

SWR: All right. Today on Song Writing Routines, I've got Lauren Weintraub. I think I got that right. Welcome to the show, I guess. I'll start with introductions. How about you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you got into song writing.

Lauren Weintraub: Yeah, of course. Well thanks for having me. So I'm 19 now. I was born in Boston and lived in Boston my whole life until about six months ago. I grew up doing theater. I'm a triplet so I have two brothers that are the same age as me and an older brother. So growing up it was pretty hectic in the house but in the best kind of way. And yeah, I did theater. I played Annie multiple times. The red hair I guess kind of stuck. And when I was a freshman in high school, that's when I started writing songs. So my dad bought me a guitar around like 13 and then I started writing songs freshman year of high school and now I've been doing it for five years and I'm in Nashville, which is the best place for it. So I'm just living life right now.

SWR: That's fantastic. So you said you did theater and stuff. How did you decide that song writing is what you wanted to do, versus getting into theater.

Lauren Weintraub: Yeah. I mean they're totally different but at the same time they're really similar. So it's just really funny getting to see the differences between the two. But I played Annie a bunch of times. I got to the age that I was like, okay. I look a lot younger than I am so there was less and less roles for me. So I just picked up a guitar and loved guitar. And my mom had always been like, "You should try writing your own songs." And for so long I was like, no that's so weird. I could never do that. And finally my freshman year of high school is when I was like, "Okay I guess I'll try it." And I just fell in love with it.

SWR: Do you come from a family that's very musical or it's just something that sort of started for you?

Lauren Weintraub: My older brother plays piano and played piano around the house all of my childhood growing up. So there was always that around the house but my parents are not musical at all. So it's kind of random where it came from. And both my triplet brothers play drums. So all the kids are musical but my parents, not so much.

SWR: Interesting. What are your influences? Who influences you to ... Or who do you go to in your mind when you write songs?

Lauren Weintraub: There's an artist, you've probably heard of her. She's from Massachusetts also, which is pretty cool. Her name is Lori McKenna. Love Lori. She is a mom of like, I think five kids. Still lives in Massachusetts and commutes back and forth between Nashville and Massachusetts. But she is just an amazing storyteller and I love her songs and I think she's amazing. So as far as songwriting goes, she's my number one influence. But as far as sound goes, I love Sara Bareilles and Ed Sheeran. And I've been listening to a lot of John Moreland and Sean McConnell recently. So kind of Americana folk country stuff.

SWR: So is that what you want to eventually get into?

Lauren Weintraub: Yeah. I think a lot of what I've been writing recently is mainly storytelling. That's the number one thing that's important to me. As long as my songs tell a story, I will love them. But sound wise I've been going into more of a folk Americana country route. Which I've been loving. So we'll see.

SWR: That's fantastic. So you're still going to school right now. How much time do you spend writing songs today?

Lauren Weintraub: So I made my schedule very strategically so that I could go to school and write songs and be like running around Nashville like crazy. But I go to class, most days, in the morning so I'm done by like 10. And then I'll write after that. So I'll usually have an 11:00 write Monday, Wednesday, Friday. So I'm writing at least three times a week. And then on Tuesdays and Thursdays I usually end up squishing one in too. So right now, I've been writing five days a week, which is crazy. And it's something I've never done before, but I feel like I'm getting better at writing just by making myself write that much and putting pen to paper and just saying let's do this. You know?

SWR: Yeah. I just interviewed someone two weeks ago, it's the last one I posted. And she talks about 15 mindsets and one of them is, excuse our French, is ass to the chair. Just sit down and get it done.

Lauren Weintraub: Yeah, I saw that one. That was a really cool interview. Yeah, I mean writer's block sucks and I've had it before. But I think what I've learned from having writer's block is that you need to literally just make yourself sit down and write something. And no matter how bad it is, at least it's something.

SWR: So are you co-writing with other people today or is this just you solo writing right now?

Lauren Weintraub: Most of what I've been doing in Nashville is co-writing. But I also think it's really important to write by yourself. So I've been trying to do a balance of the two while also going to school and being a crazy person. Literally my days are 8:00 am to 10:00 pm me running around doing stuff. But I wouldn't have it any other way.

