

Other People's Songs

[Note: I wrote this, two days short of turning 30, during my first book ghostwriting project. I was sitting in a bar in Idaho Falls waiting for a dinner table.]

Listening to the rock band and singer in the bar next door, I thought about singing other people's songs.

"How can I learn to sing like _____?"

You can't. Don't try. His songs are his. They come out of who he is and where he's been. You can sing his songs, but they sound like one man singing somebody else's songs.

Writing's the same. You can imitate someone else, but it's just a sound-alike, no matter how well it's done.

Those big name singers and songwriters leave thousands of imitators behind them, people who sing their songs without taking the risk of writing a dud. Or living one.

You can do all right redoing other people's songs. But it's an imitation. The true you comes out of your songs, your own writing. The words don't matter. It's the feeling, the life behind them. Nobody can do THAT for you. Or show you how to live.

"But," you say, "I don't know what to do. It's all so confusing."

"Yes. Isn't it. It's the same confusing, frightening, ambiguous place for the stars who seem so certain."

"How do they stand it?"

"Many of them don't."

"What can I do about it?"

"You can't do anything for them."

"No, I meant for myself."

"Just what they do. Look around, understand as best as you can, and say what you see and feel the best you know."

"But I'm afraid."

"So are they. No one who knows the risks isn't afraid. They do what they do in spite of the same fear that stops you."

"Oh."