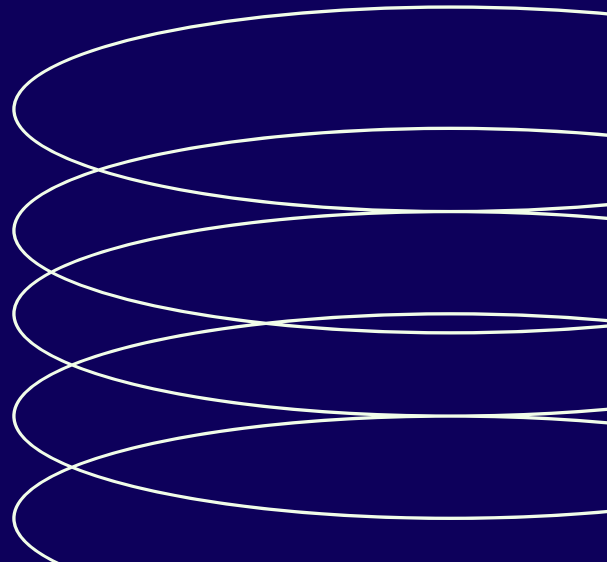




Everything  
I Know About  
**songwriting**  
I Learned From  
Kindergartners

YOU'RE ALLOWED TO WRITE  
EXTRAORDINARY SONGS



# the breakthrough

THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

In my long career as a music producer, I've worked extensively with songwriters to help them get their songs "over." Artists who know chord progressions, understand song structure, and many who could write a verse-chorus-bridge in their sleep.

Yet time and again, I found their songs to be technically sound but missing something crucial: missing the mark, missing a vital part of the story, missing the kind of magic only a song can deliver. This process of "song-doctoring," as it's often called, is an integral part of my role, and I've always been intrigued by why some artists struggle with it more than others.

One of the many gigs I took early on was in elementary schools, offering songwriting assemblies. What I discovered there forever changed the way I thought about the creative process—and became the foundation of what would evolve into The Songtellers Circle — a body of work that helps songwriters shift from frustration to flow.

## What kindergarteners get that adults have forgotten:

As I worked with late elementary students, I had to learn how to nudge them away from “funny” stuff like “stinky cheese” and “smelly socks”—material meant as social currency to amuse their classmates. Third through fifth graders can write truly great songs, but the Social Contract is already forming for them.

Not so for kindergartners. Not at all. No hesitation. No judgment. Just pure creative delight. Nobody can brainstorm like a room full of six-year-olds.

When I facilitate songwriting activities as leadership and team development for organizations, and I ask adults to write anything, they freeze right up. Their internal committee immediately convenes: The Perfectionist; The Impostor; The Comparison Engine; The Dreaded Songwriting Duo of Schema & Stigma.

### The difference?

Kids don't confuse expressing ideas with *proving their worth*.

That revelation became the cornerstone of my work:

**Most creative blocks aren't technical obstacles requiring greater knowledge or improved technique—they're perceptual problems that dissipate when we change our relationship to the work.**

More specifically: they're **permission problems**.

What follows are the five things kindergartners do naturally that adults have systematically unlearned—and how you can reclaim that permission.

EVERYTHING I KNOW ABOUT SONGWRITING I LEARNED FROM KINDERGARTNERS

# five permissions

PERMISSION #1: YOU HAVE NOTHING TO PROVE

PERMISSION #2: WHO'S BAD?

PERMISSION #3: PURE PLAY

PERMISSION #4: GAME ON

PERMISSION #5: VULNERABILITY IS NOT A LIABILITY



# N.1 You Have Nothing to Prove

## What Kindergarteners Do

When I invite kindergarteners to make up a song, they just... start. No “a song about what?” No “let me think about this.” No “I’m no good at this.” They open their mouths and sound comes out. Sometimes it’s brilliant. Sometimes it’s nonsense. They don’t seem to care which.

## What Adults Do Instead

We sit down to write (with legendary miss-makers Schema & Stigma) and immediately begin managing “No”:

- “This isn’t original enough.”
- “Ugh. This is so amateur”
- “What would [insert songwriter you admire] think of this?”
- “Am I even qualified to write about this topic?”

The process becomes an exercise in doubt, instead of an exercise in possibility. You’re not creating—you’re mincing before there’s anything to mince.