SWR: Let's talk about that a little bit. I mean it sounds like your mind's that you really have a vision. What is this vision? Where do you see yourself in a few years from now?

Lauren Weintraub: Right now, I think it's awesome being in school just because I have these four years allotted for me to be here and grow and learn and not feel any pressure to do anything crazy. I mean, if it would happen that would be awesome but I'm kind of just in this learning environment. So right now I'm kind of just trying to get better at writing and hone my craft. But in the end I really want to be

touring and performing and being on stage. Because that's kind of where I started was in theater so I don't want to lose that aspect of it. Because I just love being on stage.

SWR: I like that. So what has theater taught you about performing?

Lauren Weintraub: A lot. Yeah, a lot. I mean, one of the things that I loved about theater was that it's the same show every night. And we'd often do it for a month straight. And you have seven shows a week. So for me it was finding ways to perform the same material but switching it up and adding your own flare every night to keep it fresh and interesting. So I find that that really helps me keep my shows different and keep my stuff fresh. But also, just that experience of being on stage at such a young age was so invaluable because I don't get really nervous anymore going on stage. And that's something that I don't have to deal with a lot, which is crazy. Because for some people that's really, really hard for them. So that was really great for me.

SWR: Are you performing right now while you're in school? Or are you mostly saying these four years is just about me hunkering down and working on growth?

Lauren Weintraub: I've been performing around Nashville. So I've been doing rounds. We do here, four people on stage and you all alternate songs. I'm trying to play at least once or twice a week because I love getting out there and meeting people. So I'm trying to balance everything.

SWR: I like that you have this very strategic mindset. You really have your days planned out. What's the hard part of doing that?

Lauren Weintraub: Sleep. I mean I often find myself waking up at 7:30 to get up for my 8:00 am music theory class. And then going to write, doing homework, playing a show, hanging out with my friends, still making time for normal teenager things. And then by the time I go to bed it's usually midnight. So the hard part is definitely finding time to relax and recharge because for me that's so important. Whatever it is, something I've learned in high school was that if I don't make time to do yoga or just write in my journal for 10 minutes or read a book, I will go crazy. So I just need to remember sometimes that you need to relax and you can't be going, going, going all the time.

SWR: Let's talk about that. You mentioned yoga, what else do you do to sustain yourself? To keep yourself going and energized?

Lauren Weintraub: Yoga is awesome. I think it's great. It's really relaxing. I do a lot of just writing, journaling random stuff and reading. Sometimes I'll literally just lie on the floor and listen to records. Whatever it is that day that I feel like will slow my mind down, I do. Go for walks, go get ice cream.

SWR: That's great. What do you think is, when you talk about growth mindset, people talk about being uncomfortable. Putting yourself in a slightly uncomfortable space. Maybe for some people that's getting up on stage and performing. What is that for you today?

Lauren Weintraub: Today? Like today?

SWR: Yeah.

Lauren Weintraub: Oh gosh. I mean, for me I think I try to do one thing every day that makes me a little bit uncomfortable or something that I've never done before. Tonight I'm performing, which I guess would be my thing of today. It's a song competition and there's 10 of us and we're performing in front of Charlie Worsham and Maggie Rose and Emily Weisband who are like three of my favorite people in the world. So that would be my thing for today.

SWR: Fantastic. Are you performing original?

Lauren Weintraub: Yeah. We all do one song. So I'll be performing an original.

SWR: Okay. We talked about your goals for a few years from now, you want to see yourself performing and touring. What about your songwriting goals? Do you just want to write for yourself or are you looking to pitch yourself to other musicians?

Lauren Weintraub: It's funny because when I came to Nashville for the first time, which was like two years ago, I didn't know that you could write songs for other people and that being a songwriter was a job. So that was really cool to find that all out and learn what publishers are and learn that people literally have a living as a songwriter. I had no idea. So I love writing for myself and I would say that when I write songs that I love and I know are for myself and come from a true place, that's my number one and what I really love doing. But I love just writing songs too and targeting different audiences is such a good exercise as a songwriter. So I'd love to do it all.

I mean, that's kind of what I've already done my whole life. I feel like I've done theater and all this stuff and singing and acting and yeah. I don't really want to put myself in a box.

SWR: Let's go back to mindsets and stuff. What are you getting a degree in right now?

