

A Pair work What big break might a songwriter get? Discuss and share your ideas with the class.

Songwriter's Big Break

"And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going," the showstopper from the movie *Dreamgirls* that won Jennifer Hudson an Oscar, was written in about 45 minutes.

The year was 1980; the setting, a rehearsal studio owned by Broadway director and choreographer Michael Bennett. A workshop of a new musical called *Big Dreams*, about an all-girl singing group from Detroit full swing. Composer Henry Krieger was at the piano when Tom Eyer – the lyricist, writer, and director – handed him a sheet of paper. Eyer had been struggling to come up with an ending for the first act. He wanted a song that would usher out Effie, and bring on Deena, her replacement.

"Here's a lyric," Eyer told Krieger. "See what you can do." Krieger headed to the building manager's office, where, he recalls, "there was a desk, a piano, and a tape recorder." He sat at the piano, turned on the tape recorder, and looked at the first line: "And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going." He was at a loss. "I was straining to make sense of it," he says. "It was a very strange way to begin a song." The door opened and someone came in to make a phone call. "When he left, I sat

back down at the piano, turned on the tape recorder, and the song wrote itself," Krieger says. "That little break was what did it. I stopped trying so hard, and the song just came."

Krieger ran back to the rehearsal studio, told Eyer to call a break, and then sang the song to Jennifer Holliday, the Broadway show's Effie. When she sang it back, the reaction from the other cast members was "volcanic," Krieger says. The show had its Act I ending.

The power of the song was one of the reasons Bennett became interested in the show. He took over as director, and the musical, renamed *Dreamgirls*, opened on Broadway on December 20, 1981. In his review the next day, Broadway critic Frank Rich singled out Holliday's performance of the song, calling it an "emotional jolt."

Someone else who felt that "jolt" that night was Bill Condon. Just out of Columbia University, he watched the show from the back of the mezzanine. He loved it so much, he went back to see it several times. Years later, he would write and direct the *Dreamgirls* movie.

Source: "Songwriter's Big Break," by Michael Riedel, New York Post.

B Match the people below to the correct role they played in the production of *Dreamgirls*.

- | | |
|---------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. lyricist _____ | a. Henry Krieger |
| 2. movie director _____ | b. Bill Condon |
| 3. newspaper critic _____ | c. Jennifer Holliday |
| 4. composer _____ | d. Tom Eyer |
| 5. actress _____ | e. Frank Rich |

C Group work Discuss these questions. Then share your answers with the class.

- Who do you think plays the biggest role in making a song successful: the lyricist, the composer, or the singer? Explain.
- Have you ever had a problem that almost solved itself after taking a break? Explain.