

Creating A Worship Song

Excerpts from the book

Songs From Heaven

A Personal Look At Writing Worship Songs

Tommy Walker & Philip Kassel

The Music

Getting Started—Modeling

For those of you who are just beginning your venture into songwriting, you might want to start with a process I'll refer to as *modeling*. Spend some time listening to what other songwriters have written—the songs that work, the songs that touch you. Find a simple song that you really like, then write a song of your own that uses the same elements. I'm not suggesting that you plagiarize someone else's material and present it as your own. I'm suggesting that you *model* your song on the song of an established writer as a method of developing your own songwriting skills.

Use modeling for all components of a song while you're learning to be a better writer. If you play an instrument, figure out the chords of the other song. You might concentrate on the chord progression of the chorus, or the chords in the verse and chorus. While you're working on your lyrics, you might use the same number of syllables found in each line of the phrases from the song being modeled. Again, you wouldn't present that song as being yours, but it's a great way to learn the craft. You're building your new song on the foundation of someone who wrote a really affective song.

Modeling works well for learning rhythms as well. Write songs over rhythm patterns of other recordings to acquire a feel for a variety of rhythms.

Once you begin to develop a sense of how songs are constructed you can take the process a little further. You've already figured out the chords of the song that you're modeling so begin to alter them. Then try singing a different melody along with the new chords.

Now find a favorite psalm or poem and choose a couple of verses that work for you. The song might not be a great one and it may sound too much like the original song but that's all right at this stage. You're simply trying to get the ball rolling. And I think you'll be surprised at how well you do if you don't put any pressure on yourself to write something awesome the first few times out of the gate.

Matching Melodies And Words

Mourning Into Dancing was first born when I heard the text of Psalm 30 sung to a rather sad melody. For me, the tone of the music—the feeling it projected—didn't seem to match the message the words were conveying.

I told myself that someday I'd compose music for the same passage that would be a better match. I thought the text called for music that is bright, cheerful and would make people want to dance. It was years later when I saw the car commercial that inspired the music that would accompany my version of the psalm. I knew that this music was what the lyrics from Psalm 30 were begging for. Always ask yourself if your music is relaying the same message as your lyrics.

Forward, Always Forward

Once you begin working on a new worship song it's very important that you keep moving forward. You need to keep making progress. You want to keep your momentum up. You don't want to get bogged down in the muddy water of details.

For instance, you might be making great progress with a melody but a section of lyrics is giving you trouble. The temptation for many writers is to stop and think about it. Well, if you do you just may lose that forward momentum. In this regard, a seemingly strange yet helpful technique that many songwriters use is to sing melodies with lyrics that makes no sense. I have been mumbling nonsense to help me find the melodies for my songs from my earliest days of songwriting. Over the years I've discovered that this is a very common practice.

Yesterday, by Paul McCartney and John Lennon, is one of the most covered songs (recorded by various artists) in pop music history. Sir Paul has made it known through many interviews over the years that the title and main lyric of this monster hit was originally "scrambled eggs," and remained "scrambled eggs" for several days while he developed the song.

The main idea is to avoid letting any little snag in the creative process stop you in your tracks. If you have a good melody idea, you want and need to move forward with it. If you allow yourself to believe that you must have exactly the right lyric before you can proceed, you risk not finishing your

song at all. Choosing to insert a nonsense lyric into your song enables you to move forward with what you have, and reduces the possibility of not completing the song because of what you don't have. I've actually ended up with complete melodies without realizing I was saying something that actually made sense.

Song Form & Structure

Verses & Choruses

Contemporary song form really began to evolve early in the twentieth century. By the early 1920s songwriters generally composed popular songs containing two sections. The first was a short introductory section called the *verse*. The main function of the verse was to establish the situation described in the lyrics. The second section was called the *chorus* or *refrain*. The terms were, and still are, used interchangeably. The title of the song was most often found within the chorus.

Experienced music industry professionals realized that a way to increase record and sheet music sales was to emphasize the chorus. So, it became common practice for performers to sing the chorus several times, which served to really anchor the song title in the listener's memory.

Contemporary popular songs are generally longer and contain more words than those written fifty or sixty years ago. The separate introductory section is no longer found in popular songs. But the verse-chorus form has remained the most popular song structure. The verse-chorus song of today

generally consists of two or three verses which alternate with the chorus. Most contemporary choruses still contain the title of the song as well as the main theme of the song.

I have provided this brief history of the popular song because contemporary worship songs have adopted this basic verse-chorus structure. The worship song verse sets up or explains the theme of the chorus, and the chorus carries the theme. The chorus may also serve to anchor the theme in the listener's memory through the use of repetition.

