

REPORT

Between the Songs: Creativity, Community and Connection through Songwriting Retreats

HANNAH PARTRIDGE

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SUMMARY

My Churchill Fellowship explored how residential songwriting retreats can foster creativity, connection, and inclusion as factors that positively influence wellbeing, belonging, and mental health. The need for intentional community-building through such creative environments is particularly significant, as loneliness has been shown to increase the risk of early mortality by 26% [1] and is strongly associated with poorer mental health outcomes, including depression [2].

By visiting and participating in six retreats across the United States, I examined how design, facilitation, and community-building shape participants' creative and emotional experiences.

My Fellowship sought to answer:

- **How do collaborative songwriting retreats foster belonging, connection and creativity?**
- **What models of facilitation, production, and community-building best support inclusive community development?**

My findings highlight that environment and facilitation are central to impact: retreats thrive when they combine clear structure, emotional safety, and intentional inclusivity. The most successful programmes balance creative challenges with supportive encouragement. They not only enhance individual artistic growth but generate collective wellbeing.

Key Findings:

- **Design retreats as communities, not courses, with equal emphasis on social connection, reflection, and collaboration.**
- **Prioritise facilitator presence and energy flow throughout**
- **Ensure clarity and accessibility before and during the retreat**
- **Build alumni networks and follow-up opportunities to sustain creative relationships.**
- **Embed inclusivity at every level, from representation in leadership to language and participant recruitment.**

The insights from this research will inform my work as Director of CHORUS Songwriting CIC, supporting the development of inclusive, community-centred songwriting programmes that nurture creativity, confidence, and connection across the UK music industry.

[1] J. Holt-Lunstad et al., 'Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: a meta-analytic review', Perspectives on psychological science 10.2 (2015), pp. 227-237. [2] NHS Digital, Health Survey for England, 2021, Part 2 Loneliness and wellbeing (2023).

BACKGROUND

About Me

I am an event producer, folk musician and Director of CHORUS Songwriting CIC, an organisation promoting gender equality in the music industry through retreats and workshops for women and non-binary musicians. This short video from the start of my travels summarises my background.

My Fellowship

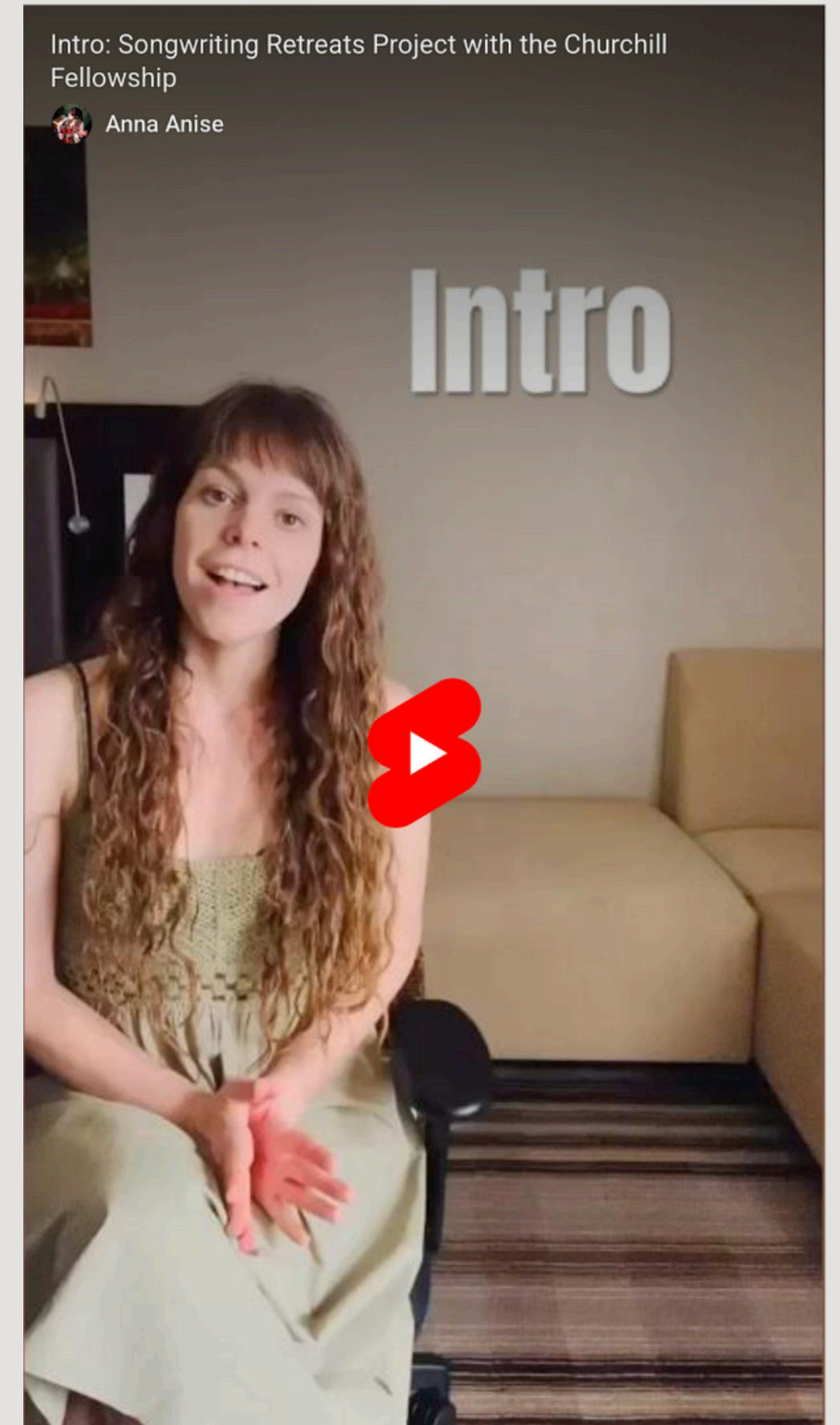
My Churchill Fellowship explored how songwriting retreats in the United States (the world's largest commercial music market) are designed and delivered, with the goal of informing the development of songwriting experiences that enhance creative communities in the UK.