## What Gets Lost

**Joy.** When you believe creation is proof, you cannot access spontaneity, play, risk, discovery—all the qualities that make songs (and humans) feel alive. You’re so busy judging whether you’re “allowed” to make this particular sound that you forget to actually make it.

## The Permission You Need

**You’re allowed to create without it reflecting your worth as an artist or person.**

The song you write today doesn’t prove you’re talented. The song you write tomorrow doesn’t prove you’re a fraud. Songs are songs. Some work, some don’t. The only way to find out which is which is to write them. Kindergartners understand this instinctively: *output doesn’t equal identity.*

## Try This Once

Set a timer for 2 minutes. Say out loud: “There’s nothing to prove.” Then voice-memo yourself singing anything—a fragment, a feeling, gibberish words over a melody. When the timer ends, close the app without listening.

You just created without proving. Notice how that felt.

# N.2 Who's Bad?

## What Kindergartners Do

Kindergartners do not concern themselves with “good” or “bad” when it comes to making stuff up. They haven’t learned that particular brand of nonsense. The nonsense they’re into is of the “ooh! I know” variety:

Ooh! I know! “Baby baby unicorn is on my apple jam”

Ooh! I know! “Fly, fly away. Your dreams can fly today”

Ooh! I know! “Stars are crying poop in the sky”

they play along to see who can be the most absurd. There’s a reason grown-ups who study improv have to teach themselves “yes, and…” — they need reminding. 5-year-olds will make up nonsense words and collapse laughing. Everything is worth trying. They start with nothing and then it’s something - not good or bad or pretty or ugly or smart or stupid. It’s what they made, and it’s their morning (or afternoon) masterpiece.

## What Adults Do Instead

You try to write something good. Something that represents your worth and talent and vision. Something that justifies the hours you’ve spent learning craft. You’ve internalized invisible rules—what’s cliché, what’s been done, what “real” songwriters would never attempt—and you police yourself mercilessly.

When you sit down to write a “good” song, your songwriting team is you, Schema, & Stigma. Wouldn’t you rather sit down to write with Fun & Possibility?

## What Gets Lost

**Surprise.** In the margins of your song slate is the phrase that shouldn’t work but lands perfectly. The melody that is the best mistake you’ve ever made. The image that’s off-center but somehow poignant. When everything requires defense, nothing can be strange. You avoid “bad” so vigilantly that you never wander into the unmarked territory where breakthroughs actually live.

I learned this the hard way. I’d started an exciting project and written one song I was proud of—truly proud—and immediately thought: *I’ll never write another song this good.* Paralysis set in. *Years* passed. In a fit of desperate, defiant frustration I decided to write “filler” for the rest of the album, just to have something to release alongside the one good track. Those filler songs became my best work.

## The Permission You Need

**You're allowed to write badly. In fact, you're allowed to make "bad" your intention.** When failure is the objective, creation becomes frictionless. You can't do it wrong when wrong is the assignment. Unless you try to do it 'right'.

### Try This Once

Set a timer for 10 minutes. Write the most cliché, obvious, boring song opening you can imagine. Use the worst rhyme in your vocabulary. Be spectacularly generic. When time's up, read what you made. I'll bet money there's something good in there—an accidental turn of phrase, an image that surprised you. That's the paradox: permission to suck gives you access to material that trying to impress keeps locked away.



# N.3 Pure Play

## What Kindergarteners Do

Kindergarteners write incredible pop choruses and they have no idea they're doing it. In fact, I'll usually take some of their initial input and earmark it for the chorus when working with this age group, because they are so adept at it. They love repetition—the same phrase over and over until it's an earworm — maybe even a hook! They make up words based purely on how they sound, or because it feels good in the mouth. They free-associate naturally. They're not trying to write a chorus. They're not "trying", period. They're just playing with sounds and words and rhythms because it's fun. The song happens as a byproduct of play, not as the goal.

## What Adults Do Instead

We need a reason. A context. A framework. We sit down and think: "Okay, what is this song about? What's the message? Who's the audience? What's the vibe?" We need to justify the creative act before we'll allow ourselves to engage in it.

We're putting the problem-solving cart before the creativity horse. Don't get me wrong: problem-solving is useful—later. It's only an obstacle at the beginning, when what we actually need is to mess around and see what happens. You have to make problems before you can solve them.