The Hook

The *hook* is a phrase in a song that communicates the theme. The hook is very often the title of the song, or can just as easily be a catchy melodic line or figure. The hook might consist of both the song title (or some other memorable phrase) accompanied by a catchy melodic line. A good hook will create a unique picture in the listener's mind and will often remain long after the song is over.

To be more memorable, hooks often use the repetition of both lyrical and musical phrases. Good hooks, though, should not use repetition for repetition's sake. Also, a good hook will generally supply enough information to exist apart from the other sections of the song.

The hook is most often found in the chorus of the song, though hooks can be effectively used in verses. If a hook appears in a verse, more often than not it will be found in the last line of each verse.

Two of my songs that have clearly defined hooks are *These Things Are True Of You* and *When All Is Said And Done*. And for a good example of repetition, listen to the chorus of *Amen*.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

As important as hooks are, if there were ever a type of song that could get away with not needing a hook it would be the worship song. It's fascinating to me that somehow our spirits never grow tired of repeating those praise and worship phrases we hear in all those songs: *I worship You, With all of my heart, I sing praises, I love You Lord, I bow down*, among others.

Something deep within us cries out to sing these phrases to God, and obviously there is nothing wrong with that. However, when I write I am always looking for a unique phrase on which to hang the entire song—a phrase that will give my song it's own unique identity. A song that is full of these standard worship phrases is great, but a song that contains a strong hook to hang those same phrases on is even better.

The Bridge

The *bridge* (or *release*) is a third section that can be utilized in contemporary songwriting structure. It is optional. Musically, the bridge should provide contrast to the verse and chorus. Lyrically, it should make a new statement, or at least provide a new idea that further supports the main theme found in

the chorus. The bridge can also be musical in nature—omitting any lyrics and using the section for an instrumental solo.

The Business of Music

Look Professional, Be Professional

Address your submission properly and professionally. This means you correctly spell the company name and the name of the person to whom you're submitting your song. Print the information on the envelope neatly, or use a typed or computer generated label. Make sure your name, the name of your church or ministry (if applicable), your address and telephone number appear on the recording package as well as the recording's label, and your cover letter. By the way, your cover letter should be short and to the point. Remember that you're dealing with busy people. They don't want to read the history of how you wrote the song, your personal history or what you hope to be when you grow up in the worship music industry. A short, concise letter labels you as a professional who respects their time limitations.

Personal referrals are absolutely the best way to get your foot in the door when you're first starting out. It's best if you're not perceived as a lone ranger. So, if you can get to know someone in the company you want to submit a song to, or someone who has some kind of established relationship with the company, it can be a great help. Your contact can submit the song for you. It provides you with a credibility you wouldn't have if you approached the company on your own. It carries a lot of weight, and better

assures that your song will actually be heard and fairly considered. Even submitting your song using the name of your church, or your church worship department, provides you with added credibility.

Remember that rejection is a part of the creative process. You will undoubtedly experience at least some rejection as you begin to get your songs out into the world. Don't let it stop you. Some big, important record or publishing company might reject your song, but if it provides a glimpse of God's truth to even a single person then you've already succeeded in a powerful way.

Dollars And Cents

The subtitle of this book is "A Personal Look At Writing Worship Songs," not "How To Get Worship Songs Recorded." And the title certainly isn't "How To Become A Commercially Successful Songwriter." None of those subjects are necessarily bad. It's just that these topics can be very involved and complex, and I would rather focus more on the spiritual side of writing worship songs than the business side.

Even though commercial success can certainly be gratifying, I believe that most creative people who pursue their art for the sake of financial or material rewards end up leading very unfulfilled and even unhappy lives. This is especially true for the writer of worship songs. Creating a song that glorifies God should be the first goal, and then anything that follows will be "icing on the cake." That being stated, the information I share with you regarding getting your songs heard by the music industry should be considered only as basic information.

Protecting Your Songs—The Copyright

If you plan to circulate recordings of your songs, perform your original songs publicly, or by other means make them available to the public, it is a good idea to protect the ownership of your work. The best way to safeguard an original song is to obtain a copyright. Copyright registration is a form of protection provided by the laws of the United States to the authors of “original works of authorship.” This protection is available to both published and unpublished works.

Most people don't realize that a copyright is secured automatically when a work (in this case, a song) is created. The Copyright Office recognizes a song as being “created” when it is established in a copy for the first time—for example, the first time you write out a lead sheet or make a recording. So, it is not absolutely necessary to actually register a song; the Copyright Office recognizes your ownership.

There are definite advantages to going through the registration process and paying the fee, even though registration is not required to receive legal protection for your song. Foremost, copyright registration establishes a public record of the copyright claim, and establishes you as the primary and original owner of the song. Next, should someone attempt to use your song illegally, registration is required before an infringement suit may be filed in court.