Why?

The House of Commons committee report Misogyny in Music (January 2024) highlighted persistent barriers facing women and gender minorities in the industry. It cited “unjustifiable limitations in opportunity, a lack of support, gender discrimination and sexual harassment as well as the persistent issue of equal pay.” As both a musician and a producer, I have witnessed how songwriting retreats can counter some of these systemic issues by providing space for creativity, confidence-building, and community. Retreat environments foster collaboration over competition, and can play a vital role in professional development, peer support, and mental wellbeing.

While my original focus was on gender equity, my research broadened to consider retreats as holistic learning spaces: places of healing, connection, and renewal that help to combat loneliness and nurture mental health. This report draws together observations from multiple retreat models, presented as case studies, to identify the practices that most effectively support creative confidence and inclusive community.

My aim is to apply these insights within CHORUS Songwriting CIC and to share them with peers, producers, and songwriting professionals - helping to shape a more connected and mentally healthy future through creative spaces such as songwriting retreats in the UK.



APPROACH

My approach was primarily **qualitative and experiential**, designed to understand how songwriting retreats create conditions for **creativity, connection and inclusion**. Rather than collecting numerical data, I focused on observing and experiencing the dynamics that **shape participants' sense of belonging, confidence and creative flow**. This included exploring how every stage of a retreat (from pre-arrival communication to the final group sharing) contributes to its **emotional and educational impact**.

Each of the six songwriting retreats I attended differed in size, structure and location. Settings ranged from island and coastal environments to rural and community-centre-based programmes. In each case, **I took part as both a participant and an observer**. This allowed me to experience facilitation methods, group processes and creative activities first-hand while also noting the structural and logistical factors that influenced participants' experiences.

Data and **reflections were gathered through field notes, journaling, photographs, short 'reel' videos** (linked throughout this report) **and informal interviews** with facilitators, organisers, and participants. To analyse the material, I organised my findings into thematic categories: preparation and arrival, setting, facilitation, inclusivity, group dynamics, activities and itinerary, and post-event contact. These helped me to identify consistent features that contributed to the sense of community and creative confidence fostered by these retreats.

Given the personal and creative nature of these environments, I took care to approach all conversations and observations with sensitivity and **respect for privacy**. Participants' comments are anonymous where included among my observations. After each retreat, I reviewed my notes to identify recurring practices, challenges, and points of note. This reflective process helped distil the insights presented in this report.



Photos of CHORUS Songwriting Retreats

CASE STUDY 1

Judy Stakee Songwriting Retreat

Nashville, Tennessee

A five-day immersive workshop that blends creative songwriting, personal growth, and industry insight through guided collaboration and mentorship.

Preparation and Arrival

- Coordination happened mainly on Facebook. Judy shared weather and logistics updates but didn't prompt introductions.
- Some missed that pre-submitted songs were requested, although it was made clear in emails.
- Entry time confusion led to waiting. But Judy was there with us to personally assign rooms and give a short tour.

Setting and Production

- Quiet, rural house near Nashville with a lake and woodland terrain for gentle immersion in nature.
- Shared rooms (up to five people) and multiple bathrooms - social but intense for introverts.
- Two shared spaces for learning, and morning yoga.
- Hearty Southern meals. Disposable cutlery and plates felt at odds with natural surroundings and homely retreat feel.

Facilitation

- Judy Stakee - warm, assertive, confident and experience-driven.
- 'Voice-Lyrics-Melody' and 'Body-Mind-Soul' formed central frameworks.
- Intuitive and concise sessions - often started with an activity or short videos to ignite the mind.
- Guest facilitators: Katie (vocal coach): Accessible physiology-based voice session. Lucy Woodward: Talked on independence, hustle, and artistic self-respect. Mike Meiers: Practical chord and structure insights; focused on emotion and storytelling through instrumentation.

Inclusivity

- Access would be workable for physical barriers (ground-floor bedrooms, cars can pull right up).
- Mostly American; one international attendee; no visible LGBTQIA+ presence but inclusive tone.
- Adaptable yoga sessions for all abilities; supportive group culture.
- Emotionally open, spiritually inclined, lead facilitator was with the group for the duration.



CASE STUDY 1

Judy Stakee Songwriting Retreat

Group Dynamic

- Participants were skilled, confident writers, mainly artists and toplineers.
- Introductions were brief, and focused on personal intentions.
- The community felt supportive and respectful, with a strong female presence.
- Bonding emerged naturally through meals, yoga, and co-writing.
- Honest feedback and emotional openness deepened trust.

