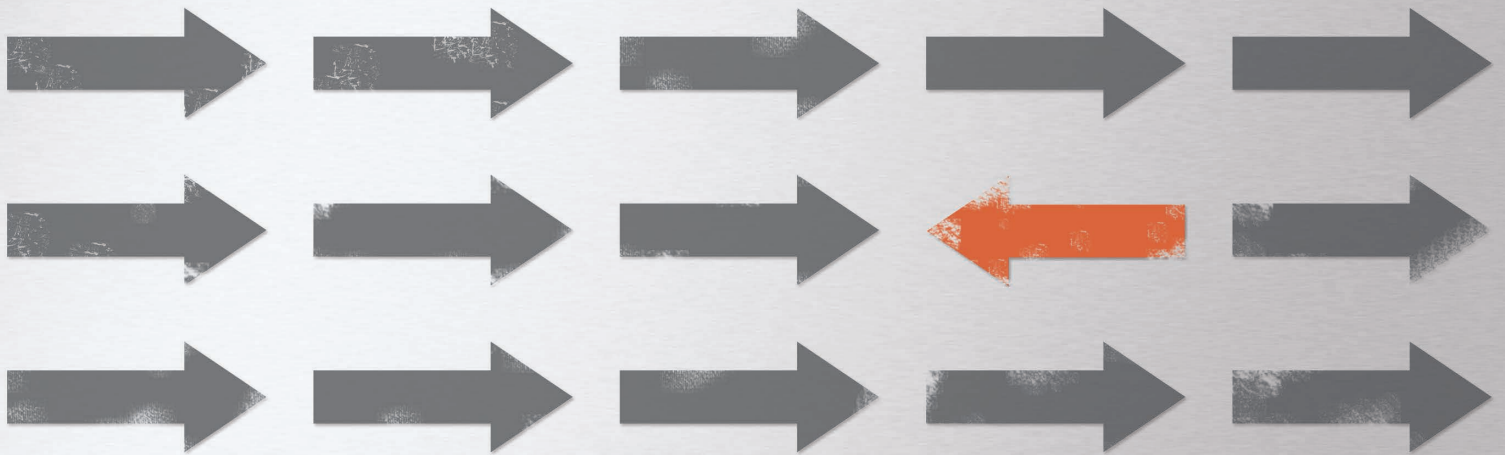


SEVEN PROVEN STRATEGIES TO  
**write better songs**

and **stand out** in a crowded songwriting marketplace



JOHN CHISUM

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# INTRODUCTION

You can write better songs now with the creative skills you already have.

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If you like great books or great movies and begin to notice how they're written, you'll almost always see that the protagonist, the hero, is taken on some kind of challenging journey. Whether it's the cute little fish *Nemo* in Disney's [Finding Nemo](#), or the enigmatic Neo in [The Matrix](#), the story begins with the lead character in his or her "normal" life setting. But then something happens that suddenly alters their reality and they're drawn into an exciting, life-or-death adventure they could never have expected. Nemo gets swept away from the safety of his father and finds himself confronted with strange forgetful fish, "recovering" sharks, jellyfish, and some California surfer turtles riding wild Australian currents, all while trying to get back home. Neo decides to swallow a blue pill (or was it the red one?) and is plunged into a confusing new world where everyone's being controlled by the Matrix, life is an illusion, and there are some indestructible scary dudes always trying to kill him. Eventually, though, Nemo and Neo's adventures and near-death challenges prove one thing to them and to us — each character already had within them all they needed to emerge from their great adventure triumphantly. In our story, *you* are Nemo and/or Neo.

**You see, I believe that you already have all you need  
to become a great Christian songwriter.**

No matter how scary your songwriting adventure has been, you can emerge a hero. How do I know that? I know that because I know that God's gifts and callings are "without repentance," according to Romans 11:29, and, if He's put in you the strong desire to communicate His endless grace through writing great songs, you are *unstoppable*. That's just the way truly called people are. They will let nothing come between them and doing what God has called them to do, whether it's to sell everything and go serve a foreign people or staying home to write great songs. The old adage "*where God guides He provides*" is never so true as when it applies to communicating the Gospel. God turns the heavens and earth on end to assist His children to share His love in myriad ways. Take one step toward your call from Him and He rushes to your side with more resources than you could ever have imagined in order to accomplish His will. Dare you to try it!

