

What is the role of worship songs in the church?

God's people have always sung when they gathered in community. It's such a powerful and wonderful way of bringing together our hearts (and our heads!) in something that we can all participate in.

When you write do you find yourself writing for a local community of believers versus a national expression of worship?

I'm a total local church guy on this one! I actually warn writers to not think of anything beyond being true to what is going on in their own hearts and in their own local church. Someone once told me that their goal was to write a song that the church around the world would sing – my response 'Why don't you write a song that you want to sing in the privacy of your own time with God .. and then something you want to sing in your church' I won't sing anything in public that I don't first own in private.

Where do you derive the inspiration for your songs?

Everywhere . . . in scripture . . . my relationship with God .. what's happening in our local church .. .the books of the bible we are preaching through . . . my sense as to what God is prophetically stirring up. . . and sometimes the song inspiration comes when I am least expecting it.

What are some resources that have been helpful to you as a writer?

For me it's primarily reading good literature like the Bible and good books (both fiction like Stephen R Lawhead and C.S. Lewis and Christian Living books like John Eldredge, Mark Buchanan and others) It's in

reading great inspiring literature that our hearts are stirred to say, "We need to sing about this!"

I have been helped by Jimmy Webb's secular book on songwriting called 'Tunesmith', but for the most part the most important thing to do is simply keep on writing and get honest feedback on your songs from those around you.

Is there a philosophy or theology behind the approach you take to writing?

I believe several key things. One is that our calling as writers is to hold out 'God truth' and 'our truth'. Some worship writers try to write God truth, but don't express it in a way that includes 'our truth'. I believe this is why we still love the Psalms – they are full of God truth and our truth.

I see the songs I write almost like a triangle .. with God truth at the top. Writing truth about God (good theology) is the like the true north gravitational pull that should always be present. On the bottom of the triangle are 'my truth' and 'poetry'. I try to incorporate all of those elements when I write.

I also believe that there is a dance going on as we write lyrics between the meaning of the words (the truth) and the sound of the words (the art) .. and if you are writing for worship meaning and truth must lead the dance and if you are writing as a singer-songwriter sound and art can lead the dance.

Do you see a difference between congregational worship songs and other christian songs and what is the difference?

There's a big difference. Christian songs (like most CCM) is designed to be sung to you or over you (and

you identify with it through the act of listening) while congregational worship songs are meant to be sung together – people identify with them by singing them.

What are some ways that I as a writer can get my songs heard by others?

Serveserve . .and then serve some more. Striving won't help . . . like people trying to lift their seat on a plane if they are afraid of flying – either the engines and wings are going to lift you or they won't. The song itself is what should be heard – not your effort (which is a good reason to write the very best songs you can write!)

At what point should I as a writer pursue a publisher?

The best songs go to work without much effort from the songwriter themselves. I never pursued a publisher once in my life – they pursued me. (I'm not saying it's wrong to knock on doors; it's just not the path that I chose). If you serve with some songs and they start being sung at multiple churches without direct effort from you that's a pretty good sign that the music may be for more than just your personal edification.

What is the role of a publisher?

A publisher exists to help exploit a song to it's fullest potential. (exploit in this context means a good thing!). They seek to find outlets for the songs, projects that would be a match for the song, and then they administrate what happens with the song so that the writer gets paid.

What makes a good worship song?

A good song has a melody that people love to sing with words that are full of truth. (Sounds easy . .but it's very hard to write songs like that!)

How often do you rewrite a song and do you rewrite it even after you've started teaching the song?

Almost every song of mine that people have heard has gone from draft 1 to about draft 4 or 5 before people hear it. The only thing more important than rewriting for songwriters is the initial writing itself. The willingness and ability to rewrite is what separates most songs and songwriters that actually get heard from those who don't. I don't usually re-write after I have started teaching a song because I don't teach a song until I have re-written it (but I can think of a couple of exceptions)

What is your favorite song that you've written and what is the story behind it?

That's a hard question to answer. (Can I steal Bono's answer – I haven't written it yet 😊!) I still feel like I am just getting started!

'Eternity' one of my lesser known songs is for sure one of my favourites.

"Eternity" was written in a moment of intense passion and absolute knowing that heaven was real in 1990. My best friend was killed in an accident around that time so my heart was often thinking about the other side. I can hardly wait to hear the Father say "...No more death, tears, shame..."

I wrote this song not just about longing for home, but knowing I'm going home. It's kind of interesting that this song has been used in more weddings and

funerals than probably any of my songs. It's also been sung and recorded in several different languages. One of the most moving for me was to hear it sung in Russian, maybe because of the suffering Russian believers have gone through, and also because all my grandparents were born in Russia.

I was glad to put a new version of this song to close the IT'S TIME CD. It's a simple acoustic version and it reminds me of the day I wrote the song almost 20 years ago.

What is the starting point to writing a song? Melody? Chord progression? Lyrics? What works for you?

This is the most common question every songwriter gets asked. It's different for different writers . .but for me it starts with some kind of seed (which is the creative gift from God) It could be a lyrical phrase or a melodic hook, but it starts the ball rolling. The seed is a quite often a gift, what happens from that point on is totally up to us as writers. I should say that writing a song from a chord progression is almost always a bad idea; I can usually hear songs that are being led around by chords. Chords are the first part of arrangements – a song is words set to a melody, and the melody exists in pitch and rhythm – changing the chords is changing the arrangement not changing the song.

Is there a point where the creativity of the lyric or musical arrangement becomes distracting to worship and when do you know if you've crossed that line?

You simply need to take risks and assess what they do to your heart . .and what they seem to do in your

congregational setting. As creative people we need to keep on creating .. but we also need to keep on serving and check in with our people to make sure our acts of creativity are still serving others and not just self-serving.