

Transcript from [here](#).

GROSS: Oh. Well, can we talk a little about your process of songwriting? I know the first thing that comes to you is the story. You only write songs in the context of character and story. But I know this is probably the most often asked question of any songwriter, and they hate to answer it because it's so corny, but really, when you're writing music and lyrics yourself, which comes first for you?

Mr. SONDHEIM: There's no first. Sometimes you get a melodic idea. I sometimes like to, by myself, improvise the piano. Sometimes with a script propped up, because I always write after the librettist has started to write a scene or two. I always wait to get so that I can divine and imitate the style that the writer is using, both in terms of dialogue and approach and getting to know the characters as he is forming them. And we have talked about the, you know, the scenes and song for weeks before, but until something's on paper I have nothing to imitate.

And so I sometimes, if looking for a kind of musical atmosphere for the piece, particularly when I'm first beginning to write the piece, I will improvise or think of various melodic ideas and sometimes, often, harmonic ideas, chord sequences and things like that. So I'm collecting a little kind of the materials for a scrapbook. And at the same time, I'm also jotting down any lyric ideas I have, titles or just subject matters or things like that. And then I usually try to start from the first song. And if I have a lyric line or a phrase that seems useful or fruitful, I'll maybe expand on a little bit.

But I try to - I may do the same thing with the music. I may have musical idea and expand on a little bit. But I never go very far without bringing the other one in, because you can easily, as you can imagine, paint yourself into a corner if you write a whole tune - or even half a tune - and have no idea what you're going to say with it, you're going to be hard pressed to find words that sit on the music easily, and do - and accomplish exactly what you want them to do and accomplish. *So the thing to do is to do together or in tandem, but not one and then the other. It's one then the other, one then the other, the same time.* [Emphasis added.]