This doesn't mean you don't need to learn and grow in your craft and abilities. Actually, quite the opposite. If you've identified the call and the desire to write, you are now *obligated* to start learning how to do it and to do it with all of your "heart, mind, soul, and strength" (Luke 10:27). Paul told the young Timothy to "Study to show yourself approved..." (2 Timothy 2:15) and that admonition now applies to *you* as an aspiring Christian songwriter. It's sheer arrogance to assume that the call to write equals a successful writing ministry. The call is but the doorway into a lifetime of learning how to be successful in your calling. Are you ready to respond to that call? If you're willing, God is ready to come alongside to help (see John 15:26).

**1 The call and strong desire to write is the first thing you have.**

**2 The second thing you have is the *experience of song in your life*.** What's the first song you can remember hearing as a child? Was it on the radio, a CD, or did your Mom sing it to you as she rocked you to sleep? Can you remember how it made you *feel*? Of course, you can! That's the power of song—it makes you *feel* something and that *feeling* becomes part of your life forever. Sweethearts often have "their song" that will forever evoke the feelings of young love when they hear it. What about the first time you felt God touch you or the first time you felt authentic worship as you sang a song to God? These are seminal moments, watershed events that alter the course of a life for God. What could be more important? The experience of song is as important as the call to write, for without it, you could never capture the essence of what it means to touch others with your words and melodies. Until it's happened to you, it's kind of difficult to help it happen for others.

**3 The third thing you have is the *gift of language*.** You speak. You think. You feel and can express what you feel in words. Animals, as much as we love them, cannot write down their feelings. I know what my dogs are *indicating* by their barking or whining, but without opposable thumbs, they can't write actual words to describe their needs. Of course, they lack the mental and physiological abilities to *think* in words, but you get the point. We are gifted by God to not only think and feel — we can write down in words what we think and feel to share with others. And the ability to improve how we think and write is a terrific boon to us. We can actually get better over time in how we express ourselves to the point of life-changing communication with others. This brings us to the fourth gift you *already* have.

**4 You have the *ability to learn*.** Yes, animals learn, but we're talking about *you*, not Muffy the house cat. The human brain is wired to learn and you aren't complete as a human without continuing to learn throughout your lifetime. The saddest people in the world are those who stop learning. Don't be one of them. Decide even now that you'll never give up and always be a learner. You can probably read at a decent level to be reading this book. Great writers are great readers, as we'll talk about in more detail, but realize now that learning is more than reading. Learning is comprised of study, experience, and time. You may have noticed that the annoying things your Mother said throughout your childhood became actual *learnings* for you later in life. Most often the concept precedes the learning of a thing. That's the way writing is. You're exposed to the concept of lyric form, let's say, but it's not until you've worked on it repeatedly that you start to *learn* the lesson of how to craft great lyrics. Until you run out of time on the earth you'll never run out of opportunities to learn. Why not use the rest of your time to learn how to become a great Christian songwriter? (I'm suddenly reminded of [Bill Murray](#) in the movie [Groundhog Day](#) - ha! His big lesson was to learn something every day and become a nice person. I think we should be all about that, too!)

**5 The fifth thing you already have to help you become a great Christian songwriter is *instant access to great instructional material*.** We live in a time that has unprecedented instant access to instructional material. Our predecessors would be aghast if they were suddenly transported from their time to ours (as if that could happen) to see the vast storehouse of knowledge we carry in our hands in the form of a smart phone. Our children and grandchildren take it for granted, much as we took for granted the color television and the touch tone phone, but the power of knowledge is at our fingertips like never before. Now, this is simultaneously great and terrible. While it is great that we can look up how many Chinese restaurants are within five miles and get driving directions, what movies are playing where and when, and who starred in that 1970 film called [Chisum](#) ([John Wayne](#)), the terrible part is that we're dumbing ourselves down and learning less all the time as we depend on the phone to know it all for us. But your cell phone isn't going to write great songs for you, no matter how smart it is. You must use the information you have access to and wisely put to work the new principles you'll learn.

**“... your cell phone isn't going to write great songs for you, no matter how smart it is.”** [\[Tweet this\]](#)



So, now that I've convinced you that you can become a great Christian songwriter with the gifts God has *already* given you, here are five traits of great Christian songwriters that you'll want to be thinking about as we go along. The great apostle Peter said in 2 Peter 1:5, "For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith, goodness; and to goodness, knowledge." This little book can become your first step toward becoming a great Christian songwriter as you "add to your faith" the knowledge of seven ways to stand out in an already crowded songwriting marketplace. Before you begin to digest the points, however, you need to begin to *think* like a great songwriter. The way you do that is to know *how* great writers think.