Activities & Itinerary

- The five-day retreat included morning yoga, talks, co-writing, and evening playback.
- Songwriting tasks covered first-line challenges, film/TV briefs, and journaling for personal insight.
- Critiques used the Voice–Lyrics–Melody lens, emphasising clarity, emotion, and brevity.
- Creative games like drawing and riddles encouraged lateral thinking.
- Business sessions covered copyright, publishing, and standards for keeping credit records.
- The schedule balanced creativity, learning, and self-reflection.

Post-Event Contact

- The retreat ended with reflection exercises and a symbolic gift pack.
- Judy encouraged continued collaboration, and gave examples of how other groups do this.
- Networking was supported through shared contacts and opened follow-up opportunities.

Other Observations

- Judy's facilitation was very present while keeping the structure and whole group in mind.
- The short pre-retreat Zoom call helped to build connection and comfort.



Ideas That Stuck...

- Shorter activities that inspire and ignite creativity before starting a group task can help us get into the right headspace.
- Professionalism and presence are equally helpful in facilitating balance between warmth and the structure.

CASE STUDY 2

Cacapehon Recording & Songwriting Retreat

Capon Springs, West Virginia

A five-day, immersive retreat focused on recording, songwriting and the music business, held at Capon Springs & Farms Resort. Features world-class mentors, communal meals and intimate peer-to-peer learning among fellow creators.

Preparation and Arrival

- Warm, welcoming atmosphere from the outset; participants passionate and knowledgeable about music.
- Friendly travel chats with carpool buddies organised through Facebook group.
- Retreat host acknowledged me as having travelled the furthest, I felt personally seen! I thought introductions could have had more structure and assembly style seating felt a bit too formal.
- Arrival environment: calm, fresh, and community-oriented; strong sense of belonging right away.

Setting and Production

- Location: Capon Springs resort in a wooded valley with constant sounds of a stream and nearby hiking trails.
- Facilities: Compact layout with outdoor seating, writing spots, spa, and quirky rituals (bingo!).
- Accommodation: Private room - restful and grounding.
- Aesthetic: Retro “Dirty Dancing” 1950s charm; honesty shop system reflected community trust.

Facilitation

- Sessions delivered mainly in lecture style, less interactive than other retreats.
- Guest sessions included performances and talks highlighting tutor’s experience.
- Facilitators and participants alike shared personal reflections and feedback.

Inclusivity

- Community built around openness rather than ability; mixed experience levels welcomed.
- Informal gender balance improvements noted (there were more women present than previous years at around 25%? and no formal scholarship for Women, although had done previous year).
- Space physically accessible and socially safe, though remote setting limited solo exploration safety.



CASE STUDY 2

Cacapehon Recording & Songwriting Retreat

Group Dynamic

- Strong interpersonal bonds, shared meals, song circles, and emotional final concert due to big hearted performances.
- Connection valued over content: participants return for the people, not necessarily the curriculum.
- Tone of mutual vulnerability and creative camaraderie; some structured sharing, mostly organic.

Activities & Itinerary

- Detailed schedule provided in welcome folders; structured days with optional recreation (spa, bingo, golf).
- Evening concerts and song circles central to connection.
- Suggestion that a guided hike could enhance free-time engagement, safety, and bonding.

Post-event Contact

- Long-standing participants emphasised the community's continuity, returning yearly sustains belonging.
- Some online connection persisted post-COVID; hybrid songwriting/recording model emerged successfully.

Other Observations

- AI discussions: framed as another creative tool parallel to using musical or visual “swatches.”
- Philosophical takeaway: “You must let go of control before you can control what you let go of.”
- Retreat illustrated how shared routine (meals, rituals, music) fosters belonging and safety in creative communities.



Ideas That Stuck...

- When a strong community is created, people come back for the sense of belonging, the connection, and the friendships more than the content.
- Songwriting gives permission to be vulnerable and expressive to serve the song, which can help people to safely open up for catharsis and connection.

CASE STUDY 3

Brave Voice: Writing and Singing For Your Life

Flint Hills, Kansas

An intimate five-day creative immersion in the Flint Hills of Kansas where writers, songwriters, and singers gather to rediscover their voice, connect deeply with others, and craft meaningful work in a nurturing community.

Preparation and Arrival

- Smooth, well-signposted check-in; warm welcome from all four facilitators.
- Opening circle invited each participant to share a one-sentence intention, simple but effective for connection and keeping energy up.