Lauren Weintraub: I'm getting a songwriting degree.

SWR: Nice.

Lauren Weintraub: Yeah. Didn't even know that existed until like a year ago. Yep.

SWR: A year ago. So were you actively looking for it or did someone tell you about this?

Lauren Weintraub: Yeah so since I'm from Boston, I obviously applied for Berklee College of Music. It seemed like such a great fit. I'd done like a five week summer program there. I loved it. And I still love Berklee. But there's just something about Nashville and so I started looking into Nashville schools and figuring out what the majors were and if I'd have to do math and stuff like that, which I do still have to do. But I found Belmont, which is where I am now. And they have a songwriting major, which only five colleges that I know of have a songwriting major in the US. There's probably more but only five that I know of. So yeah, I came down and toured the campus, which looks fake. It's so pretty it looks fake. And everyone here is just so nice and it seemed like the perfect fit.

SWR: That's great. Let's go back to songwriting. I mean but how are you getting critiques for your material today?

Lauren Weintraub: For my songs?

SWR: Yeah.

Lauren Weintraub: I think I've been lucky enough to build a tiny web in Nashville. It's growing. But I have this inner circle of a few songwriters who I write with all the time and who I really, really trust and trust their opinions. So I'm always sending songs to my friends just being like, "Hey can you give this a listen and tell me what you think?" And I've got a few mentors in my life, just from growing up and meeting people. I know you've talked to Luke and Kelly so you know about Judy Stakee. She's been amazing for me. And sometimes I'll send her songs and be like, "Hey can you listen to this?" And she's always so incredibly sweet and kind.

SWR: She seems rather amazing. I need to get to talk to her on one of these episodes.

Lauren Weintraub: Yes. She is a force of nature. I love her.

SWR: Have you been to one of her retreats?

Lauren Weintraub: Yeah so I was on the same one that Kelly was on.

SWR: Okay. Okay.

Lauren Weintraub: That's how Kelly Johnson and I met. And it was just amazing. Amazing.

SWR: Okay. I want to stick with the songwriting theme. We talked about your schedule, we talked about critiquing, what does one of these sessions look like when you're in a room with your other writers?

Lauren Weintraub: It's always different. Which is the best part about it. I've written probably about 100 songs at this point and they always start a different way. Sometimes I'll bring in an idea, other times someone else will have this idea like, "We have to write this song today." And I'll be like, "Okay, let's do it." But yeah, it kind of just depends. When I'm writing alone, it's often just me and my guitar mumbling and just playing chords. I would look like I was crazy if you didn't know what songwriting was. But with other people, it's kind of more of an, "Okay, let's talk through this story. What are we writing about? What is this?" And often I'll whip out my guitar and start playing and figuring out a chord progression or something. And then it just spirals from there.

SWR: Okay. I think something I find interesting is how people actually do get feedback for their songs. You have, you said, this trusted network of people you go to. Do you ever, I guess, I don't know what the right word would be, but I guess try a song at a venue and then you get a feeler from the crowd and be like, "Maybe this is not right, or this is fantastic."

Lauren Weintraub: Oh yes. Performing songs live, brand new songs, is the number one best way to find out. Because audiences won't lie. They're often in Nashville, they're all tourists who just want to hear good music. So I love trying my songs out live for the first time. And just being like, "Hey I wrote this song yesterday." And just seeing if the audience vibes with it, if they're looking at me, if they're paying attention, if they like it. That's definitely one of the best ways to find out.

SWR: So here's a question I have. Usually I'm just doing covers and stuff when I'm performing and I can tell if I did a good job or not. But if you're doing an original, how do you know what element of it isn't good? Is it just the music or the lyrics or maybe the hook's not good. How do you figure out?

Lauren Weintraub: If I'm performing it live, for me if the song is good and the audience is following the story, I can't describe it, but there's always this magic in the air where everyone's really quiet and they're looking at you and they're listening and you can tell that they're really engaged in the song. But if they're not, I mean it's kind of a process of figuring out what about the song you need to change.

And often for me, it's lyrical changes and it's going back at the lyrics and reading them out loud to myself and being like, "Okay, what about this doesn't make sense? What about this story could be better?" Because in the end it's all about the story.

