

Song-Writing*

(thoughts that fit to music)

- by Mark Fanshawe,
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Why write songs?

- because you have a talent for it
- because you have something to say
- because there isn't a song that says what you want to express
- because the Bible tells us to in Psalm 149:1:

"Praise the Lord!

Sing to the Lord a new song."

(someone's got to write for new generations in
their own language – why not you?)

Where do songs come from?

There are many different sources that lyrics can come from, which I have grouped into four categories – **lyrical sources**, **non-lyrical sources**, **influences** and **others**. I will give examples to illustrate each source, using worship songs and hymns that are in use at BOCF, including some songs written by our worship team.

Lyrical sources – words used by someone else:

1. **The Bible** (e.g. 'Yesterday, Today and Forever' by Vicky Beeching – Hebrews 13:8 – & '63' by BOCF – Psalm 63)
2. **A book or sermon** (e.g. 'My Soul Sings' by Delirious – inspired by Rob Bell's book, 'Velvet Elvis' – & 'Stand For You' by BOCF – inspired by a sermon by Marcus Ottaviani)
3. **A phrase** (e.g. 'Filled With Your Glory' by Starfield – a phrase stuck in the song-writers head – & 'Come' by BOCF – the opening line of a prayer by Pauline Brandon)

* This seminar is focussed on writing lyrics rather than music, as not everyone has the necessary skills to write music, but I believe everyone can write lyrics as long as they know some basic principles. It is also specifically aimed at writing for Christian worship, though many of the principles are applicable for writing any kind of song.

Non-lyrical sources – things ‘about’ the song:

1. **Music** (e.g. ‘My Soul Sings’ by Delirious & ‘Purified’ by BOCF both started with a guitar part and the rest of the song was written later)
2. **Style** (e.g. ‘Filled With Your Glory’ by Starfield & ‘More’ by BOCF were both written as anthems)
3. **Theme** (e.g. ‘Everything’ by Tim Hughes – written for a sermon series on surrendering every part of life – & ‘More’ by BOCF – written for AblazeUK’s theme of Increase)

Influences:

1. **Personal experience** (e.g. ‘Blessed Be Your Name’ by Matt & Beth Redman – written following a series of miscarriages – & ‘Purified’ by BOCF – written during a 24/7 Prayer Week whilst reflecting on repentance and prodigal experiences)
2. **Surroundings** (e.g. ‘God of This City’ by Bluetree – written whilst on mission in Pattaya, Thailand, a notorious destination for child sex offenders – & ‘Almighty God’ by Tim Hughes, written on a hotel balcony in Sydney with a great view!)

Others:

1. **writing for an event** (e.g. ‘Love Divine’ – written for Christmas – and ‘Only Love’ – written for Easter – by BOCF)
2. **collaborating with other writers** (e.g. ‘Thank You God’ by BOCFyouth – written as individual statements/prayers and collated into a song – & the ‘Compassionart’ album, involving songs written in workshops by 12 well known international worship leaders)
3. **re-writes of old songs** (e.g. ‘Living Sacrifice’ & ‘The Voice of Jesus’ by BOCF are re-writes of old hymns by Frances Ridley Havergal & Horatio Bonar)

<h3>Exercise 1</h3>

Choose one activity:

- a. Write a version of Psalm 23 that replaces the ‘shepherd’ metaphor with something that makes more sense to your own experience
- b. Turn a parable into either a **Limerick** (‘There was a young man from Kentucky, whose cat was incredibly lucky...’) or a **Haiku** (three non-rhyming lines of 5, 7, and 5 syllables).

Things to remember when writing songs:

☼ **It must be True**

The content must be true to the Bible (or, if not directly reflecting a passage of scripture, at least not contradictory to anything in the Bible), and if it is written from your perspective, it should be true to your life.

☼ **It must be Singable**

As you are writing for a congregation, think about whether others will be able to sing your song comfortably. Three common mistakes can be avoided below:

a. The lines don't necessarily have to rhyme (just read a few popular Soul Survivor songs and try to find rhymes...), but they must scan [have consistent rhythm] and fit together.

b. The content can be personal, but be aware of whether others will be able to sing it as if it was their own or not.

c. If you write a tune/music as well, don't make it too hard, too high, too low or too dull!

☼ **Be aware of Grammar**

It may not be everyone's first love, but if your grammar is faulty your message may get confused. If it's something you struggle with, ask someone to check that practical aspect when you finish a song, or find a partner to write with who finds it easier. Songs must also be consistent in whether they are 'to God' or 'about God'. If you have a good reason, you can get away with using one for the verse and the other for the chorus (e.g. 'Shout To The Lord' by Hillsong & 'You' by BOCF), but don't get confused.

☼ **Nothing wrong with "three chords and the truth" (Harlan Howard)**

Simple lyrics are fine – we are trying to express ourselves to or about God, not win the Nobel Prize for Literature! You can't cover the whole Bible or a systematic theology in one song (unless it's really long!), so don't try. Focus on what you want to say, and say it. If it takes a chorus, that's your song; if it takes three verses with a chorus and a bridge, then that's your song. No structure or vocabulary is divine.

Exercise 2

Try to write a song, either alone, with a partner, or collaborating as a group.

Tips:

- **keep a lyric book** or computer file to jot down ideas and work on songs;
- **bounce** ideas off someone you trust, and always **test** a song with at least one person before it goes public;
- **re-visit** old ideas or finished songs, particularly when they're not fresh in your mind;
- **play an instrument!** I know not everyone does, but even just learning how to pick out a tune with one finger on a keyboard could help the writing process (but remember that not every song-writer plays music, so don't feel you have to);
- **know the Bible** as well as you can, and read different translations – you can pick up different perspectives on passages you already know*;
- **spend time with God** – expressions of worship overflow from time spent in worship.

* 'You' by BOCF was based on Psalm 19...with phrases taken from four different translations!