

Practical Song Writing Tips

In the course of my day job as a guitar teacher, students sometimes ask me to help them write a song. Some want to write worship songs, others pop songs. Most have a few ideas that on their own sound really catchy but no way of threading the ideas together. Some have a few words, some have a chord progression, some have even come up with a killer rock riff. This often results in a collection of creative pieces that sound as if they have been hastily duct taped together rather than thoughtfully woven together in order to lead people on a musical and lyrical journey with no nasty left turns or sudden stops.

So here are ten practical ideas, in no particular order, which may help you craft your own new songs and perhaps take them in pleasantly unexpected directions.

Great Songs Have Great Themes

One of the most important areas in any song is the theme. Try and think of a great song without a great theme. There aren't many. You might not like or even agree with the theme itself but so many great songs that have stood the test of time contain themes that people both understand and relate to. Melody makes a song memorable but the theme will make it connect with you. Think of all the great hymns. The ones that have lasted have a universal theme that every worshipper can respond to.

Titles, the Shape of Songs to Come

I know of a professional songwriter who begins the writing process without an instrument. He starts by brainstorming song themes and song titles. Once he has come up with around fifty themes and titles he will pair the best ones together and from that he will form the basis of a whole album's material. Coming up with a great title before any other lyrics are formed is a very different way to write a song. Starting off with a title will help shape your content, the wordplay, and can occasionally take your chorus lyrics on an unexpected journey. Next, he chooses a tempo which again fits the theme. Once the tempo is set, he focuses on the most memorable part of the song - the chorus. After that it's much easier to write verses and other supporting parts of the song. This is a very strategic way of writing music that leads the listener on a journey of stories, ideas, questions and answers. Put into context, this could help add balance to some of the theological ideas that many of us explore in sung worship.

Melody First

Many inexperienced writers often write songs based around the chord progressions they are familiar with. The melodies often sound the same because they are governed by the chords. Try thinking about melody first and then placing chords underneath to make the melody even more interesting, not the other way round. One way I try to devise melodies is in shopping malls! Very often I'll walk past a shop and catch a glimpse or sound byte of a new or unfamiliar track on the shop sound system. I'll keep walking and try to carry on singing an extension to the part melody I heard. It's a great way to come up with something quite different to the original song you were inspired by.

Can People Sing It?

The average male voice sings in the key of *E_b*, whereas the average female voice is in the key of *B_b*. These two keys are pretty far apart on the musical spectrum so if you want everyone to be able to sing the melody you need to work with notes that fit into both these vocal ranges. Another good idea is to only take your congregational melodies up to a top D.

Don't Waste Words

Sometimes a song will repeat a line to draw the singer's attention to the content of the lyric so that they can sing it again with even more conviction. Or maybe a lyric has such a weight of meaning that the congregation needs to repeat it so as to not miss its gravity. However, many badly written songs will repeat lines simply because the writer can't think of what else to say or hasn't spent enough time crafting the lyrics. A good song can still say the same thing but will shift the lyrics to develop the content and keep the singer engaged.

Lyrical Tools

Buy a rhyming dictionary and a thesaurus. I even have a friend who collects old hymn books to give him lyrical ideas.

Swap Your Chords Around

If you are familiar with music theory and perhaps the Nashville Numbering System then try taking a well used chord sequence E.g. chords 1 3 5 2 5. In the key of G that would be chords G maj, Bmin, Dmaj, Amin, Dmaj. Now swap around the major and minor chords – eg make Bmin into Bmaj. The changed notes in the new chords fall outside the key and so help force your melody line outside of the normal G major scale. Stevie Wonder does this to great effect on a number of his classic songs.

Write on Bass

Another idea if you're stuck with the same old chords is to write on bass guitar. Not only can your song take on a different feel since you are now writing with a rhythm instrument but your melody doesn't have to be shackled to the chords that you know. I've heard Sheryl Crow uses this technique and subsequently her songs have really catchy melody lines but the chords drift in and out of the key in pleasantly unpredictable ways.

Don't Change Your Groove

I've heard many a song demo with a great intro groove that sounds like its going somewhere interesting and then completely changes as soon as the verse starts. The groove should be the chassis to your song that all the other parts can hang from. At times in the song you can lighten the groove or add to it to make it sound more intense but the same basic rhythmic feel needs to pervade the whole song. Remember, when we are writing songs for a congregation, we are writing mostly for non musicians who need to be led with changes that are easy to pick up, recall in a weeks' time and reproduce often with limited musical skill.

And Finally...

Just have fun experimenting with words and music. Some of the ideas here may help you craft your songs, but really there are no hard and fast rules when it comes to how to write music. It works differently for different people. However, if you have the ability to play or sing something new that people simply enjoy, then you have the ability to write a song. So try out some of these ideas and maybe even come up with your own song writing methods. At the end of the day creativity is just a vehicle. If you put together any form of music that helps you or someone else engage with and discover more of God, then you are using the very gifts He gave us to help us know Him more.

Andy Chamberlain



Andy Chamberlain co owns Musicademy, a UK music college specializing in courses for church based musicians. Musicademy's new series of worship guitar tuition DVDs for both beginners and intermediate players are available from www.musicademy.co.uk