SWR: I always have a hard time with that. I have no idea what element of it went south.

Lauren Weintraub: It's trial and error, you know? It's hard. It's not easy.

SWR: It's easier to find out what works than what doesn't work, I guess.

Lauren Weintraub: Yes. And it's easier to write sad songs than happy songs.

SWR: That is so true. I think people want sadder songs than they want happy songs.

Lauren Weintraub: Oh I'm way better at writing sad songs than happy songs.

SWR: Why is that?

Lauren Weintraub: I don't know. I've always been that way and it's kind of like a songwriter joke that everyone says that. But I don't know what it is. It's just easier for me to dive into that deep emotional place than write sunny, happy songs. I don't really know why.

SWR: That's awesome. There's not that many happy songs on the radio if you listen to it a lot of times.

Lauren Weintraub: Yeah.

SWR: Okay. What do you use for tools? Is it just paper and pen? Guitar? Keyboards? What is it?

Lauren Weintraub: I used to be only paper and pen. I would only write songs in a notebook with a pen. And then I moved here and realized that nobody really does that anymore and it's way easier to just use your computer and be able to ... It's way faster. So at first I hated using my computer. I was like, this feels so weird, I feel like I'm doing homework. But I kind of just adjusted to it and now I really like writing on my computer. But yeah, I mean here it's my guitar. I'm bringing my guitar to every write. But back at home I have a keyboard which I didn't bring here which I'm really sad about because I love playing piano. But yeah. Guitar, piano, whatever it is.

SWR: So you just have Word open? How are you using the computer?

Lauren Weintraub: Yeah, I mean I usually use Word or Pages. Sometimes people want to do a shared doc where you can see everything together. I don't love doing that but that's just me. I love being able to type stuff out and look at it and being like, "Okay, what about this?" But that's just me.

SWR: Okay here's a question that I love asking. How do you know when you're done with a song?

Lauren Weintraub: Oh no. I guess it's kind of like art in the way that at first less is more. You can always add more. I mean, for me if we've got a song and we're three hours in usually I'll just be like, "All right, let's call it a day." And listen to the song back and text me in a few days and tell me if there's anything you want to change. And if you do we can meet back up and look at it. But I think at some point you have to call it and be like, "Let's step back from this for a moment because

we've been so focused on it for three hours and listen to it and see what it sounds like when we're not in this tiny room."

SWR: All right. What are you struggling to do when it comes to songwriting?

Lauren Weintraub: That's such a good question. I mean a lot of it for me right now, and this is something I never thought I would struggle with, but I guess that's what always happens. Is just having time to come up with ideas and be creative. Because I'm so busy all the time running around doing stuff that often I don't have time to focus and come up with ideas. So I've been trying to focus on that lately and set aside time every day to be like, "Okay let's get our ideas together so that when we go write we have ideas to write."

SWR: I know a few people who have a do not disturb me on the calendar. It's just completely empty and it's just them. And some of them spend it reading books, maybe some of them write. Where it's complete isolation from humanity.

Lauren Weintraub: Yeah. As songwriters I think we all need complete isolation from humanity at times.

SWR: And then come back with a bunch of ideas.

Lauren Weintraub: Yeah. I mean it's true. It's true.

SWR: What advice would you have, I mean you're really young, but what advice would you have for someone that's starting out to be ... Maybe what advice would you give yourself five years ago? Six years ago?

Lauren Weintraub: Oh wow. I think, this sounds so cheesy but it would just be to follow your heart when it comes to sound. I feel like a lot of me trying to find my sound and figure out what I like was often skewed by other people and, "Oh my gosh, this is what's on the radio. I should probably be writing that." And often I didn't love what was on the radio but I thought that was what I had to write. So coming to Nashville and finding my people that I love to write with has really been helpful because I'm kind of fearless and unafraid to be myself with them. Which is really awesome. But I guess it would be not to really worry about other people think. Just follow yourself.

I remember, I tell this story all the time, but I remember in high school, I was in the car with four of my friends. And we all did acapella together and we were listening to the radio and that song Seven Years by Lukas Graham came on and my friend Andrew was like, "Oh my gosh, I love this song." And I was like why? I just wanted to know why he liked the song. And he was like, "Honestly, Lauren, it's one of the only songs on pop radio right now that tells a story." And I just had this moment where I was like, "Oh my gosh, you're right." And ever since then I've been really focused on the storytelling. Because if that's not there, then I'm checked out. So storytelling is definitely really, really important.