I want to share with you five key things great writers do and how they shape the way they think. As you add these concepts into your life, you'll automatically get better at writing. Your writing will get easier, eventually flowing from a place deep in you where the calling and the craft have fused in a way that makes writing seem almost effortless. Writing will be more fun than fight and one day you'll realize that the call has come true. All the obstacles will have faded and you'll wonder what ever slowed you down. What's more, you won't let the fear of failure or the fear of the competition hinder you. Nothing will. You'll be *unstoppable*.

## 1 GREAT WRITERS STUDY GREAT SONGS

**All great writers have studied other great writers and their songs.** None of us write in a vacuum. You and I have joined ourselves to the rich heritage of Christian songwriters who've gone before us. Who can deny the contribution that people like [Andrae' Crouch](#) have made? Or [Bill and Gloria Gaither](#) or [Chris Tomlin](#)? What about the great hymn writers like [Fanny Crosby](#), the [Wesleys](#), [John Newton](#), and [Philip Bliss](#)? Christian song wouldn't exist in the same way without these amazing people, their stories and lives, their vast contribution to how we sing the Great Story of Jesus. Truth be told, though, each of these great writers learned by studying other writers, at least to some degree. We're all influenced merely by listening to songs, but the greats learn more by *studying* the greats. If you want to be a great writer, study great writers. Let them mentor you from afar as you inculcate their styles and learn the distinctions between them.

**Great songs have stood the test of time.** Great songs are great songs for very specific reasons. If that weren't true, every song would be great no matter how bad it is. The sad fact is that there are thousands and thousands of bad songs the world must endure. Why write another one? Hymns like [Amazing Grace](#) (Newton), [Great Is Thy Faithfulness](#) (Chisholm/Runyan), and the later [In Christ Alone](#) (Townend/Getty) endure year after year because they observe some very specific principles of songwriting that make them perennial. These songs will be around for decades to come because they, 1) capture a universal emotion; 2) express that emotion in excellent language; and 3) present that emotion and excellent language with a memorable melody that just about anyone can sing. Work to get these elements in your song and it just might stick around a decade or two, too.

**Writing without studying the genre is futile.** Again, add to your calling to write great songs the actual knowledge of *how* to write. Far too many aspiring songwriters spin their wheels needlessly because they “just want to write what I feel” without realizing that studying songs and genres will *help* them write what they truly feel. An aspiring attorney learns the law. An aspiring dentist learns about teeth and how to pull them. An aspiring quarterback learns the football game and how to make plays. Why is it that we fool ourselves into thinking that the art of songwriting is without its own rules and craft? What makes us think “just writing what we feel” is going to make for great song? All the classical artists such as [Monet](#), [Renoir](#), and [Rembrandt](#) had to learn their craft before painting their masterpieces. Are we so arrogant as to think we can write classic songs without learning the disciplines of great songwriting?

**Develop your understanding of what makes a song great.** Understanding what makes a song, any song, truly great takes us one step closer to *writing* a great song ourselves. No time is wasted that is spent reading, dissecting, and even imitating great songs (more on imitation as learning later). The power and results of making a quality decision to dig into the task of actually *understanding* the elements of great song-making cannot be underestimated. Football teams watch the films of winning plays over and over and study their opponents habits and strategies. Directors study classic films until they “get” what makes them classic. Actors and dancers understudy the lead to learn the nuance of their inflections and movements onstage. The best authors have read everyone else out there and have come to understand the elements of greatness in their prose. We, as great Christian songwriters, must do the same.

## 2 GREAT WRITERS READ GREAT PROSE

**Great writers are great readers.** There's simply no way to overstate this — real writers are real readers. Like peanut butter and jelly, bread and butter, coffee and cream, anyone who wants to be a great writer *must* become a great reader. I've been making this one point all along that a real writer is *first* a student of words. More on that in the next paragraph, but readers *love* words and the way they are pulled together to make great thoughts in sentence form. A lyric is a short sentence and actually something kin to a paragraph in its potency. The best lyricists have learned to condense entire sermons into single lines. Lacking the luxury of length, economy of words is the writer's friend and ace-in-the-hole. Few listeners truly appreciate the skill real writers have developed to condense enormous theological concepts into a single phrase. Consider [Newton](#)'s singular *Amazing grace! How sweet the sound/That saved a wretch like me!* The sheer brilliance of these words have rarely, if ever, been eclipsed when it comes to capturing the theology and emotion of the Gospel in a single exclamation of praise. Becoming a great reader affords the writer a full arsenal of words from which to draw when the occasion arises.

