

## Songwriting Tips

i) ***Start with a hook*** - build your song around a hook line, usually your title line. Most good songwriters say this should come first. For instance, say you have a line "Like He loves me." That's your hook. Build a good melody that's pleasant to the ear and makes people want to sing it. Surround it with a chorus that sings easily with a catchy tune, then surround that with verses that keep pointing to the hook. Make your hook grasping and memorable then use your chorus time to prop it up and drive it home.

ii) ***Focus*** - follow your theme through with a logical progression. If the theme begins to surf around you've lost their interest. Many times people write songs that end up being 3 songs in one, and bring in way to many characters or themes, etc. Make sure you keep your focus. When the listener has finished listening to your song, they should know exactly what you're point is, and not have to wonder who's talking now, and what are you saying, etc.

iii) ***Identifiable theme*** - write songs that people say "yea I feel that way" or "I never thought of it like that, but I like that" or yea, that's me" etc. Write songs people can relate too. Songs that touch us, are songs that we want to sing along with. Amazing grace, My Redeemer Lives, Dwelling Places and so on. I think it's imperative in our writing that we don't write songs that the listener say "gee, that must of been some experience for you, I wish I could relate. We need to have the song relate to the listener, so that they can sing along, so that they know where we're coming from.

iv) ***Connectability*** - They can connect with the song. A song is a song, when someone walks away and says "yea, me too." What's going on in Christian's minds right now? What's going on in people's minds who are hurting and looking for answers? What's going on in regular Joe's mind right now, and how can you talk to him about God through a song?

v) ***Solid Structure*** - songwriting is not poetry, but must have a poetic sense: A song is a 3 minute story. A beginning, middle and end. Make it rhyme, and stick to your scheme. A song is a set of lyrics set to music. Rhyming is found throughout today's as well as yesterday's music. Do a little search and you'll find that the vast majority of popular songs rhyme. Rhyming gives songs a "poetic" feeling. Once you set a listener up with a rhyme, they then look for it to rhyme that same way the next time. For instance: Let's say you start a verse off and rhyme the 2nd and 4th line. This is very typical of a 4 line verse. It's good to have a verse end with a rhyme. The next verse should not have the 2nd and 4th line rhyme, or the 1st and 3rd. You've started a rhyme scheme of the 2nd and 4th line rhyming. You can't change it now.

Near rhymes can also be used. Near rhymes, will rhyme a part of the word, and sometimes not even all that closely. Eg.

Pam Tillis's song "**Don't tell me what to do**"

*We tried and we tried but its over*

*Guess I didn't fit the image in your mind  
Now you tell me to find another lover  
Oh baby, aren't you gettin' outta line*

Notice that mind/line is a near rhyme. If the song stayed with perfect rhymes, they'd have to use kind/find/behind etc. But here the "d" was dropped and the "in" near rhyme of "line" was used.

Remember, don't OVER RHYME and make sure your songs have solid structure. (verses match, etc.)

vi) **Start strong** - if you don't catch the publisher/listener right off the bat you're done. You have to hook their attention immediately. You're 1st few lines are very important. Give your song a strong opening. You have only a few seconds to grab their attention so give them an opening that makes them WANT to hear more. Remember, you're wanting to say something with meaning. You're not just creating background noise are you? Then you need to grab their attention early or they won't even realize your song has a chorus.

"Successful songs grab the listeners attention by a variety of time proven 1st line devices.