Obtaining a copyright is a simple process that consists of completing a two-page form, paying a registration fee (currently \$30), and mailing either a

lead sheet or recording of your song to the Copyright Office in the Library of Congress. Copyrighting every song you write can get expensive at \$30 per song. Try to choose the songs that you believe in most strongly—the songs you believe have the most potential—and protect those. Your song is protected from the moment it is created, through your lifetime, plus 70 years. In the case of a song written by collaboration, the term lasts for 70 years after the last surviving author's death.

The proper copyright form to register a song or song recording is the Performing Arts (PA) form. It can be obtained by writing to:

Library of Congress
Copyright Office
101 Independence Avenue, S.E.
Washington, D.C. 20559-6000

You can also download forms, as well as learn almost everything you need to know about copyright laws at the Copyright Office Website:

www.loc.gov/copyright

You should note that Copyright Office fees are subject to change. The website is a great way to make sure you are up to date on this kind of information.

To register a copyright, mail the following items in a single envelope to the Copyright Office:

1. A properly completed application form.
2. A nonrefundable filing fee of \$30 (effective through June 30, 2002) for each application.
3. A nonreturnable deposit of the work being registered—in other words, a lead sheet or recording of the song being copyrighted.

The deposit requirements vary in particular situations. Copyright forms contain detailed instructions so read them carefully to avoid mistakes and complications.

Music Publishing

There are four main sources of income for a songwriter: sheet music, mechanical royalties, performance royalties and foreign publishing. Here's a brief breakdown of what is involved with these sources:

- **Sheet Music** — A song generally has to be recorded, widely distributed and well known to merit having sheet music printed.
- **Mechanical Royalties** — Mechanical royalties come from the sales of CDs, cassette tapes, videotapes, piano rolls or the newer digital piano disks, and video or DVD disks. In other words, any medium that produces a recording of a song should generate writer income. As this booklet is being written, a great controversy is underway in the music industry concerning methods to monitor and collect royalties from Internet sources of distribution such as MP3 music files.

- Performance Royalties — If a song is performed on the radio, television, in auditoriums, churches or sports arenas, or on jukeboxes, the writer receives performance royalties. Once a songwriter is published he or she must join one of the following organizations: ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers), BMI (Broadcast Music, Inc.) and SESAC (Society of European Stage Authors and Composers). These organizations monitor the performance, collect fees and distribute royalties on behalf of their members. Christian music performed in churches is licensed by CCLI (Christian Copyright Licensing International).
- Foreign Royalties — In this world of technology and instant communication, music is easily distributed all over the world. An American publisher might be large enough to have branch offices around the world. If a publisher isn't international, it can license music to foreign sub-publishers in order to generate sales and collect royalties in foreign territories.

As the creator of the product in question, the songwriter receives at least 50% of all income in a music publishing deal. As long as a song is copyrighted, it is against the law for the publishing company to pay the songwriter any less than half. You'll note that I stated "at least 50%." That's because once a songwriter has songs that are well-known in hundreds of churches, radio stations and by countless performers, he or she has the leverage to ask for a co-publishing deal. As the name suggests, in a co-publishing deal the songwriter receives a percentage of the publisher's 50% in addition to the 50% writing royalty.

Why would any publisher want to give a percentage of their half of the money to the songwriter? It's simple; the fact that a particular songwriter's songs are widely known and played is a barometer to the popularity of the songs. This popularity is a strong indication that future songs from the same songwriter will do as well. It's more of a "sure thing" for the publisher. A publisher will be willing to share a little more of the profit to prevent the songwriter from going to another publisher.

If you're a fairly unknown writer I don't recommend fighting for a co-publishing deal. First of all, if you come across as a fighter too early in your career, the publishing company will gladly move on. After all, the world is full of talented songwriters. Secondly, it's the publisher's job to get your song out into the marketplace. It's the publisher's job to make your song known. If you're relatively unknown and your song is unknown, then the publisher has a rough job ahead and will deserve all of the 50% publishing income.

If the publisher does a good job and the result is that your songs become well known, widely used in churches and widely recorded, then more of a partnership has been created. At that point you can think about negotiating a better deal.

Many new or inexperienced songwriters are fearful of having their songs stolen by music publishers. I know people who are so protective of their songs that the songs never end up being heard, let alone published. That seems rather silly to me when you consider that half of something (a 50% writer's royalty, for instance) is a lot more than 100% of nothing.

It's important to realize that music publishers are generally honest, smart people. They aren't going to "bite the hand that feeds them." Granted, they are in the music *business*, which means they need to make a profit, but they know in the long run it will not pay them to steal songs. If word spread that a publisher was stealing songs, it wouldn't be long before all songwriters would stop doing any business with them completely. So, don't be afraid—get those songs out there!