I'm not an avid novel reader, preferring devotional classics by writers like [Brennan Manning](#) and the poetry of [Rilke](#) and others. Nothing wrong with novels and reading the classic novelists will certainly help you. Any writer using the King's English beautifully is worthy of reading. Whatever you read, the important thing is that you have the mindset of gleaning from these books what applies to your songwriting. Many of the principles of perspective, language, setting, and their elements in prose apply fully to the song.

**Great writers understand language.** As in the former point, language and its use in songs is the principle thing. Instrumental music is nice and has its special place, but it is ultimately the *message* of the song that is most important. Arguably, the melody delivers the message and has an essential role. But without a special message, the music is just music. It is rare that we look at each other and hum a tune to convey something, but I'm not saying it never happens. When a writer captures a unique and outstanding idea, it must ultimately be delivered in language. Different genres require different languages and the great writer can converse in different dialects. Not every writer will master every genre, but the more advanced writers can write a hymn-like song, a contemporary worship song, and even a country Gospel song. One of my friends, [Joel Lindsey](#), is a master at many genres and won a Dove Award this year (2015) for Bluegrass Song of the Year, even though he predominantly writes for the Contemporary Christian Music market. Joel understands language and tailors lyrics for different genres expertly.



**Great writers learn the difference between poetry, prose and lyric.** Great poetry doesn't often translate to great song lyric. Great writers know this and avoid mixing the two. At the risk of offending someone, I need to say that great Scripture doesn't always make for great lyrics, either, unless one is tailoring melodies to fit existing Scripture verses verbatim (but that is another thing entirely). Great prose doesn't often become great lyrics, either, though it often inspires great lyrics. Several projects I know from the past have been written from classics such as [My Utmost for His Highest](#), and other great works. But there is a vast divide between poetry, prose, Scripture, and great lyrics. The great writers know how to draw upon the influences of these and turn them into great lyrics.

**Great writers glean from phrases in books, articles, and even other songs.** There is great art in turning unique phrases from books, articles, and even other songs into their own lyric hooks and even entire lyrics. Creativity is the ability to take familiar things and put them together in fresh ways. Great writers understand this and are always collecting phrases that could be “turned” to become something unique. [Ghouls Night Out](#) by The Misfits (1986) is one garish example. [From the Inside Out](#) by Hillsongs' [Joel Houston](#) is another type of turned phrase where a familiar phrase actually takes on new meaning through double entendre, as well as the 1980 hit by country artist George Jones [He Stopped Loving Her Today](#) (Braddock/Putman), considered by some as the greatest country song of all time.

**“ Creativity is the ability to take familiar things and put them together in fresh ways.”** [\[Tweet this\]](#)

Just where these phrases come from are legion, but great writers are always listening and looking for them. Since all art is derivative, the knack great writers develop is to spot the “hook” or a phrase that an entire song lyric could be hung upon. For most writers, the title and hook are the most important starting point. True, some writers start with a musical hook, a catchy melodic phrase that is then retrofitted with a catchy lyric phrase, but just how often that works is arguable. I recently saw an interview with British pop-phenomenon [Sam Smith](#) who said his song [Stay With Me](#) was inspired when co-writer [William Phillips](#) began to play three chords on the piano, then [James Napier](#) provided a quick drum track. (One fascinating fact about this song is that Smith, Napier, and Phillips eventually had to acknowledge that it sounded so much like Tom Petty's [I Won't Back Down](#) that they had to share co-writing credits with Petty and his co-writer, [Jeff Lynne](#). (Maybe they could've thought that one through a bit more.)

In sum, then, learn to listen and look for hooks, those catchy little phrases people use every day. Jot any you think might develop in a notebook or on a special note-taking app in your all-powerful smart phone. That way, next time you feel the urge to write something, you can refer to the list and see which ideas jump out at you to work on. I've found that just about the moment a phrase hits me as a hook the song starts writing itself. This has happened many times and jump starts my creativity every time. A great hook is the beginning of a great song, the kind that will last for a long, long time. There are plenty of "hit songs" that record companies promote at radio that no one will care about in fifty years. While those type of songs have their place as a career-builder for an artist, the greatest songs are the ones that impact the greatest amount of people for the longest amount of time. Think about the anonymous *Happy Birthday* or Mel Torme's 1945 [Christmas Song](#) (Wells/Torme). Now those are some classic songs.