Setting and Production

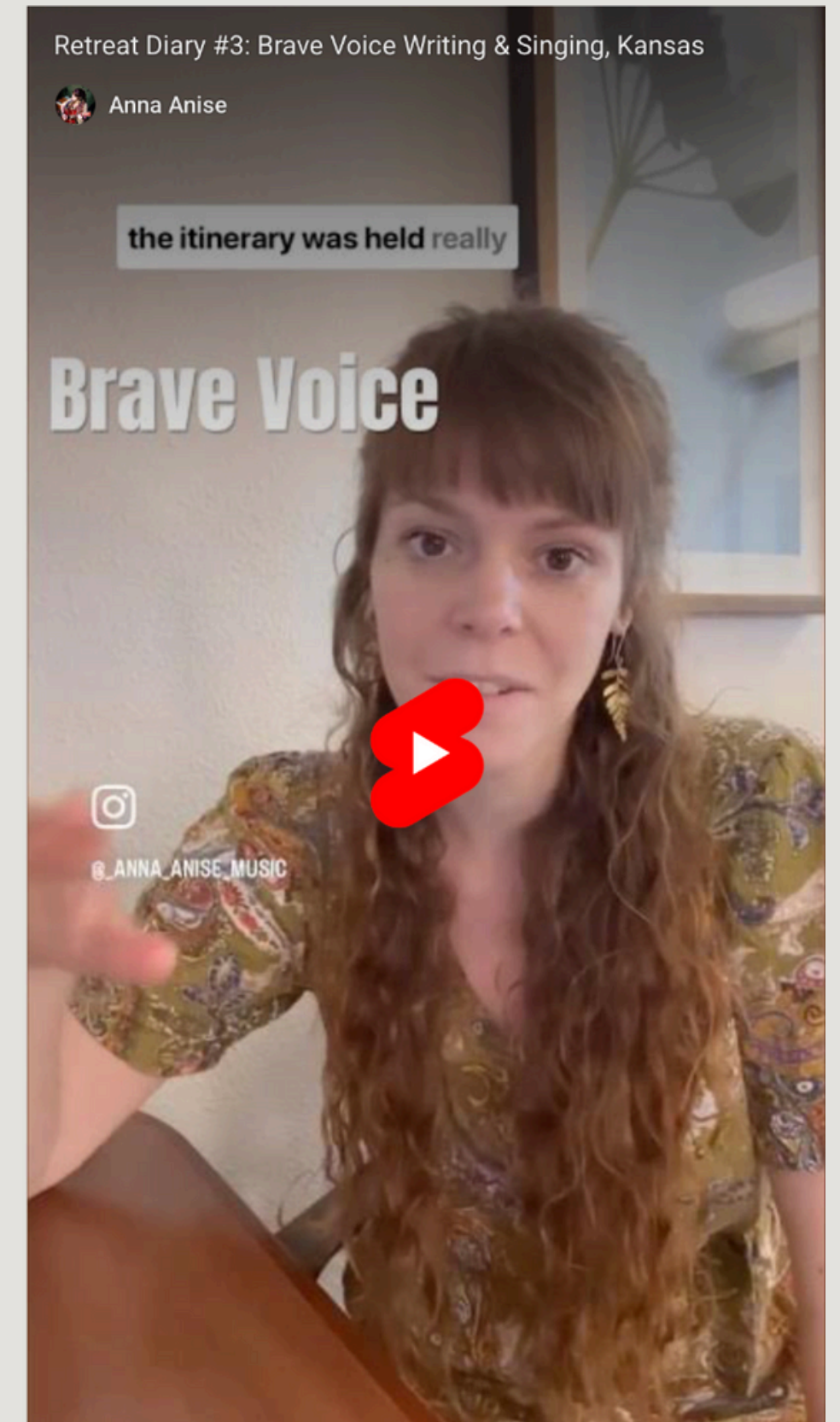
- Held on a rustic campground in the Flint Hills near Lawrence, Kansas; expansive but modest facilities.
- Cabins spaced out for privacy; shared rooms (3–4 per room), very basic comfort.
- Outdoor activities available (walking, kayaking) though safety oversight could be improved.
- No major scenic views, but a strong sense of openness and space; nature subtly wove into participants' songwriting.
- Meals unhurried, communal and key social time for conversation and storytelling.

Facilitation

- Consistent, structured sessions started punctually and were signalled by a song.
- Pedagogy emphasised active listening, emotional honesty.
- Shared leadership model with facilitators present throughout; only one brief outside guest which felt less integrated and slightly imposing to the space but was balanced due to this person's openness.
- Professional, compassionate tone blended songwriting, wellbeing, and reflective practice.

Inclusivity

- Around 25–30 participants, mostly 60 to 80 yrs, diverse background (teachers, therapists, academics).
- LGBTQ+ representation visible; open, emotionally safe environment.
- Gentle balance between personal sharing and artistic focus. There was no political or religious tension despite current USA context, but this was touched upon in more intimate conversations.



CASE STUDY 3

Brave Voice: Writing and Singing For Your Life

Group Dynamic

- Circle seating format central to the sessions, a symbol of equality and trust.
- Group bonded deeply through shared meals, humour, and story-rich evenings.
- “Awards night” added levity and celebration; overall atmosphere supportive, caring, and cathartic.

Activities & Itinerary

- Structured sessions interspersed with generous downtime; folders provided with schedule and resources.
- Daily writing, singing, and reflection exercises; small group sharing encouraged but not forced.
- Some participants experienced a mid-week lull. Could benefit from a more guided mid-retreat activity.

Post-event Contact

- Informal encouragement to stay in touch through the Brave Voice network; ongoing relationships often continue organically.
- Not commercially driven, a focus on personal renewal and community rather than self-promotion.

