

the perks of being a topliner

EMILY PHILLIPS, WHO'S CO-WRITTEN NUMEROUS POP HITS FOR THE LIKES OF RIZZLE KICKS, JOHN NEWMAN AND BIG TIME RUSH, EXPLAINS WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A MODERN TOPLINE WRITER

The word topline is used in many situations to describe something of the highest importance, whether it's a business, an actor or an advertisement. And so in the music business, the topline writer – or 'topliner' – is often regarded as the pivotal role in the world of songwriting. The irresistible topline combination of a singalong melody and compelling lyric is gold dust to any pop act, producer, record label and publisher, and is rewarded generously with the lion's share of the royalties. It's this melodic Midas touch that many budding songwriters crave, but what does it take to be a topliner? What does the job of a topline writer actually entail?

We asked British songwriter Emily Phillips. You may not recognise her name, but she's appeared on the credits of 10 tracks on Rizzle Kicks' second album *Roaring 20's* (including the Top 10 singles *Lost Generation* and *Skip To The Good Bit*) as well as several hits for pop-soul singer John Newman and American boy band Big Time Rush. Emily grew up classically trained on the piano and cello, but turned her back on music and went to art school to forge a career as a painter. That was until the mid-90s, when she shared a London flat with Damon Albarn and Elastica's Justine

Frischmann, who were at that time both at the height of their fame.

Albarn spotted Emily's musical talent, showed her a few chords on the guitar and said, "You should be writing, have a go." Inspired by these words and by the Blur frontman's workaholic application to music, it wasn't long before Emily formed Britpop band

Transcargo and shelved the painting career. A Warner publishing deal for Emily and producer Ant Whiting – now her husband and songwriting partner soon followed – and today, hers is the life of a successful topliner.

Do you market yourself as a topliner or have you been given that label?

"It's handy to be specific in terms of what it is you do. I think a topliner is somebody who focuses on melody and lyrics and essentially leaves the body of the music to the producer. I thought it was a modern term used by the corporate music business, but in fact both Haydn and Bach called themselves topline writers. It's an ancient expression to signify how important the melody is. First and foremost, I think the melody is what catches people's attention, and the producer's job is to ensure that the harmonic progression underneath is doing the best job it can do."

Do you get brought in right at the start, before anyone goes in the studio, or are you ever given finished backing tracks to write to?

"Sometimes I'm given backing tracks, but I much prefer to be in the room with the artist



and, ideally, a producer. I think three-way writing is the best, because that way there's a majority vote if you get stuck."

How do you handle working under pressure from artists, labels and publishers, when they're expecting you to write a hit in a matter of hours?

"I've always quite enjoyed the challenge of pressure, but there's a sort of paradox here because artists need time and sometimes songs need time. When record labels are asking for hits and you know you've only got a day or two with an artist, it's not very healthy. On the other hand, when you're in the swing of the song and you know you've got to finish by six o'clock, it can get your brain into gear and you can think faster."

When you first get signed, who do you start working with and writing for?

"You go in with unsigned artists on a development level, or they'll hook you up with a producer. It's a huge learning curve. I went to LA and managed to get a cut with Big Time Rush, which got to No 3 in the US Billboard Chart, but you're always hedging your bets with new artists, even now. Ant and I have got a good track record, but we still go in with some development artists and you can't tell if it's going to work out."

How do you and Ant maintain the balance between work and family life?

"I love working with Ant and we got together as musicians in the first place, so our relationship is very much based on the fact that we're musically compatible and we complement each other. Also, we only do about one-third of our writing together – Ant will occasionally get other co-writers in, but will equally bring me in and, by the same token, there will be three or four other producers that I'll go to."

Do you have a clear divide between work and home life, or is it 24/7 with you both talking about songs?

"The truth is, I don't really switch off. As a child I always wrote poems and I still spend my free time writing poetry. I'm fascinated by how to express what you experience in life through words, differently, and combine that with melody. I have these books full of poems and that's what I draw on in these sessions – I'll glance at them and a lyric or a line in a poem will leap off the page. You've got to start somewhere"

How do you typically start a session?