**“A great hook is the beginning of a great song, the kind that will last for a long, long time.”** [Tweet this]

### 3 GREAT WRITERS LEARN THE ART OF RESPECTFUL IMITATION

**Don't try to reinvent the wheel - imitate your favorite writers.** [Voltaire](#) said, "Originality is nothing but judicious imitation. The most original writers borrowed one from another." Aspiring writers must begin by imitation, especially if writing commercial songs is the goal. By respectful imitation I mean primarily the intentional forming of songs (lyrics and melodies) after the typical form of other songwriters. We'll cover plagiarism, copying, and outright stealing from other writers in a moment, but think about it — babies imitate their mothers, fathers, siblings, and significant caretakers in order to learn how to be human. It's no different in songwriting. We must imitate in order to learn. We have to study other's songs and begin to emulate them in form and style in order to discover our own forms and styles.

Great writers, artists, dancers, and even accountants begin their professional lives imitating others and ingesting the disciplines they use to write and do great things. Think about someone like [Helen Keller](#), who, despite her breakthrough accomplishments with the help of her teacher, [Anne Sullivan](#), was severely hindered in early life simply by the inability to imitate those around her. So, don't be afraid to experiment by identifying the writers and songs that move you, then setting out to actually imitate them as you learn to write your own great songs.

**Imitation isn't plagiarism or copying or stealing.** Okay, so plagiarism, copying, and actually stealing suck and are crimes that can carry great penalties. Don't do it. I've heard of preachers who actually preach other preacher's sermons verbatim, using their examples, personal stories, and all, as if they are their own. Gross. How awful. Besides being unethical and immoral, it violates the trust we place in our preachers and makes you want to go take a shower once you find out. But we're not talking about any of that here. What we're talking about is honest emulation, the good and honorable act of learning by studying the technique other songwriters use (and which they've learned from honest emulation). There are infringement laws in the U.S. and other countries that state exactly how many measures and notes of a composition could be "lifted" before actual infringement occurs. In my view, nothing about your song should ever approach plagiarism. You should never have to count measures or notes to see if you're too close to someone else's work. That's so far from what I'm talking about that, if you aren't tracking with me on this, please go back and start at the beginning to catch up, okay? In the paragraph or two after this, I will actually recommend "stealing" in a perfectly legitimate way, so stay tuned.

**Imitation is the primary way we learn.** If I've not convinced you yet, let me try again. *Everything* — from the way we put on our pants to the way we smile, laugh, or hold a fork — is the result of imitation. Psychologists call it *mirroring* and it begins at birth. We learn who we are on every level by seeing how parents, siblings, and significant others mirror back to us who we are. As we pattern our songs after those songs and writers we love, we learn how to write. It's perfectly legit to write songs like someone else's while we're learning. Nothing wrong with that. Realtors use the same types of signs on their client's lawns to attract buyers. There's not *that* much difference in hamburgers. Cars are cars, but the distinctions lie in the content, or what's under the hood, so to speak. As we imitate, we learn how to write like the pros and then begin to put our own personalities into the craft, bringing forth our own unique art. New combinations, remember? But, if we're waiting to suddenly be "original" we'll never write a song, much less write a great one. For every great song a writer writes, I guarantee you that he or she has written dozens, if not hundreds, of mediocre to outright *bad* songs to get to that good one. Rare is the writer who just dashes off great songs all the time, though there are some amazingly talented and skilled people out there.

So, get to it. Pick a song — just one — and study it, dissect it, digest it. Then start imitating it. As I said elsewhere in this book, sit with the lyric. Get an old-fashioned pen and actually write out the words over and over until you feel them in your fingers. Trust me. This does something as you begin to absorb what great words are and what they feel like as you actually write them out for yourself. To help get you started, here are [YouTube](#) links to a few of my favorites:

[Bonded Together](#) by [Twila Paris](#)

[I Can't Make You Love Me](#) by [Mike Reid](#) and [Allen Shamblin](#) (performed by [Bonnie Raitt](#))

[10,000 Reasons](#) by [Matt Redman](#) and [Jonas Myrin](#)

I can't print the lyrics here for copyright issues, but let me encourage you to do what I just suggested. Google the lyrics and then write them out for yourself. I would caution you to make sure you're picking a *great* song, one like [How Great Is Our God](#) (Tomlin, *et al*), or Redman/Myrin's [10,000 Reasons](#), two songs we all know will be around for a long, long time. If straight out worship songs aren't your thing, go for something classic like [Amazing Grace](#) or [How Great Thou Art](#). We obviously don't want to imitate poor writing, so be sure to pick a proven, lasting song that a lot of people would agree is more than a flash-in-the-pan radio "hit" that no one will care about in another year or so. This is a book about writing Christian songs, but all of the same principles apply to general market songs like Reid/Shamblin's [I Can't Make You Love Me](#). Feel free to pick something you like from there to work with, if you'd like. The point is to inculcate the *feeling* of great writing.

