



BY PIPPA BIDDLE

The songwriter and former Gloriana member reveals the earworm trap—and how he broke free of it.

When Tom Gossin got into the music industry, it was almost too late. He entered the business at a critical moment, a time when instruments were being replaced with facsimiles of ones, technology was opening up production to anyone with a laptop, and playing to 20,000 people turned into playing to 20,000 phones. Inspired by the singer-songwriters like Van Morrison, Paul McCartney, and Kurt Cobain, the former singer and guitarist in chart-topping country crossover band Gloriana had envisioned a life of late night riffing and deep collaboration. What he faced was a new era of earworm music.

Earworms are those songs you probably hate the first few times you hear them, but then they snag their talons in your brain and won't let go. The science behind how to make an earworm track is formulaic, and mastering the formula is one of the secrets to commercial pop success. Sticky songs even have a technical name: Involuntary Musical Imagery, or INMI, and they share traits: a fast tempo, easy-to-remember melody, and repetition. So there is a reason that the song with the sound effect that's eerily similar to a dolphin crying is lodged in your brain: it was designed to do just that.

The role of earworm music hit Gossin hardest during the two years he spent as a songwriter in Nashville after he finished touring with Gloriana. What he saw in the songwriting world, he says, was an industry addicted to a formula. "Nobody should get it twisted. Just like when you go on Facebook there are all these ads that pop up that are tailored to you," many of the people who are making pop music today "know that girls who listen to Rihanna want songs about being bad"—so that's what they give them. The entire process is a fill-in-the-blank. Insert a catchy title, looping track, lyrics that confirm the audience's existing beliefs, and you may just have a hit on your hands.

Earworms and pop music overlap, but Gossin is quick to point out that not all pop relies on a formula, or at least doesn't follow the formula to the letter—and some of the biggest chart-toppers completely reject it. He offers "Hello" by Adele as a perfect example of music that isn't built from a worksheet.

"It's not just about dogging popular music," he says. "Adele is real, and written in a way that you can tell is the old way. It's not just about loops and tracks." Steely

Dan is an older-school example of a band whose huge hits were built on artistic integrity, not just to get stuck in people's heads. "Their hit songs are fantastic," Gossin says, "and the fact that they were able to turn complex music into hit songs shows that there is smart music that everyone can like."

Frustrated by an industry that was becoming more formulaic—not less—Gossin eventually left Nashville for Wilmington, North Carolina, and today he's focused on music as an art rather than an industry. Reflecting on the journey he's taken since his Gloriana days, Gossin says, "I've been a serious musician my whole life. I've been studying music since I was five years old, but people wouldn't know that from the band I was in."

Gossin is grateful that he got to live his dream, even if it wasn't exactly as he'd envisioned it. For a while he fought to be on top of the charts, but now his ultimate goal is to create music that positively impacts people. "There is still an art form there, and when you get a good song you can tell the difference," he says. "The ones that are real always resonate."

#### Tom Gossin's Guide: How to Listen to Music

**Invest:** Gossin doesn't stream music, and he compares streaming to taking an Uber. When you buy a car, you take care of it, and you're invested in it. But when you take an Uber, it's borrowed: "It gets me where I want to go, but there's no pride of ownership," he says. Streaming is the same: borrowed music that you don't have to invest in. Streaming companies, he says, undercut the industry by poorly compensating writers. Instead he buys songs, and often full albums. To take pride in something, you need to own it.

**Immerse:** Gossin doesn't want to be prescriptive, but there are a few artists that he recommends people sit down with to reconnect with non-formulaic music. "Some people just don't like what everybody likes," he says, "and I get that." But he's also not ashamed to admit that his favorites include some of the most famous albums in music history. He's a huge Beatles fan and insists that "anything after 'Sgt. Pepper's' is an education in songwriting." Then there is Van Morrison, who "would go in and make an album in a day," and Nirvana, who "was kinda out of left field." Right now though, he's spending a lot of time with his Steely Dan albums. In his opinion, they are "the epitome of fantastic writing and studio work. They were the best musicians: all about perfectionism, and they made albums in the 70s that would be hard to make now," which is exactly why we should be listening to them.

**Engage:** Whatever you listen to, though, you need to actually listen—and there's no judgment from Gossin if what you want to listen to is at the top of the charts. "I don't get it twisted," he says, "it's totally about the listener and what makes them happy. Even the formulaic music or what I think is cheesy. If it works for you, it's doing what it needs to do."