Other Observations

- Rich storytelling culture. Participants shared personal losses, faith shifts, and family experiences with deep empathy.
- Strong sense of healing and mutual care (“This is New Year’s Eve, the rest of the year starts tomorrow”).
- Themes of letting go, emotional resilience, and connection through voice underscored every aspect of the retreat.



Ideas That Stuck...

- Some spacious afternoon sessions work well, where focus on your current projects is encouraged.
- An ‘Awards Night’ with a table service dinner makes the final evening celebratory and gives time to appreciate each person, along with the ‘Pockets of Gratitude’ envelopes containing personal notes of appreciation.



CASE STUDY 4

Andrea Stolpe Songwriting Retreat

Idyllwild, California

A five-day immersive experience where songwriters refine their craft, collaborate with peers and deepen their artistic voice in a supportive, high-focus environment.

Preparation and Arrival

- Andrea has run 32 earlier retreats and trained under Pat Pattison, giving a sense of pedigree.
- Check-in would've been stronger with a meet-and-greet with a retreat team member, rather than just checking-in with the venue.
- The opening circle felt a little strained due to the loud air-conditioner and participants' shyness.

Setting and Production

- Location offered dramatic alpine-style views and easy access to a scenic town and trails.
- Accommodation was shared (2 people per room), comfortable and luxurious.
- Meals were canteen-style, which felt misaligned with the setting's potential.

Facilitation

- Andrea is deeply experienced and craft-oriented, which comes across in her thorough teaching style, but did not focus as much on scene setting or community building as in other retreats.
- Emphasis on lyrics, groove, melody: 'only two need to be amazing at once to hold the song'.
- Guest session by Kasia Livingston on industry/publishing was a fitting and warm choice, but could've been better framed with an introduction to better understand her experience.

Inclusivity

- Mixed age/experience group; however, there was a common leaning towards retired men that was noticeable at the majority of the retreats.
- International participants (including from the UK and Germany) from people following Andrea's acclaimed online videos and courses.
- Physical accessibility was good, with the venue across a slope and multiple access routes to spaces. There were also mixed-ability morning activities (walk, yoga) available, as well as a pool on site.



CASE STUDY 4

Andrea Stolpe Songwriting Retreat

Group Dynamic

- There were not as many conscious community-building activities on this retreat. However the focused songwriting school approach seemed to work well for most participants and they bonded in their own time.
- Some spontaneous collaborations happened, but sometimes felt as if they were fracturing from the group.

Activities & Itinerary

- Sessions involved lectures, solo writing activities, song feedback sessions and brief setting for co-writing.
- “Co-writes” had less hands-on from facilitators than other retreats, with participants left to it.
- The area and the local town were really spectacular, so it would have been great to include this as part of the itinerary to explore together.

Post-event Contact

- A WhatsApp group created by a participant acts as an alumni community ‘glue’, which is active weekly.
- Closing circle emphasised the online programme and alumni route, but felt more business/sales-oriented than relational.

Other Observations

- This retreat doesn’t necessarily advertise itself as a community-focused space, however I can’t help but wonder if this would enhance the experience alongside the high-calibre teaching.
- I came away with improved songs, but felt less deeply connected amid mixed participant engagement.



Ideas That Stuck...

- As this is the longest-standing retreat in terms of number of events (32 retreats and counting), I wonder if the lack of intentional community building I noticed helps with the sustainability of this offering. No doubt it would be emotionally exhausting and difficult to create an intense community and teach multiple retreats a year.



CASE STUDY 5

Songwriter Soiree: Songs in the City

Portland, Oregon

A one-day immersive songwriting experience where creators of all levels come together to learn craft, co-write, sing, and perform in community. Songwriter Soiree also runs two annual residential songwriting retreats.

Preparation and Arrival

- Clear opening circle with name games, call-and-response, and simple beat-building to ease participants into group creativity.
- Introductory logistics and tutor introductions established expectations and agreements.
- Arrival environment relaxed and welcoming; minimal instruction, focused on jumping straight into creative activity.

Setting and Production

- Held in inspiring spaces (quirky ex-school, artists studio annexe, epic beach location), designed for comfort and immersion.
- No catering or formal accommodations on this event; participants self-arranged but advice given freely.
- Production logistics smooth, clearly informed by previous experience; online communication and newsletters built anticipation.

Facilitation

- Jeff Pepper Rodgers delivered expert songwriting sessions, emphasising chord progressions and accessible techniques without overloading on theory.
- Multi-level approach: singing and drumming offered for accessibility; tutors actively engaged participants at varying skill levels.
- Informal facilitation techniques used (e.g., quote-on-the-wall inspirational prompts, immediate participation in creative exercises).

Inclusivity

- Mixed participants, including non-songwriters eager to learn; emphasis on encouragement and positivity.
- Social support via “care group” with therapists ensured wellbeing during and after retreat.
- Group intentionally open to a wide range of ages and backgrounds, fostering safe and welcoming space.



CASE STUDY 5

Songwriter Soiree: Songs in the City

Group Dynamics

- Collaborative activities like co-writing, circle singing, and spontaneous jamming encouraged connection.
- Splinter groups formed organically around shared interests; cheerleader-type participants boosted group energy.
- Ongoing communication via newsletters and online community (“The Nest”) maintains connection year-round.