**Learn to Steal Like an Artist.** Austin Kleon's little book [Steal Like An Artist](#) (Workman Publishing Company, New York: 2012) is a great read. In it, he helps us understand that all art is derivative and that we indeed learn by imitation and by the creative combinations of already existing ideas, words, pictures, and all that goes into making good art. Two quotes I love in it are, "Art is theft" from [Picasso](#); and [Eliot](#)'s, "The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn." To set out to be completely original is futile. At best, we songwriters stumble over a great idea which is then crafted into a memorable, catchy hook that, well, *hooks* people into listening to the song. Then we craft a stunning lyric with tremendous content and payoff around the hook, set it to music just as hooky and memorable, then spin it out for the world to love. But, as wise old Solomon has said, "There's nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes. 1:9) and we find ourselves all-too-often struggling against the fact that our song sounds *just like* something else or our lyric is *too close to so-and so's* lyric or hook. What to do? Get creative! By understanding that complete originality is impossible, we're set free to combine the influences we've gathered into something fresh and new — our own little creation!

Consider this: *thousands* of songs utilize the same chord progression we learned as children on the piano bench playing [Heart and Soul](#) (Carmichael/Loesser, circa 1938). Remember that one? You were either on the left side of the keyboard playing the bass in the left hand and four very familiar chords over and over with your right, while your kid sister or best friend next door banged out the single melody on the upper keys, over and over. Those chords are known as 1, 6, 4, 5, which, in the Key of C would be C - Am - F - G, or at least we always played it in C because there are no sharps or flats to stumble over. Every kid should know this one. So, take a minute right now and think about [Heart and Soul](#), then hum to yourself Chris Tomlin's amazing song [How Great Is Our God](#) (Tomlin/Reeves/Cash). Same chord progression, right? It's really uncanny to stop and think about just how many songs have been and still are being written with this very progression. It's just about as common as Common Time, which is 4/4, of course. Here's a funny blog and video about it - [The Most Common Progression](#).

The difference is what you *do* with the progression. You see, it's perfectly fine to use the exact same chord progression as your favorite song, as long as *how* you use them and what you put on top of them are so cool that no one screams, "HEY! That sounds just like...!!" Artists and songwriters have been doing this throughout history. Occasionally someone breaks out of the pack by identifying a marvelous new combination of things no one thought of before, but we'll all mostly keep using the progressions we love over and over. That's really okay, as long as we use them well.

#### 4 GREAT WRITERS DEVELOP GREATER AWARENESS OF BEAUTY

**Great writers know that inspiration is found in many ways - be open to it more often.** The most successful songs are written using a higher kind of language than we use in everyday speech, even if the song seems approachable and conversational (and perhaps *especially* if it seems so). That means that there's a higher level of *thought* and crafting that goes into creating memorable phrases that people grasp immediately, even upon first hearing. This doesn't just *happen*. We have to work hard to get it going and increase our awareness of everything around us in order to develop the kind of thinking that eventually translates into better lyrics and thus better songs overall. This alludes to the discipline part of being a writer we'll discuss in greater detail later, but for now, suffice it to say that great writing requires great thinking and great thinking requires an increased consciousness of everything in life, especially *beauty*.

**"... great writing requires great thinking and great thinking requires an increased consciousness of everything in life, especially beauty."**

[[Tweet this](#)]



Now, by beauty, I don't necessarily mean pretty flowers and pink sunsets. Those are nice, but if you're planning to write about them you'd better find a really different way to talk about them. For example, let's compare the classic couplet *Roses Are Red* to [Gerard Manley Hopkin's](#) *God's Grandeur* (1877).