## What Gets Lost

**Magic.** There's something alchemical that happens when creation comes from play instead of problem-solving. When you're playing, you stumble into combinations you'd never "choose." You make connections without necessarily understanding them. You discover the melody that breaks your heart in exactly the right way. This isn't merely about whimsy or sentimentality; it's about exercising those neuro-transmissions that fosters connection and synthesis—the same part of the brain that kindergarteners engage with regularly, but which adults often neglect.

## The Permission You Need

**You're allowed to make things that have no explicit purpose.**

Not every creative act needs a reason to be, a goal, an intended outcome. Some of your best (and most authentic) material will come from three minutes of purposeless play—sounds that feel good, words that bounce nicely, rhythms that make you want to move. Kindergarteners know this: the play IS the point. The song is just the resulting discovery.

## Try This Once

Set a timer for three minutes total. No rules except these:

- **Minute 1: Rhythm play.** Tap, clap, stomp, beatbox, whatever. Just make rhythms that feel good. No song. No context. Just rhythm in the body.
- **Minute 2: Melody play.** Hum, sing, whistle, la-la-la. Make up melodic phrases. Doesn't matter if they "go" anywhere. Just sounds.
- **Minute 3: Word play.** Say words that sound good together. Make up words. Repeat words. Mash words. No meaning required.

Record all of it. When you're done, listen back. You'll hear something in there—a rhythm, a melody fragment, a word combination—that you'd never have made if you'd been "trying". That's the magic.



# N.4 Game On

## What Kindergarteners Do

In my elementary school work, I learned quickly that I had to fit in every songwriting activity into the time allotted in the highly structured daily school schedule — sometimes only 30-40 minutes to deliver a complete, recorded song. And you know what? The kids never even noticed. They got more engaged. The limits became fun, not frustration.

Tell a kindergartener they have three minutes to make up a song and watch what happens. They don't resist the constraint—they *light up*. “Three minutes? Okay!” The timer isn't a limitation; it's the starting gun. The rules make it a game, and games are how kindergarteners engage with nearly everything.

There's a reason early childhood educators know this trick: want a kid to do something? Tell them you'll time them. Arbitrary constraints don't restrict play—they merely shape it.

## What Adults Do Instead

We treat songwriting as *serious work*. *Important work*. Work that requires the right conditions, the right mindset, the right amount of uninterrupted time. We resist constraints as limitations, rather than inviting them as motivational structure.

We've forgotten how to gamify. We think “time to work on that verse” instead of “I'm gonna rewrite this verse in under seven minutes using only one-syllable words.” The former sounds like a chore. The latter sounds like a challenge. Same task. Completely different engagement.

## What Gets Lost

**Motivation.** Gamification—applying game design elements to non-game contexts—can increase productivity and significantly enhance motivation by providing a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Research shows that game elements like timers, constraints, and progress tracking positively affect task engagement and perceived meaningfulness.

But you don't need a study to tell you this. You already know it. Remember the last time you were assigned —or gave yourself—a ridiculous constraint and suddenly the problem song became fun again? Yeah.



## The Permission You Need

**You're allowed to turn any part of songwriting into a game. Even the sucky parts.**

When editing (what we call “**admin**” in The Songtellers Circle) feels tedious, gamify:

- Can't finish that bridge? Write it backwards in 11 minutes. Done. That's Version 1.
- Verse feels bloated? Cut exactly 10 words, no more, no less.
- Bored with your melody? Use only the 3rd, 4th, and 5th members of the scale.

The constraint doesn't have to be “meaningful” or hold to any aesthetic you aspire to. It just has to feel like a game. And once it's a game, your brain engages differently. Suddenly you're playing instead of working, you're having fun, and the song moves forward.

Even if you're hoping to write the next “Wichita Lineman,” you can make a game of the editing. Mastery and play aren't opposites—kindergarteners prove that every day.