Activities & Itinerary

- Structured yet flexible schedule: two 2-hour sessions, open jamming periods, meals, and evening soiree for performance.
- Workshops emphasised practical songwriting skills, collaboration, and performance experience.
- Solo and group work balanced, allowing both personal creative development and communal participation.

Post-event Contact

- “The Nest” online platform and newsletters foster ongoing interaction and community.
- Year-round events encourage continued learning, collaboration, and connection with tutors and peers.

Other

- Strong emphasis on inspiration from place; while not nature-focused, the environment often influences songs.
- Retreat philosophy balances writing for personal processing vs. commercial/finished song creation.



Ideas That Stuck...

- Retreat agreements concisely written out set the tone for the group and encourage a supportive and positive atmosphere.
- A large facilitation team, where the face of the event does not lead the learning sessions adds to the collective and collaborative ethos.



CASE STUDY 6

Miles of Music Island Camp

Three Mile Island, New Hampshire

A week-long immersive retreat on a private New Hampshire island where musicians of all levels gather to learn traditional and modern songwriting, jam, and build community in nature.

Preparation and Arrival

- Staggered pre-arrival emails plus a summary email helped participants absorb information gradually.
- Travel assistance included as part of the experience, with friendly support available.
- Warm, welcoming atmosphere on arrival, including friendly interactions boarding the boat.

Setting and Production

- Retreat held on an island with scenic opportunities for walking and water activities; the boat arrival added a ceremonial arrival feeling.
- Accommodation in cabins; back to basics but part of the experience (cold nights, no shower, a walk to the portaloos).
- Family-style catering (food bought to middle of table to help yourself) with active chef engagement.
- Communal spaces supported icebreakers, workshops, and casual interactions.

Facilitation

- Lead facilitation emphasised coaching creative self, growth mindset, courage over confidence, and group sing-alongs.
- Workshops included interactive exercises (e.g., chord jukebox, building songs in small groups).
- Guest facilitators contributed expertise (e.g., arranging, creative exercises) and informal guidance; facilitators warm, engaged, adaptable, available.

Inclusivity

- Community and agreements actively emphasised (though some commitments and expectations could be clearer and more concise); exercises encouraged participation from newcomers.
- Activities considered group mix (ages, backgrounds, experience levels); noted potential for participants to feel left out if not actively engaging.
- Opportunities to join in repeated group exercises promoted inclusivity.



CASE STUDY 6

Miles of Music Island Camp

Group Dynamics

- Icebreakers (line up by birth month, distance travelled to speak to new people) and small-group song exercises fostered connection.
- Shared experiences like campfire nights and public sing-alongs strengthened bonds.
- Considerate culture around participation; attention paid to how long people speak in sessions.

Activities & Itinerary

- Full, varied schedule of short workshops with breaks; afternoons sometimes looser.
- Writing and songwriting classes included small-group collaboration, singing, improvisation, and building from personal prompts.
- Optional activities like kayaking, island walks, and informal conversations added richness.

Post-Event Contact

- Encouragement to stay in touch through informal community connections; some pre- and post-event communication maintained via email.
- Community emphasis and repeated attendance help reinforce long-term connection among participants.

Other

- Non-musical highlights included morning swims, campfire nights, shared food experiences, and the ceremonial boat arrival.
- Tutors maintained schedule and flow even with distractions (late arrivals, people moving between rooms).
- Here, more attention was given to encouraging everyone to share their various skills than at other retreats.
- Notable thoughtful touches like staff waving off participants at the end added to retreat experience.



Ideas That Stuck...

- Being on an island where the only other people are also part of the music camp is an experience like no other. Really makes you feel like you're in another world.
- Numerous activities designed to get everyone to open-up and friendly enhance the community vibe.

Key Findings

OVERVIEW

Category	Key Findings	Observations	Lessons Learned
Preparation & Arrival	Pre-retreat communication via email, Facebook, or newsletters helps participants prepare; arrival experiences are stronger when hosts provide warm, personal welcome.	Some retreats had unclear expectations (e.g., things to prepare, arrival times), leading to confusion; introductory circles or simple icebreakers eased early social anxiety.	Provide clear pre-event guidance and expectations; incorporate welcoming rituals and early opportunities for participants to connect.
Setting & Production	Nature-rich or inspiring locations with communal and private spaces enhance immersion, and encourage creativity (song lyrics inspired by the landscape, a sense of wonder).	Accommodation comfort varied; accessibility was uneven; campfires, scenic views, rituals added meaning; informal aesthetics (retro charm, rustic cabins) contributed to atmosphere.	Choose locations that balance comfort, accessibility, and inspirational surroundings; plan communal and reflective spaces intentionally; consider other experiences as part of retreat design (a movement activity, local engagement, walk).
Facilitation	Experienced, warm facilitators who blend structured sessions with intuitive guidance increase engagement; guest facilitators add specialist skills and refresh energy.	Style ranged from hands-on to lecture-based; small disruptions managed without major impact to overall course but could easily distract participant flow.	Maintain clear pedagogy while allowing flexibility; use guest facilitators to complement core teaching; facilitators’ presence and adaptability are key to participant confidence.
Inclusivity	Diversity in age, background, and experience is common; most retreats emphasised positive outlook for social cohesion.	Physical accessibility and deliberate inclusion varied; and some retreats could benefit from encouraging a wider demographic of attendees such as through scholarships or targeted marketing.	Explicitly plan for diverse participants and accessibility; design exercises and space to encourage participants to have conversations in small groups, helping to avoid unintentional exclusion.

