

ORIGINALLY from Scotland, singer-songwriter-guitarist John Harley Weston moved to Australia in 1997. He won the rock category of this year's Australian National Songwriting Contest, as well as writing and releasing the song "The Road To Victory" for the Brisbane Lions AFL team, which went on to become the club's unofficial anthem, but the first taste of success came in the early-'90s as lead singer and co-writer with Scottish band Frontier, who were signed to Polygram. His independent debut release is *Hope Harbour*, an album of diverse rock tunes with bluesy overtones.

Is it true you started your musical career as a kid playing the accordion?

Yeah [laughs]. We used to do old-folks' homes. Man, it was the funniest thing you've ever seen. It was like a 15-piece accordion band; it was huge, four or five guitarists, a drummer ... We made an incredible racket. People in the front row were sitting there, teeth shaking around. But it was good. They were a captive market.

Has the accordion helped your songwriting?

Absolutely. I can play keyboards for a start. The accordion gave me that whole grounding as far as understanding chords, octaves, chord progressions. It wasn't till I was about 25 that I picked up the guitar.

What made you pick it up?

As a singer, I was in and out of studios, working with guitarists, and there was always a guitar sitting in the control room, and I picked that up and said to the guitarist: "Show me a couple of chords." Before I knew it, after learning a few chords, songs just started coming out.

Do you have any rituals you go through when you write songs?

Whenever I pick up the guitar, I feel like there's a song coming. The hardest part for me is making sure I have enough time to pick it up and finish it. I don't mean that I'm bad at finishing it; it's just that I know how long it takes to channel what it is you're doing. I think it really is like channelling. I think that sometimes songwriters can get in the way of a song by making it a bit

more difficult than it actually is.

Do you ever get stuck in a rut, writer's block?

I've never had writer's block, but I know what you mean about being stuck in a rut. You have a chord progression and you can't get anywhere - I'm actually doing that right now with a song. You really have to take a step back, work on something else, then come back to it lyrically or melodically from a different angle. Usually you'll end up going back to the original idea, but you'll have more perspective. I try to visualise the song finished. It's like when you play a chorus and you think, "I can see the whole the song, I can hear this and I can hear that." You've then got the second part of the verse to make it sound like it's going into that chorus, and the way to do that is to relax and enjoy it. The minute you stop playing and start thinking about it, you're putting the block up. You have to enjoy what it is you're playing when you're writing it.

Do you have particular tricks or techniques for songwriting?

I guess it's a bit like writing a piece for a magazine - you have to know what your start, middle and end are going to be, otherwise you're just pissing in the wind. You've got one line in your chorus - that's what your song is going to be about, so you start building around it. Really, you can go anywhere, as long as you keep focused on what it is you're trying to say. I joined www.taxi.com [independent artist & repertoire company that provides, among other things, feedback on songs] - and a lot of the critiques that come back are very good because they'll say: "Who is it that you're talking about here? I got lost in the bridge just before the chorus. The chorus didn't make sense to me because of that." You then go back and listen, and you go, "Right, I see what you mean."

How did you come up with the tree image in "Brothers and Sisters"?

I read an article in *Time* magazine a few years ago about an Israeli and Palestinian family. They both lived in the same house at different times, and there was a tree in the garden - I think it was the Israeli family that put it there - and they put a plaque at the bottom of the tree. It basically

"I think that sometimes songwriters can get in the way of a song"

said that nature was one of the things that brings people together. And the Palestinian family [when they moved in] looked after the tree, which was still very young, and the families actually became friends. That's a nice image. I think the plaque also said something like "We on this planet are all brothers and sisters," and I thought, "Great title - I'll use that."

So how did you come to win the rock category at this year's Australian National Songwriting Contest?

The year before, I sent in about four songs and didn't get anything, didn't get anywhere. I was checking the web all the time just to see if I'd got into the top 10, but I didn't. So the following year when the competition came around again, I thought, "Well, I'll send a couple more in." So I sent in another four. I almost fell off my chair when the president of the competition rang me to say I'd won. For an independent artist, there's not a lot of [avenues for people to be exposed to your music] other than people buying your CD, possibly getting some radio - which is bloody hard - so a contest like that is a great lift. But, ultimately, it's only as good as how much work you put into it after that.

For more on John Harley Weston, visit www.johnharleyweston.com

Gold Coast-based songwriter John Harley Weston discusses what it takes to be a successful songwriter.

**WESTON
WORLD**

