service.

**R Michael Rhodes:** Yeah, service.

**SWR:** Yeah, I love it. Alright. This is the last question: What are some resources you recommend for songwriters? For example, I didn't know about this group you're with. The Global Songwriters?

**R Michael Rhodes:** Global Songwriters Connection.

**SWR:** Connection. Is there something else that you rely on or go to?

**R Michael Rhodes:** Lately, Spotify's been awesome. Just going and listening to different stuff. What are people do what? What do I like? What don't I like? I think what you don't like is almost as important as what you do like, so being able to identify that, right? So you don't started down a path that you're gonna end up not liking to begin with. A lot of the tools that I like to use are the rhyming dictionaries that you can, the apps that you can get for rhyming, the thesauruses, the synonyms, all of that kind of stuff have really helped me a lot, too. I used to think that was cheating. I used to feel like that was cheating. I should be able to think this up on my own. I should be able to write this, but after I started kind of using some of those tools, it was like, no, I gotta use these tools. It just makes it so much better.

**SWR:** Yeah, you hit something there right. That tendency to just, by yourself with a pencil and a paper and just come up with everything no help. I don't need anybody. I think that affects a lot of people in different parts of their lives, right?

**R Michael Rhodes:** Yeah, absolutely.

**SWR:** Great. Hey, thanks so much for spending this time today talking to me. I really, really appreciate it.

**R Michael Rhodes:** Well, thanks for inviting me. I appreciate that.

**SWR:** Right. Congratulations on all the good stuff and hopefully, I get to talk to you soon.

**R Michael Rhodes:** Awesome. Thank you. Thank you very much.

**SWR:** Okay.

**R Michael Rhodes:** See yeah.

**SWR:** Bye.