OVERVIEW

Key Findings

Category	Key Findings	Observations	Lessons Learned
Group Dynamics	Bonding arises through shared creative activities, circle seating formats, shared meals, and informal interactions.	Some retreats relied on organic connection, others included structured icebreakers which helped the group to relax and get to know each other faster.	Include structured and organic opportunities for connection; cultivate trust and a culture of mutual respect from the outset.
Activities & Itinerary	Balanced schedules of structured workshops, optional activities, and new/other experiences (bingo, kayaking, optional hike) support creativity and personal reflection.	Activities often included co-writing, improvisation, singing, journaling, and free time; afternoons sometimes looser and there was often some optional session engagement.	Combine structured creative tasks with flexible downtime; including small-group collaboration and solo tasks, but keep this changing to keep an energy flow. Think about the arch of the course and energy levels.
Post-Event Contact	Online platforms, newsletters, and alumni networks support ongoing connection and collaboration.	Repeat attendance and pre-/post-event communications strengthen community; some retreats relied on participant-driven post-retreat connection, and some retreats saw over 50% of participants return year on year.	Facilitate post-event connection proactively; encourage ongoing creative collaboration and support through formal or informal channels. Setting a simple task after the retreat can help encourage a habit of integrating lessons learned.
Other Observations	Sensory and ceremonial elements (e.g., campfires, morning swims, boat arrival journey) enhance retreat experience; facilitator modelling the community ethos is important.	Emotional safety, trust, and attention to participant comfort contribute to overall satisfaction; minor logistical issues do not derail experience if handled well.	Design retreats with intentional sensory experiences and rituals; prioritise emotional safety and facilitator presence to maintain flow and engagement.

OVERVIEW

Personal Reflections

Upon my return home, I thought a lot about the learnings I would take from this once-in-a-lifetime trip, which went beyond the findings I expected from researching how communities form on songwriting retreats. My reflections focused on taking on board elements from the retreat itineraries that highlighted important elements for a healthy daily routine. For example, morning movement, spacious mealtimes with others, and regular small activities to ignite creativity. These ways to create a more wholesome personal routine feel just as important as the research and the song-craft leanings, as they also nod to the impact that these holistic spaces can have on participants daily wellbeing in the long term.

There are already many ways I can see myself applying my findings in my professional work through CHORUS Songwriting CIC, and other songwriting tutor opportunities, such as with AMATA (Falmouth Uni) and the Music Summer School and Festival. Now that I have experienced first-hand the benefits of using intentional community building activities and tasks to ignite and inspire creativity, I'm looking forward to folding this into my own workshops and events in new and encouraging ways. The experience has also reminded me of my own practice as a songwriter and the need to protect focused time for new ideas, demo creation, and reflective writing. This approach aligns with my wider personal mission to deepen, rather than expand, my skillset and practice so I can refine and hone my expertise as a songwriter, facilitator and event producer.

The things I will remember most from this research trip are the moments that exemplified that these events were giving opportunity for expression and connection. Things like performances of newly written songs that shared a vulnerable emotion from otherwise stoic individuals, deep and meaningful conversations about love, life, and loss that started with a reflection on a creative activity or prompt, long car journeys where life stories were exchanged, celebratory moments witnessed where participants did something for the first time or in a new way that we could all revel in. These moments were so connecting, so human, so filled with support and care. If only I could box-up the atmosphere in some of those moments and show it to the sceptics over the power and importance of art and supporting the arts. I think the world would be a better place for it.

This whole experience has further motivated me to continue creating retreats that are just as much about human connection as about artistic output, and support others in seeing the value in fostering communities within their events that can lead to more openness, heart, and longevity in the creative activities shared.

Conclusion

Across six diverse retreats, I found that the design of every stage, from pre-arrival communication to post-event follow-up, directly affects participants' sense of belonging and creative flow.

The most impactful retreats shared several characteristics:

- Warm, intentional facilitation that modelled vulnerability, empathy, and structure.
- Environments designed for calm and connection, often in natural settings that supported reflection and inspiration.
- Collaborative formats that valued ritual, shared meals, sitting in a circle, as much as workshops.
- Clear communication and expectations, allowing safety and creative risk-taking.
- Post-retreat continuity, through online communities or annual gatherings, transforming short-term inspiration into long-term support networks.

Conversely, I observed that participants at retreats lacking intentional community building activities took longer to relax and become friendly with one another. They missed opportunities to connect and form stronger bonds and comfort in creative expression.