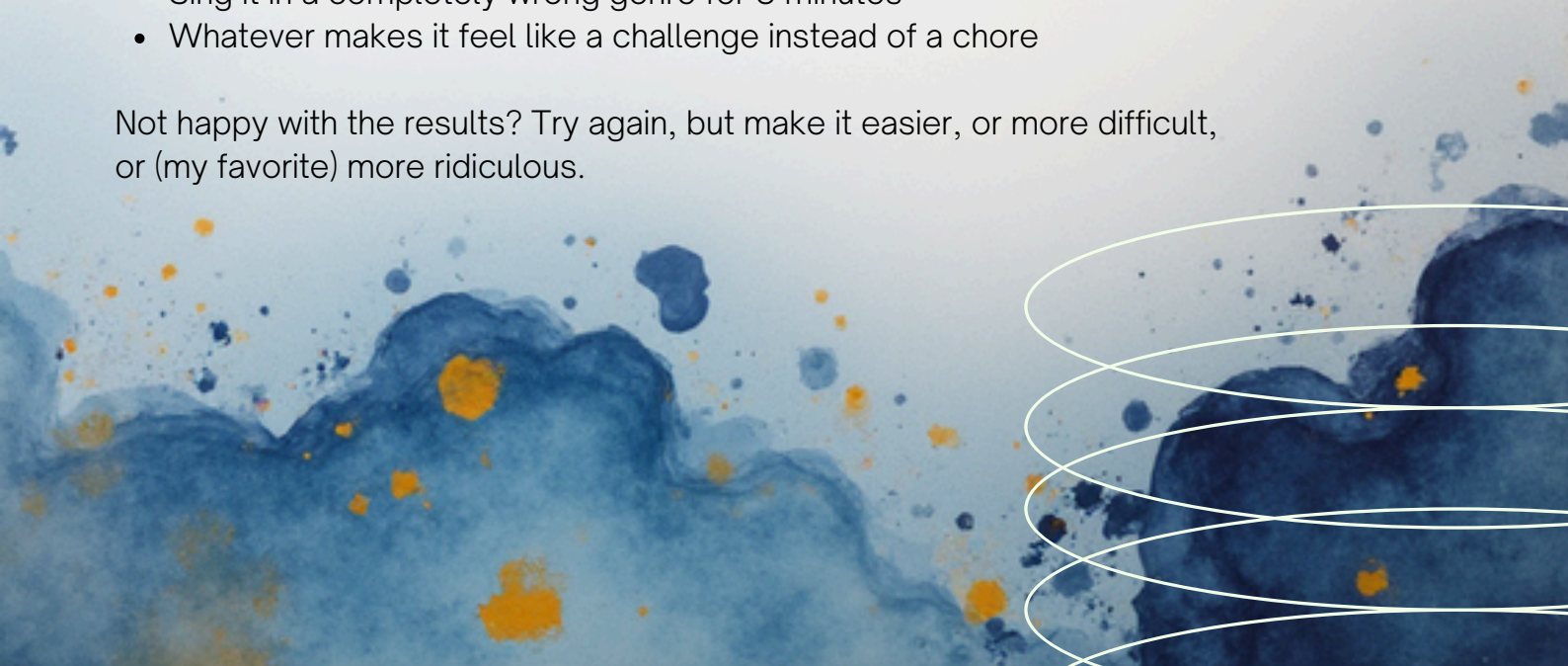
## Try This Once

Pick the part of your current song that feels most stuck or tedious.

Now make a game of it:

- Rewrite the verse in exactly 6 minutes (set a timer)
- Cut 15 words—not 14, not 16
- Rewrite using only words of one syllable
- Sing it in a completely wrong genre for 3 minutes
- Whatever makes it feel like a challenge instead of a chore

Not happy with the results? Try again, but make it easier, or more difficult, or (my favorite) more ridiculous.



# N.5 Vulnerability ≠ Liability

## What Kindergartners Do

At the end of our sessions, kindergartners don't ask if their song is "good." They just sing it. Loudly. Down the hall, on the bus home, to anyone who'll listen. They made something, and now they're sharing it, and that's the whole story.

In short, they don't second guess — which is, I'm sad to report, no longer true by the time they reach 2nd or 3rd grade. Once 5th grade comes around, with adolescence looming, I'm faced with a different challenge as a teaching artist.

Here's what I tell 5th graders when they start getting self-conscious: **vulnerability is a superpower**. The courage required to say what's true—instead of what's funny or cool or safe—is the secret to writing something exceptional. Kindergarteners haven't learned to hide yet. They show up with their full selves, make something, and move on.

## What Adults Do Instead

We think protecting ourselves from the vulnerability of making something true is safer. We control how much of ourselves we'll show, manage how honest we'll let ourselves be. But what we're actually doing is choosing comfort over truth. And comfortable songs don't move anyone.

