

# Songwriting Tips for the Church

*Dan & Lauren Smith*

## Songs Will Flow from Time Spent with God

This is first because it's the most important. If we truly believe in the living God who speaks and inspires us through His word, then we must also spend time with Him and let our songwriting flow from His presence. Songs written and meant for the church to sing as praise and worship will flow out of our own personal times with the Lord.

Make Him first and songwriting second. Ask God, "Lord, what is it you want your church to say to you or hear from you?" It's out of these questions that we can best receive God's direction in our songwriting, and what He wants to say to or what He wants to hear from our church family in our worship of Him.

## Leave Your Ego at the Door

This is also extremely important. Songwriting as a collaborative experience requires humility - there is no space for the ego. You have to be willing to take criticism and respect opinions. Sometimes what you internally think makes lyrical sense does not work for the listener or could be said in a much more poignant way.

The same is true musically. Keep an open heart and open mind when collaborating on music together. Be willing to admit or believe that you're wrong or someone else's idea is better. In worship, it's not your song, it's God's. You are a team working to craft a message from Him - think of it as a discovery process you are all on together.

## Don't Overthink It

It's easy to overcomplicate songwriting and get frustrated in the process. Just because you are not using every possible chord in a song doesn't mean it's a bad song. Sometimes a song just needs four chords and that's okay. Keep it simple as you write and create: as the entire song matures, so will its pieces and parts.

## Keep it Simple

For corporate worship, there's a difficult creative balance to achieve between accessibility, complexity, and originality. Focus on what's best for the song and allow it to write itself. You'll often find yourself trying to force a song to become something it can't be. Let a song come to life and be what it is. It might not sound like a Hillsong, Jesus Culture, Bethel, Tomlin, or Crowder song...and that's a good thing because it's YOUR song and that's what Jesus wants to hear. Focus on Him and let the Spirit work through you. Trust in your own voice and be confident in your own style.

## Step Away

On our newest album, I started writing one of the songs in 2012 and didn't come back to finishing it until 2014. Sometimes what's best for a song is to let it rest and come back to it later. Maybe it's a couple of hours or maybe it's a couple of years. It's okay if a song doesn't get finished in one day - sometimes the best songs require one ingredient - time.

## You Write What You Eat

I've heard it said that songwriting is like poop. It's the product of everything you ingest. Sadly, I think this is a fantastic analogy. Musically and lyrically your songwriting will reflect what you listen to, what you read, what you watch, what you engage with in your everyday life. Expect your songs to reflect your uniqueness and learn to be completely confident in that.

## The Purpose of a Bridge

A lot of worship music loses focus on what the point of a bridge is: to say something new and say it well. These days, worship music uses the bridge as the cliff note of the song - the one line that sums up the whole song and is repeated over and over and over and over and over and over and over.

Instead, let the bridge of a song be an opportunity to say something completely new about the topic you're writing on in a deeper and more profound way. Bridges are not just for creating a new musical moment or an emotional crescendo - they are also for saying something brand new lyrically.

## Support the Hook

This comes from a great blog by Shaun Groves on Songwriting and I love his point:

"The hook of a song is often the title, and usually a word or short phrase tied closely to the main idea of the song. It's also the one piece of lyric a listener is most likely to walk away remembering. It's usually the centerpiece of the chorus. And the verse lyrics lead the listener to the hook.

A good example is Katy Perry's song "Firework." The hook is "firework". Look at how the first verse of the song begins very generally and then slowly becomes more specific, centering in on imagery related to "firework". This is called supporting the hook. She begins by describing a broad feeling, then attaches that feeling to the metaphor of "firework" with related words like "spark," "ignite," "shine," and "4th of July."

*Do you ever feel like a plastic bag  
Drifting through the wind, wanting to start again?  
Do you ever feel, feel so paper thin  
Like a house of cards, one blow from caving in?  
Do you ever feel already buried deep?  
Six feet under screams, but no one seems to hear a thing*

*Do you know that there's still a chance for you  
'Cause there's a spark in you?  
You just gotta ignite the light and let it shine  
Just own the night like the 4th of July*

And here's the chorus with the hook at the forefront.