*The question* - How many roads must a man walk down - Bob Dylan

*The greeting* - Well, hello there - Willie Nelson

*The suggestion or request* - Don't go changing, to try and please me - Billy Joel

*The provocative statement* - Maybe I hang around here a little more than I should - Allen/Barry

*The time frame* - Wednesday morning as 5 o'clock - Lennon/McCartney

*The situation* - My child arrived just the other day - Cat's in the cradle - S. & H. Chapin

*The setting* - Sitting in the morning sun - Cropper/Redding

*The visual image* - Under the boardwalk, down by the sea - Rolling Stones

The use of secular songs is not as a model for gospel, I am just showing good songwriting technique. Let's think of some gospel songs that use these as well:

*The setting* - The old rugged cross - On a hill, far away

*The statement* - Amazing grace - Amazing grace, how sweet the sound -

*The question* - Who Is On The Lord's Side - Who Is On The Lord's Side, who will serve the King

vii) **Write a lot** - grab a rhyming dictionary, have a pad and pen handy everywhere, all the time, get a pocket tape recorder and always be ready for inspiration. Write down everything that comes to you. As in anything, practice makes perfect.

viii) **Look at the world like a songwriter** - read billboards, books, the newspaper, listen to sermons, conversations, etc. like a writer. Always be open and searching for ideas and hooks. Listen for ideas, and you'll find that they're screaming out at you at times. Listen to the Sunday sermon. That's good for at least one song a week. Pick up the newspaper, there's a couple more songs just from headlines written. Listen to your normal, everyday conversations with people throughout the day, and you'll get a few more ideas.

Inspiration comes in floods when we're looking for it. It comes here and there when we're not tuned in to it, but when songwriting is on our mind, songs pop out everywhere. We are busy at work, etc., they have to jump out and smack us in the face at times. When we read the paper, look outside, watch TV, read the Bible, etc. as a "songwriter" it's amazing how inspiration comes. Begin to "listen all around you. Ideas are everywhere, if you just listen." Write like crazy, and you'll have a lot you'll have a lot of coal, and someday, you might just find yourself a diamond. No matter what, you'll surely have some fun.

ix) **Know your audience** - if you're writing for the radio, write the type of songs people are looking for. If you're writing for your church, know Praise & Worship song types. if you're writing for yourself, write for yourself, but understand why many might not relate.

x) **It's not writing, it's rewriting** - songs usually don't come off in one shot. MOST songs are rewritten MANY times. Like a chunk of coal, polish it up to a diamond.

xi) **Be open to critiques** - people aren't critiquing YOU, they're trying to HELP you. Many times people take critiques personally and never learn because they take them the wrong way. Take a step back and critique yourself in the third person. Make doubly sure that your lyrics do not open up any questions. Tie up all of those loose ends. You do not want to leave a listener wondering...

xii) **Study, study, study** - just like you spent years learning the guitar, etc. it takes time to learn the craft of writing. Go to the library, get books on the subject, join discussion groups, etc. Study those songs that have been hits and analyse what has helped them to be hits. If you want to write praise and worship, or songs for outreach etc., find the lyrics to the most successful 10 songs of that type, and study the lyrics. How long are the verses, chorus, look for rhyme patterns etc. Countless secular highly successful songs are 4 line choruses, short verses, and a distinct, rhyme pattern that is the same. The verse pattern doesn't have to match the chorus, but it should with the verses. Often it matches the chorus too though.

Eg No 1 **Sweet home Alabama**

Sweet home Alabama  
Where the skies are so true  
Sweet home Alabama  
Lord I'm coming home to you

4 line choruses, or at least choruses that are not too long, as well as verses, and a distinct, rhyme pattern that's kept. makes for a good song.

xiii) **Smother it all in prayer** - find God's will for you, and pray for His direction. God doesn't toss down perfect songs into our lap that are above rewrites and critiques. He sure could if He wanted too, but I don't believe He does. I think He might toss us some

inspiration at times though. Kind of like life, He gives you the gift, or inspiration. But it's up to us to make the most of it and do something with it or waste it away.

xiv) *Set aside writing time in a comfortable space* - develop a routine in which your creativity can come forth readily as you wait on the Holy Spirit for inspiration.

xv) *Develop a mental catalogue of cliché themes and lines* - Not to steer clear of them, but to draw from them. You must know what has worked in the past.

