

Song writing: The Importance of Good Lyrics and Song Vision

By Brenton Brown

Having been involved in four Vineyard recording projects that we've done in the UK, and in particular having sat on the song panel for three of those projects and listened to over 200 song submissions by song writers from Vineyards around the country, I've come to the conclusion that the challenge typically is not about melody or feel. It's not a 'musical' thing by and large. Almost always, the panel will have to turn a song down because there are problems lyrically. I want us to take a look at this area of song writing, which might help some of us, move from writing songs that are used locally to writing songs that can be used nationally. Here I'm going to talk about 'song-vision' and lyrics.

Song-vision - making a point

I'd like to put in a disclaimer that, as with any creative expression, there are always exceptions to the rule. Nevertheless, almost always, the songs that connect with the most number of people, the songs that we find being sung in the most number of churches and even the songs that are played on most of the radio stations, are generally songs that express coherently a single thought or idea. They are songs that have one (often universal) song-vision. Good songs, the songs that people own, are songs that ruthlessly stick to expressing a single thought or idea.

Very often the best songs are songs that find creative ways of expressing an idea from a number of different perspectives. A single, even complex idea can of course be looked at from different angles or contrasted from

different perspectives but ultimately the song will be saying just one thing. Mixed messages are confusing. Before you finish your song, you should know how you want people to feel or react on singing/hearing it. Your job as a writer is to make one point, and make it well. Ask yourself - what is the one thing I want to say?

Ideas on how to express one thing passionately and coherently in a song

Here are four things that I've found to be useful tools on how to maintain one song-vision. Typically, as we write songs, we start with an initial moment of inspiration where we hastily scribble down a flood of thoughts that often seem to work and then continue mostly with perspiration and pain where the going is much slower and we struggle to find things to say! Here are a couple of ideas they may help you through this painful stage:

1. Spend time doing some 'blue sky mining' before you begin editing

After you've been writing songs for a while the main challenge is to keep the 'editor' in you out of the creative process. I find that the moment I start to create and have some ideas, I have an editor in me saying, 'I'm not sure if that's congregational enough', 'what about the theological content of that phrase?' etc.

Let the creative in you run rampant! Typically we only keep about 10% of what we create. The rest we throw away. If we start editing our creative process too early then we are limiting the amount of material we will have to work with in the end. It's far harder to re-engage in the creative process after you've been editing the first verse and chorus

for the last hour. It's like switching brains. So, try to have as much creative raw material to begin with as possible.

2. Start the process knowing that you're trying to make one point

This sounds obvious but it can really help the song. In Nashville, staff-writers tend to start the process by finding a title, and then work out what the song will be saying from there. Once they've got a catchy title they pretty much know where the song is going. The title guides the creative process and provides guide rails to keep the song's vision/message on track. At some point during the crafting process write down one sentence identifying what it is you want to say.

3. Spend time researching

Here is a common problem. Songs of mine that have suffered from meandering song-visions have tended to do so simply because I just don't have enough to say on the subject. But I want to finish writing the song. So what do I do? I start writing about something else!

Our inspiration for the lyrics we write can come from almost anywhere - books, courses, experiences, dreams, movies, conversations, devotionals, sermons, quiet times etc. The list is almost endless. Keep a notebook for phrases that just pop out at you. Always be on the look out for new expressions of ancient truths - these cut through the layers of familiarity and allow the message to penetrate our hearts.

However, this initial impetus will often not be enough to carry us through to the end of the song. At a certain point you will probably need to do some research - read around the subject, use theological and devotional books, get hold

of sermon tapes, get a concordance and cross-reference, study relevant passages etc. Never in the history of Christianity has there been so much material available to read and use. I would encourage everyone to constantly be studying. The things you learn will ferment in you. Then, when the creative process comes, the material will be there. For me some of the strongest songs I've written came in this way. 'All who are thirsty' came the morning after I'd read 'The Divine Romance' and had been studying Revelation; 'Humble King' came after a two-month course on the gospels.

As songwriters, we play a very important educational role in church life. I have often heard the phrase, 'songs will always outlast sermons in the collective memory of a church' - that's why they had better be useful! It's important to make sure that the songs we're writing are both accessible but also theologically deep.

4. Learn to look for phrases and images that re-express your main message

This is perhaps the most useful tool I've found in writing. If song writing is really about saying one thing passionately, then more often than not the genius of good lyric writing is really about expressing the same thought, repeatedly throughout the song using different but complimentary words and images.

Some songs are simply this: multiple expressions of one single, powerful idea, for example 'Be the centre'. The central idea is repeated using 10 different images to express this basic thought - source, light, hope, song, internal fire, wind in sails, reason to live, vision, path, guide. It is simple and powerful, and results in an undiluted message.

Summary

- Good songs, the songs that people own, are songs that ruthlessly stick to expressing a single thought or idea - the song-vision
- Your job as a writer is to make one point, and make it well. Ask yourself - what is the one thing I want to say?
- Keep the 'editor' in you out of the initial creative process - let the creative in you run rampant!
- Learn to look for phrases and images that re-express your main message. The genius of good lyric writing is about expressing the same thought, repeatedly throughout the song using different but complimentary words and images.

This article is taken from a series of notes by Brenton Brown (used at a Song-writing workshop at Mallshanger in December 2000) edited by Simon and Gaynor Shaw 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.