*'Cause baby, you're a firework  
Come on, show 'em what you're worth  
Make 'em go, oh, oh, oh  
As you shoot across the sky*

Katy supported the hook well: That verse couldn't be a verse in any other song. It *has* to be paired with that hook: "firework."

Now look at the hit worship song "Stronger" by Hillsong. The hook is "stronger." Here's the first verse:

*There is love that came for us  
Humbled to a sinner's cross  
You broke my shame and sinfulness  
You rose again victorious*

*Faithfulness none can deny  
Through the storm and through the fire  
There is truth that sets me free  
Jesus Christ who lives in me*

And here's the chorus.

*You are stronger you are stronger  
Sin is broken, you have saved me  
It is written, Christ is risen  
Jesus you are Lord of all*

The hook is supported so poorly that this first verse could just as easily be paired with the chorus of "How Great Is Our God" or "Mighty To Save." When a hook isn't well supported a song becomes so general it's generic."

## Write in Real Life

Another one from Shaun's blog:

"Patty Griffin is a great writer in part because when she describes a scene I feel like I'm there. When she introduces a character? I can see them in my mind's eye. Just enough detail – not too much – anchors a song's message (and every song has one) in the real world. And that makes it universal – more appealing/relatable to any human living in the real world.

But today's worship songs talk about God and the writer's experience with Him in so little detail that she could just as well be talking about her boyfriend or anyone admirable or beloved. A few of the often used generic descriptions of God are "good", "majestic", "great", "loving", "merciful." And they're all true! The Bible says so!

But the Bible says so with specificity – within a large detailed story made up of smaller detailed stories that take place in the real (ancient) world. It tells us exactly *what* is unique about the goodness, majesty, greatness, love and mercy of our God. It tells us *why*, *how*, to whom and when He is good, majestic, etc. And so the God of the Bible is anchored in real life and portrayed as a Person so unique that He cannot possibly be mistaken for your boyfriend...or anyone else."

## Avoiding Cliches

We all love cliches because they're memorable and they say something succinctly and with great tact. The problem is that cliches are unoriginal and lazy. Sometimes, yes, there is no other way to say "God, there is none like you" than to simply say, "God, there is none like you." But it should also be the pursuit of the songwriter to say something old in a new way. Create a **new** cliché and think outside the box.

## Thinking Outside of "The Moment"

When writing songs for the church we all fall into the trap of writing with participation in mind. After all, the point is to sing these songs together with everyone. But often times we think of the moment the congregation will be singing the song and not about the song at all. It's easy to get wrapped up in trying to create an emotional experience rather than a thoughtful one. Focus on crafting music not only to elicit an emotion but to also elicit thought.

## Organization (Keep a Journal)

You may not be someone to keep an organized set of folders and documents on your computer with your song ideas in it - but i'm telling you there is no better way to navigate the creative landscape of your own head and heart than to record all your musical ideas and lyrical ideas and keep them on file. If you have a cell phone - record that melody when it comes to you - even if you have to step away from your desk for a minute. I used to get up from my desk and walk outside of the building for 30 seconds at my old job just to record a melody on my phone that I didn't want to forget. Keep a google drive, dropbox, or evernote file system of your lyrical ideas and poems and upload your cell phone recordings to the same place. Sort through them every couple of weeks and see if pieces start tying together for you between lyrics and melodies. Bottom line - get your butt organized.

## Songwriting is a Journey

The craft of songwriting is a journey - you will never reach the end and say, "I have arrived." You will go through dry seasons and you will go through seasons of great harvest. Be willing to learn at every curve in the road and be willing to trust the voice that is trying to speak through you. Mature and grow as a writer as you mature and grow as a believer. Entrust your gifts to the one who gave them to you and focus on Him alone - the journey will be a lot more fun and rewarding if you do.