Even worse, we let the outcome govern our reaction. If the song didn't 'work', we suck. If we couldn't find the magic phrase, we failed. We carry yesterday's struggles into today's session, and tomorrow's, until we're so worried about getting it right that we can't get anything at all. Sound familiar?

## What Gets Lost

**Truth.** When you're controlling outcomes—managing how much you'll risk, how honest you'll be, whether yesterday's result gives you permission to try again today—you lose access to the only thing that makes songs matter.

Kindergarteners don't struggle with their vulnerability (yet). They just show up, say what's true right now, and that's that. And then they do it again the next day, regardless of how the previous day went.



## The Permission You Need

### **You're allowed to surrender control and express your truth.**

Stop managing how vulnerable you're willing to be. Stop letting yesterday's outcome determine whether you show up today. The song you wrote yesterday (or last year) doesn't have to mean anything in terms of writing again today. The fact that you couldn't find the right words this morning doesn't mean you won't find them eventually.

Surrender control. Just show up with your truth—messy, uncertain, imperfect—and make something. Then come back tomorrow and do it again.

Vulnerability isn't weakness—it's the willingness to tell the truth even when you can't control how it lands. And the courage to keep showing up, to keep surrendering control, to keep expressing your truth even when yesterday didn't work—that's what separates people who write songs from people who wrote a song once.

### **Try This Once (or twice, or...)**

Write something today that feels too true to share. Something that makes you slightly uncomfortable because you can't control how someone might receive it. Then, whether it works or not, whether you're proud of it or not, show up tomorrow and write something else that's true.

That's the superpower. Repeat.





## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

If you made it this far, you've probably recognized yourself in the “what adults do instead” sections. That's understandable—me too. We were socialized to prove our worth through our work, to avoid failure at all costs, to treat vulnerability as weakness, to let outcomes determine our identity.

But here's what I've learned after working with kindergarteners, Grammy nominated pros, and everyone in-between:

-  
**The permission was always yours. You just forgot you had it.**

These five permissions aren't new skills to learn. They're old instincts to reclaim. You already know how to do this—you did it when you were six. The only thing standing between you and extraordinary songs is the learned behavior of asking for permission you already have.

So here it is, in writing, from someone who's spent decades helping songwriters do their best work:

**You're allowed to create without proving anything.**

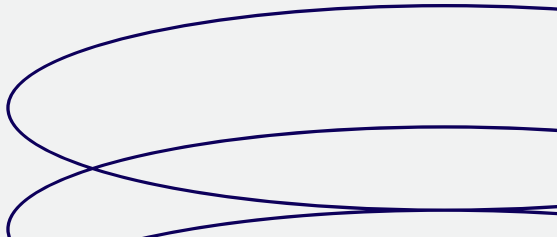
**You're allowed to write badly.**

**You're allowed to just play.**

**You're allowed to make a game of it.**

**You're allowed to be vulnerable, move on, and show up again tomorrow.**

Try one of these permissions this week. Just one. See what happens.



## WHAT COMES NEXT

This guide gives you **permission**.  
...the foundational shift that makes everything else possible.

If you want **practical techniques** to implement these permissions daily—the specific exercises, frameworks, and strategies (we call them “activations”) that turn permission into prolific output, my ebook ***Spark of the Songteller: 23 Ways to Stoke Creative Fire*** gives you a comprehensive toolkit.

**And when you're ready to go deeper**—when you want to work with advanced methodologies like The Audiature™ Approach, receive direct coaching, and collaborate with other serious songwriters who are doing this work—

**The Songtellers Circle** is where permission becomes transformation.

But start here. Reclaim one permission. The rest follows!

**JOIN THE CIRCLE**



# the author

## **LIAM DAVIS**

Liam Davis is a 4× GRAMMY®-nominated producer, songwriter, and creative mentor who's spent decades helping people make better songs by thinking differently about creativity. A founding member of the power-pop band Frisbie—once called “one of the best, most ambitious pop bands in America” by Salon—he's worked with everyone from touring artists to CEOs to kindergartners.

Raised by teaching artists, Liam learned early that most creative problems aren't technical, they're perceptual. That idea became the backbone of The Songtellers Circle, a program and community for songwriters who want to drop the performance of perfection and get back to what's real.

He lives in the Midwest with his family and a rotating cast of instruments, notebooks, and recipes..