

# Song Writing: The Importance of Song Writing

By Brenton Brown

## *Why is song writing important?*

Psalms 33. - 'Sing to the Lord a new song'. God tells us to sing new songs to Him. God is the most creative dude on the planet! Since we've been born into His family we're going to start creating right? - although not everybody gets to write songs on behalf of everyone else. . . *Singing new songs occurs 9 times in scripture, and 6 of those times it is a command.*

Songs focus us, they bring us together, in a way that helps us express ourselves communally to God. Think how much more challenging worshipping God together would be without the songs?

'During the act of worship something has been happening to the worshipers: minds are cleared; perceptions come into focus; spirits are renewed. As this takes place, ordinary speech, impatient of pedestrian prose, dances - it's condensed into poetry and then raised into tune. Worship sings. Singing is speech intensified and expanded. Song takes the natural rhythms and timbre of speech and develops its accents and intonations into music.

There are songs everywhere in scripture. The people of God sing. They express exuberance in realizing the majesty of God and the mercy of Christ, the wholeness of reality and their new found ability to participate in it. Songs proliferate. Hymns gather the voices of men, women, and children into century-tiered choirs. Moses sings. Miriam sings. Deborah sings. David sings. Mary sings. Angels sing.

Jesus and his disciples sing. Paul and Silas sing. When persons of faith become aware of who God is and what He does, they sing. The songs are irrepressible (!).

*Eugene Peterson, Reversed Thunder, p.66*

So songs should take the thoughts and worship of our hearts and lift them up to God in something congregational . . .

Songs can bring deliverance. They can haul us out of where we are struggling, they can be 'a hand-hold on the cliff face of life' that can get us closer to God . . .(Dave Wilcox).

**The Philosophy - what are we shooting for musically?**

*Worship songs need to serve other people . . .*

By definition congregational songs need to be congregational. Writing for a group of people rather than just myself requires me to wear two hats: the artist and the servant. The songs are there for other people and not just me. The songs are meant to serve the congregation - they are a voice to God. That's why we do it.

*Simple and Interesting . . .*

So, what kind of songs do they need to be on a musical level? Well, this is what I'd suggest:

***Worship songs need to be simple enough to be accessible but complex enough to be interesting.***

If people are going to be able to sing these songs they need to be singable. And that means easy to follow. Simple.

However, they also need to be interesting enough to be sung again and again. If a song is musically too simple it's not going to last. People will get bored of it. Congregational songs need to be complex enough to be interesting. However, if a song is musically too complex it will never get off the ground as people will not be able to sing it . . .

Simple and bad is very easy. Simple and good is extremely difficult. But this is what we're shooting for . . .

Examples of simple and good songs: Isn't He (John Wimber), I Could Sing Of Your Love Forever (Martin Smith).

Below are some suggestions for both simple and interesting ideas for song writers:

#### **Simple ideas:**

- musical repetition - lyrical, melodic, rhythmic phrases
- singable range
- first language English
- stepwise melodic lines
- manipulation of a good melody

#### **Interesting ideas:**

- different feels, fresh
- different time signatures
- sensitive use of non-diatonic or out chords
- target notes
- tension and resolution
- different song form

Normally, I spend the rest of this workshop detailing what I mean by those things I've just outlined for you under the

headings of 'simple' and 'complex or interesting'. **However**, having been involved in the song selection process for several Vineyard UK recordings and having done a couple of these types of workshops there are certain things that seem to come up again and again. And the main challenge doesn't seem to be the writing of interesting congregational melodies. Generally people are able to come up with melody that is interesting musically and by and large, it is congregational. So I'm going to leave that for the moment. All I want to say about that is make sure the melody is interesting and then ask the question: ***could my mom sing this song?***

*The biggest challenge for songwriters, and this certainly goes for me, is the lyrical challenge. That is writing fresh, coherent, passionate lyrics that make sense congregationally! So how do we do that? And I think a useful question to ask is . . .*

***What am I trying to say in this song?***

**1. Another way of describing the song vision is to call it your target.**

When we write a song we need a target, otherwise how are we going to know when we've hit the mark. It's got to be clear . . .

*Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle'? - 1 Cor 14.7-8*

Clarity is important. And having a clear idea of what it is you're trying to say will give your song clarity. It's like having goal posts. Most of us start the song out from a feeling, or a chord progression, or maybe a groove on a drum machine. All of these are good places to start but what you need to do quickly is establish the target. Why are you writing the song? What are you trying to say? More importantly, why would someone else want to sing it?

## **2. One song vision or spiritual statement is enough.**

Trying to hit more than one target at a time is quite difficult. Make a choice - what is this song about and then stick to it?