### **Roses Are Red**

Roses are red, violets are blue  
Sugar is sweet and so are you

### **God's Grandeur**

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Okay, so wow. Very lofty language, indeed. I wept once just reading these words to a group at a retreat. Hopkin's was a master and knew his way around the King's English as a highly-trained scholar in his day. He was the equivalent in his time to, say, a [Maya Angelou](#) in ours, only he didn't have the internet. What I want you to see here is the vast difference between common language and extraordinary language. Too few aspiring writers take the time to figure this out and go back again and again to trite, deeply-worn phrases and concepts that undermine the power of their songs. The point isn't to write in Elizabethan English, but to strive to understand what higher language usage is about in order to craft a natural lyric that communicates with pathos, emotion, heart, and soul. You have to know the rules before you can break them, as some say. It all starts with great language.

Again, if I'm critiquing a song, I have to concentrate first on the lyric hook and content. The music serves the lyric in our genre. If you're writing for the Christian church and market, you must pay great attention to the content much more than that it's just another song about Jesus. Let's face it — there's a lot of *bad* songs out there about Jesus. Why write another one? Why not lift our sights to higher places and direct the talents He's given us towards writing great songs that will live for a long, long time? A great writer learns the difference between common and trite language and a higher calibre of usage, then develops the ability to think about how to use them.

**Great writers are eclectic and enjoy a wide range of input.** Great writers develop a greater awareness of the world around them and learn to draw from a wide range of input. One of my favorite spiritual writers, the late [Henri Nouwen](#), wrote one of my all-time favorite books called [Return of the Prodigal](#) after meditating on [Rembrandt's famous painting](#) of the same name. Inspiration can come from anywhere. One issue I always cover as soon as possible with aspiring songwriters is that they're often very narrow and limited in their artistic influences and input. Obviously, if you only listen to one kind of music, you'll have a limited scope of what music can be. If you read one kind of book or only watch one kind of show, you'll only have the input from that small bandwidth and be limited, ultimately, in your own ability to communicate effectively. It'd be like eating fast food hamburgers every day and expecting to be able to prepare and serve fine French cuisine. It doesn't happen that way.

We Christian folks are always on guard against polluting our minds with bad influences from “secular” music and there's a lot to be said for that. But understanding musical styles and gleaning from them is a far different matter. Christian radio has historically been five - ten years *behind* secular mainstream radio, so, if all you listen to is Christian radio, you're already behind. That being said, no one has to subject themselves to nasty songs to learn about genres and styles. In fact, the snippets of songs available in every genre on [iTunes](#) is plenty to get you started. Anytime I start feeling left out of the current music scene, all I have to do is grab my laptop and go “[iTunes Surfing](#)” to catch up on all the latest trends and sounds. I admit, I can get lost for hours listening through pieces and parts of the myriad artists, albums, and songs being proffered there, but the primary feeling I always come away with is just how homogeneous our music culture really is — every popular thing pretty much sounds like the next popular thing.

My point is that great writers make it their business to be up on all the latest trends while maintaining their integrity and commitment to doing what the Lord has called them to do. There are EXPLICIT warnings on [iTunes](#) for each song, so you never have to compromise. As a Christian writer, you already know that you don't buy into "sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll," but it doesn't hurt you to check out what immensely creative people in the general marketplace are doing. You might even find that God speaks to you through it and inspires you to work harder at getting your writing up to the standards that got these people where they are. Music influences music. Trends active now will find their way into the Christian music world, at least in another five years or so, just long enough for you to get some great songs written.

## 5 GREAT WRITERS JOIN, LEARN, AND GROW

**Great writers know that we are hard-wired to belong.** Humans are created to live in community. God saw that it wasn't good for Adam to be alone (Genesis 2), so He brought forth from Adam's side the "man with a womb," the woman, to live and love and serve alongside him. We are hard-wired to belong. We find our greatest fulfillment when we live, love, and serve in community. Being a songwriter is one of the loneliest professions and avocations on the planet, so I want you to know that becoming part of [NCS](#) will help you to overcome the lonely factor and find a sense of belonging that will help you become the writer you want to be. [NCS](#) can't be everything, but it can be a place to start, a place to belong, and a place to grow.

**“We are hard-wired to belong.”** [\[Tweet this\]](#)

**Great writers know that we are hard-wired to keep learning.** There's a reason they teach creative writing in school. Everyone must start somewhere. The old proverb that says, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step" is never more true than when it comes to learning how to write great Christian songs. Joining a fun and exciting writing community like [NCS](#) could very well be your first step towards writing your first great song. Learning doesn't happen in a vacuum. We need each other to be "iron sharpening iron" (Proverbs 27:17) and to inspire and motivate ourselves to keep going when the going is rough. The sheer validation that we have something valuable to say is worth it, but then add to that the fantastic value of learning from some of the best writers around and it all starts to add exponential value to your writing.