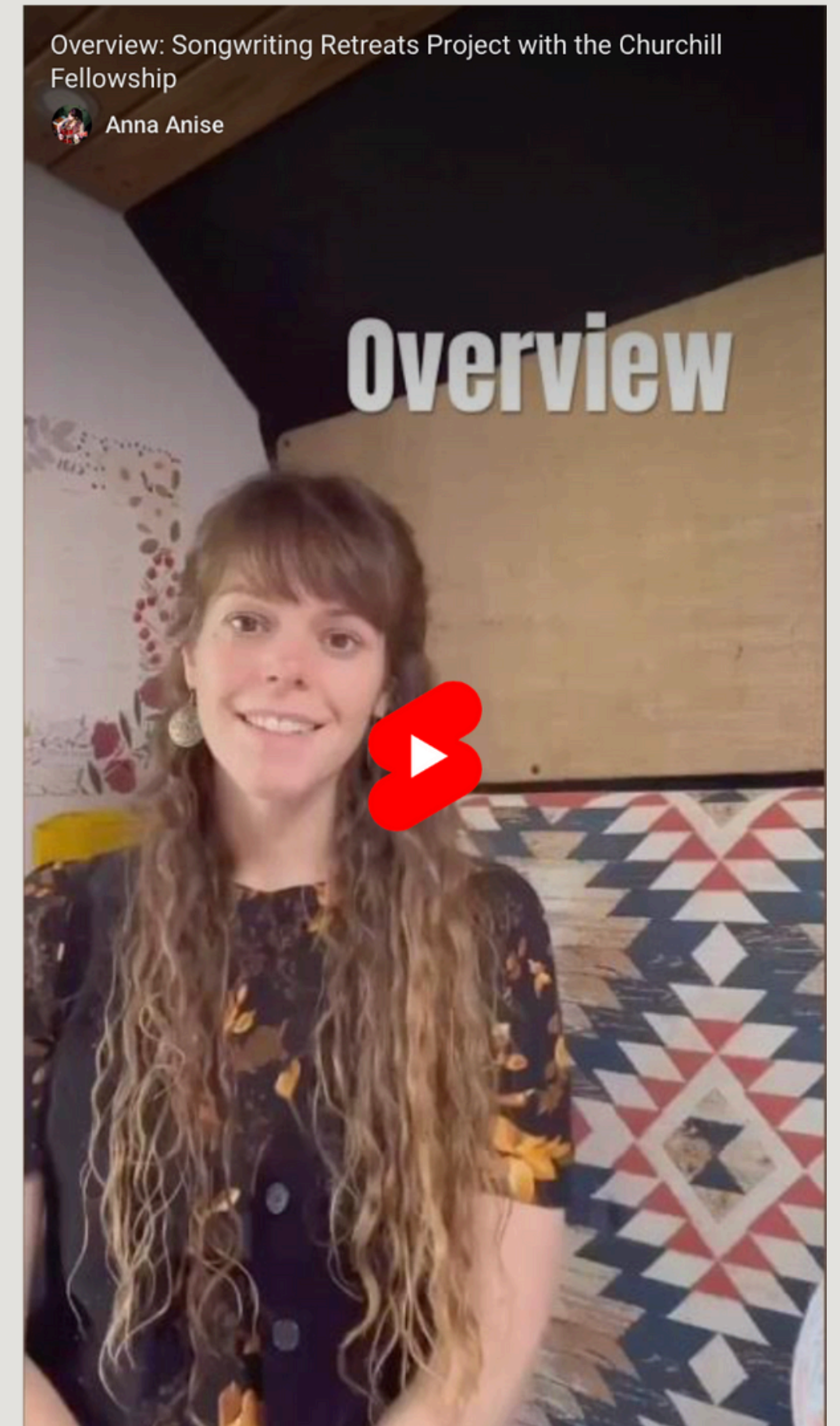
Overall, the research reveals that songwriting retreats are more than learning environments - they are micro-communities of care. When designed with intention, they can support new friendships, promote wellbeing, and create space for genuine artistic collaboration.

Key Recommendations

- Design retreats as communities, not courses, with equal emphasis on social connection, reflection, and collaboration.
- Prioritise facilitator presence and energy flow throughout
- Ensure clarity and accessibility before and during the retreat
- Build alumni networks and follow-up opportunities to sustain creative relationships.
- Embed inclusivity at every level, from representation in leadership to language and participant recruitment.

Through this Fellowship, I have seen how inclusive songwriting retreats can model the kind of creative culture our industry needs: one that values empathy as much as excellence, and community as much as craft. These findings will directly shape CHORUS Songwriting CIC's future programmes and contribute to a broader conversation about how the arts can build belonging, resilience, and equality through music.

OVERVIEW



APPENDICES

Links & References

The Retreats I Visited in the USA:

- [Judy Stakee Songwriting Retreat](#)
- [Cacapehon Recording and Songwriting Retreat](#)
- [Brave Voice: Writing and Singing for Your Life](#)
- [Andrea Stolpe Songwriting Retreat](#)
- [Songwriter Soiree: Songs in the City](#)
- [Miles of Music Island Camp](#)

Links to my Work in the UK:

- [CHORUS Songwriting CIC](#) - Retreats and events
- [Anna Anise](#) - Cornish singer/songwriter

Other Songwriting Retreats in the UK:

- [Wild Songs](#) with Martha Tilston in South West
- Lady Maisery [Creative Song Weeks](#)
- Courses at [Halsway Manor](#)
- Courses at [Hawkwood College](#)

Equality in Music Recourses:

- [The F List Women in Music Support Organisation](#)
- [English Folk Dance and Song Society](#)
- [Access Folk](#), University of Sheffield
- [UK Music](#)
- [Misogyny in Music Report: UK Parliament](#)

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