"I'll quite often have an acoustic writing session in my house and then we'll go to the studio the day after. I'll make the place look organised, peaceful and welcoming. It's important when people arrive that the place is relaxing. The house is open-plan

on the ground floor, there's a piano, guitars hanging up, books and records everywhere, and loads of pictures on the wall. Wherever you look, the house is full of art.

"Then, I do feel a bit like a psychiatrist, but I'll talk to these people and say to them: 'How are you? What's happening and what do you want to write about?' Then I'll start thinking around the subject and visualise as much as I can."

Do you ever find you run out of ideas?

"You can find yourself in what I call a 'chorus wilderness' that's tantamount to hell. You might be stuck for two hours on a chorus and nobody can resolve it. In that situation, I think my role is to make somebody feel safe enough that we *will* resolve it. Sometimes we'll struggle on and then other times we'll go away and come back to it. Having done this for years now, I do have the confidence that it'll all work out. Sometimes it just requires brain-power and application, and some people just can't be bothered, but I love that – I'm like a dog with a bone!"

Do you find that a song comes together in a particular order each time?

"I know a lot of writers do the melody first, which is probably wise because it's ultimately the most important thing, but I love it when a lyric comes with a melody. It can be so difficult shoehorning lyrics to fit a tune and when things sound too 'toplined' I think you can tell, and I don't think it has much believability. Every time it's slightly different, so I don't think there's really any hard and fast rule."

What happens at the end of a session?

"We always try and record the song in whatever shape or form, to get it sketched down. It's good to live with a song in demo form for a while, but there's never really enough time – these artists' diaries are packed out and you've generally only got two days with them. There isn't too much time for dithering around."

"I LOVE IT WHEN A LYRIC COMES WITH A MELODY. IT CAN BE SO DIFFICULT SHOEHORNING LYRICS TO FIT A TUNE AND WHEN THINGS SOUND TOO 'TOPLINED' I THINK YOU CAN TELL, AND I DON'T THINK IT HAS MUCH BELIEVABILITY"

What do you think is the most important aspect of your role as a topliner?

"I liken songwriting to being a potter: you've got to mould this thing and make it into a shape. In the case of Rizzle Kicks, my job was really to enhance the notes that I knew would sound right through the radio."

"That's another side of what I do, where a very strong artist will come in with the main body of an idea, and I can edit, polish where it needs polishing, alter some lyrics and that can make the song work. John Newman's song *Cheating* wasn't even going to go on the album, but when he came in I could spot straight away what didn't shine, what

needed editing, what needed brightening up lyrically and so on. Then it became his second single and got to No 9."

So it's not always about you coming up with all the ideas?

"Oh no, it's best if the artist has a strong idea. I'm far more interested in what an artist has to say. I just hope I can help turn what they have to say into a great song. Then we're in business – their voice is going to be shining through and it's going to be recognisable. If things are too heavily interfered with by co-writers, then the artist gets watered down and ends up being more and more generic."

We've talked about how you've worked with an artist on one song, but how did you end up working with Rizzle Kicks on their entire album?

"We did one session and just clicked. They loved Ant's production and we've collected analogue gear for years, which appealed to them. There'd be moments when I played a key role and I'd come up with a melody, but also I did feed them very well! It was home from home and I think they enjoyed that."

How did it compare to your typical work?

"It was a privilege for us to really get inside an album, because normally we're jumping

around between different artists and different types of music every week. Last week we went through three different genres in consecutive days – Aston from JLS is Justin Timberlake meets Michael Jackson, then the next day Lauren Aquilina came in and she's Fleetwood Mac meets Joni Mitchell, and then we had Will Heard who's an amazing soul singer, so that might be Shuggie Otis meets Stevie Wonder!

"I'm certainly not complaining, though. It's exciting and stimulating... but quite tiring by the end of the week." **SW**

Interview: Aaron Slater