SWR: Okay so if I was to summarize it, it's find your identity, stick with it. Don't get influenced by pop stuff on the radio. You also mentioned about finding your tribe and your community there in Nashville. And work on trying to tell a story.

Lauren Weintraub: Yeah. And I guess also get out there and perform. Some of my first open mics that I did, I was a little nervous because I'd only done theater. And when you're in a small room doing open mic, you can actually see people's faces. And when I was doing theater it was all kind of just a black wall because you can't see anyone. So yeah, I was a little nervous but you kind of just got to get yourself out there and give yourself a push.

SWR: Be uncomfortable.

Lauren Weintraub: Yeah, be uncomfortable.

SWR: You know, I keep forgetting the title of the book but it's by David Byrne. And he talks about, in there, opera singers back in the day recording technology was so terrible that there was no pitch correction post production or anything. You just hit it, you hit it. If you don't, you record again. So what they would ask opera singers to do is to give vibrato with their voice. So they really didn't have to nail the pitch. And our brain can pick the correct pitch out of this wavering sound and say, "Oh this is what it should be." But after that, everyone who listened to that realized that, "Oh for me to be an opera singer I need to have this super awesome vibrato and sing like ahh," and that's what started happening.

Every opera singer now has vibrato.

Lauren Weintraub: Yep. That's a good example.

SWR: And I got to talking with someone else and I guess they were talking to a producer like, "Is the next generation of kids gonna be like, everything on the radio is perfect pitch. Will they actually have perfect pitch? Or will maybe it stop them from being musicians because they believe they're not good enough because they don't have perfect pitch, right?"

Lauren Weintraub: Yeah. That's so great. I mean, yeah, I've had people tell me before, your lyrics are way too specific. That's never gonna get on the radio. It's too specific. And I'm like, okay. Awesome. Whatever. I'm just gonna keep doing it. You know?

SWR: Another book I read was, I keep forgetting titles, but it's Amanda Palmer's book. And I didn't even know who she was I just saw this book and I'm like, let me download this, I want to listen to it." And her songs are like seven, eight minutes long and it's a story that just keeps going on and on. And she's figured out how to do that. She's got this really hardcore fan base.

Lauren Weintraub: Yeah. I love stories like that. That's awesome.

SWR: Yeah so I think you're right when you say stick to your intuitions, stick with what you're good at and keep at it.

Lauren Weintraub: Yeah. Yeah.

SWR: Awesome. All right, if you were interviewing a songwriter, what would you be asking?

Lauren Weintraub: I guess if I was interviewing my hero songwriter, what would I ask them? I would probably ask them what books they really liked right now and what songs they really liked right now. Because I love hearing what other people are inspired by. And I know I'm and school getting a songwriting degree right now, which who knows what that means, but I think that the best way I get better at songwriting is by reading good books, listening to good songs and writing with good songwriters. So yeah, I would probably just ask them, "Do you have any really good books you just read or some amazing record I have to listen to?" Because I want to know what grinds their gears and gets them going.

SWR: Cool. And I'm going to flip that question back on you now. What are you reading?

Lauren Weintraub: I see what you did there. I just finished, John Green has a new book called, oh my gosh I'm going to forget what it's called. I have it in my drawer right there. Oh, Turtles All the Way Down. Really good book. I'm obsessed with John Green. So yeah, I just finished that, which was really, really good. And I'm reading a book called Little Fires Everywhere right now which is really good. Haven't finished it but it's really good so far.

SWR: Awesome. Cool. I had a good time talking to you.

Lauren Weintraub: Yes, thank you so much.

SWR: Thanks for being on the show. I wish you the best of luck in school and stuff. I'm really excited to see where you're going to be. I'll check in on you.

Lauren Weintraub: Yes, thank you so much.

SWR: Cool. Thanks so much.

Lauren Weintraub: Thanks for having me. Talk soon hopefully.

SWR: Yeah.

Lauren Weintraub: All right, bye bye.

SWR: Bye.