I've found that an inability to stick to one theme in a song often means I don't have enough to say about what I'm trying to write about. I'm not ready to write that song. I need to study and think about it, spend time with it. Hear God's heart about it . . .

## **3. A congregational song has a theme or spiritual statement that has universal appeal or universal significance, i.e. it needs to be sung.**

The songs that work the best are the ones that strike the common chord with most people. Of course there needs to be a balance of service and integrity. I.e. what you are saying needs to be authentic to who you are and what God is saying to you. There is also an educator's role that we play as song writers that we will be looking at tomorrow.

Secular teacher on songwriting Sheila Davis says this: '*A song is successful when an audience responds with a*

*recognition that says: Me too . . . I've felt that . . . I've seen what you've seen . . . I know what you mean.*

But worship songs that last are ones that release people to express their worship to God as their own. They say - I've felt that . . . I've wanted to say that to God, I have longed for that. The songs that connect with people in that way will always be the peoples choice. . .

*SO: When you look at your songs, look and see whether you're saying one thing clearly. If you are writing a song that has a verse/chorus form, make sure that at the end of the verse when you're about to hit the chorus, you can utter the phrase: And that's why I want to say: . . .(I'm falling on my knees, or Lord Reign in Me, or Let everything that has breath, or I'm desperate for you, or You're all I want).*

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### **E.g. 5.2 Heart of Worship**

When the music fades, all is stripped away  
And I simply come  
Longing just to bring something that's of worth  
That will bless Your heart

I'll bring You more than a song  
For a song in itself is not what You have required  
You search much deeper within  
Through the way things appear  
You're looking into my heart

*I'm coming back to the heart of worship  
And it's all about You, it's all about Your Jesus  
I'm sorry Lord for the things I've made it*

*When it's all about You, all about You Jesus*

King of endless worth, no-one could express  
How much You deserve  
Though I'm weak and poor, all I have is yours  
Every single breathe

*Basic thought:* I'm returning to what worship is about - which is more than a song, its a heart attitude.

Why:

1. It's not about songs - (that's not what You have required)
2. It's about the heart - (You see much deeper within, through appearances)
3. It's about our lives - (all I have is yours, every single breathe)
4. Because You're worth it - (How much you deserve)

Subtext: I've made worship into something it's not. I've made it into the music and the songs.

**E.g. 5.2 Humble King**

Kneel me down again, here at Your feet [make me humble]  
Show me how much You love humility [show me the value of humility]  
O Spirit be the star that leads me to  
The humble heart of love I see in You [lead me to the humility I see in you]

You are the God of the broken, the friend of the weak  
You wash the feet of the weary, embrace the ones in need

I want to be like You Jesus, to have this heart in me  
You are the God of the humble, You are the humble King

*Basic argument:* Make me humble because you are humble  
and I want to be like You

Verse one is essentially a re-expression of the desire to be  
humble

Chorus supplies the reasons

1. You a humble God and value humility - Why? Love  
broken, weary, weak, needy people
2. I value you, therefore, I value humility, therefore,  
2. Therefore, make me humble

### ***What do we look for in good lyrics?***

Here are four things I look for in lyrics:

1. *Are they spiritually accurate?* I mean is this true? Does  
this really happen. Can I really say this? Does this fit with  
the balance of scripture . . . and/or experience?

2. *Do they fit with the song vision?* As we've touched on  
they can be the most truthful statement in the Bible, but if  
they don't fit with the song, they're not going to feel  
write, they're not going to help people worship - and worst  
of all, people might not know why . . . (sure God is slow to  
anger, but what has that to do with wanting to be close to  
Him)

3. *Do they sing?* Are they lyrical. Lyrics are not poetry.  
They're earthier than that. They're can be more  
conversational or more grand. They maybe something you

might say to someone in a conversation. Or something you would only say in an encounter with an all powerful God. But they are never simply statements of fact. Including a line of lyric in your song because it's true is not enough - it's got to sing. It's got to fit the feel and the rhythm of the song.

4. *Are they fresh? Has this been used before?* Can I really sing this statement again? One of the big challenges in writing congregational songs, is the challenge of expressing age-old, timeless truth in new ways. This has what made Martin Smith's songs, *Over the Mountains* and *Did you feel the mountains tremble*, so ready to use. They were fresh ways of saying what we all believe. So look out for stock phrases, and stock images. Be ready to explore new images and themes. Keep an eye out on nature.

*This article is taken from a series of notes by Brenton Brown (used at a Song-writing workshop at Mallshanger in December 2000). It is used with kind permission and updated by Vineyard Records UK. Brenton Brown is a songwriter and worship leader on the Vineyard Records UK releases 'Come now is the time', 'Hungry', 'Surrender', 'Doing the Stuff Live' and 'Holy' Brenton and his wife, Jude, now live in the US and attend the Malibu Vineyard.*