## **Great writers know that we are hard-wired to grow and to become better.**

Learning about writing is one thing. Actually *growing* as a writer is another thing altogether. Remember sitting in school learning about something, but never really understanding it until you experienced it later in life? Writing is the same. We learn about it, do our best to grasp the principles of writing great hooks, stunning lines and verses with a killer chorus, but only doing it is going to cause growth. It would be like reading every book on the market about how to become a great runner but never getting off the couch. There comes a time when we have to get up and move, get up and run, get up and go towards the goal in order to figure out what it's really going to require of us. To not grow is to become stagnant, lethargic, and even depressed. God created you to run towards your goals, not sit on the couch and wait for them to magically appear. Great writers consistently run towards the goal of writing great songs. They understand that they are hard-wired to grow a little each day and to become better and better at the craft of writing.

**“There comes a time when we have to get up and move, get up and run, get up and go towards the goal in order to figure out what it's really going to require of us.”** [\[Tweet this\]](#)

## **So, let's get started!**

In the following sections, I want to share with you seven proven strategies for standing out in a crowded songwriting marketplace. Truth is, there are a lot of people out there trying to write and promote songs. Problem is, though, most of them write bad songs and just want to be validated for the bad writers they are. Never before in the history of mankind has there been more opportunity to write and promote your music. We're only a couple of decades into the social media phenomenon and a small handful of artists and writers have figured out how to use it to build their careers. The good news is that anyone can publish their songs. The bad news is that anyone can publish their songs and the world is being flooded with songs that aren't adding value to anyone's lives or building the Kingdom of Jesus in any significant way.

I'm convinced that God has better things for you and I want to help you get there. These seven points, if you use them well, will help you learn, grow, and experience the exhilaration of your songwriting skills increasing to the point where people may actually care about your writing. What could be better than to see the ideas, words, and melodies that God inspired in you connect with people and bring greater value to their lives? That has never stopped being thrilling to me, even after hundreds of songs I've been part of have affected millions worldwide. So, open your mind, pray a minute or two for God to inspire you now, and let's dig in.

# RESIST SHORT CUTS

*"There are no shortcuts to any place worth going." - Beverly Sills*

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Lesley Frey wrote a brilliant little piece on [Lifehack.org](http://Lifehack.org) called [Looking for Shortcuts to Success? You Need to Read This](#) in which she identified seven reasons that shortcuts to success don't really exist. I want to share with you a few reasons I don't believe in shortcuts to great songwriting, either, but she hits the mark as she offers her own reasons why taking hacks never really works the way we think they might. She mentions several reasons, including *The Ski Lift Reason* about riding a lift to the top of the mountain versus climbing it on foot, and the *Odysseus' Reason* about how our epic journeys teach us that we learn and grow through the trials and struggles like by no other way. As much as we don't want trials and challenges in our lives, those are the very ways we learn that we can triumph and become better people through them.

But my favorite reason she offers in relation to our topic here is *Dumbo's Reason*. If you remember the classic Disney movie, the little flying elephant [Dumbo](#) is told he can fly, but only because he has a magic feather. When Dumbo loses the feather, he becomes paralyzed. The magic feather was his shortcut to success. No feather, no flying. His success was unrepeatable once his shortcut was lost. For writers who lean on shortcuts, success will be unsustainable, as well. There's no real shortcut to writing great songs repeatedly outside of learning the principles of great writing, and then writing, writing, writing.

One of the main reasons we want to take shortcuts is that we lack patience. Patience is a required virtue in all aspects of life, but perhaps never so much as in songwriting. Like a fine wine, songs have their own fermentation process that cannot be hurried along. A song is a unique combination of literary and musical elements that come together over time, usually, though not always. Be patient with where you are now. Frankly, you can't be *anywhere* but where you are now, so accept it and take the necessary steps to better yourself just as you are by reading this book. Realizing that even seasoned writers can learn more about the craft is helpful. We can all be tempted to try to shortcut the creative process, but things that last the longest sometimes take the longest to create or to learn how to create. Many European cathedrals took hundreds of years to build and they still stand today. In our culture, we're conditioned to want instant results from the smallest efforts — instant food, instant internet access, and all the instant things we're steeped in. If the web page we click on takes more than two seconds to load, for instance, we're on to the next site.



When we want to write great songs, we must learn to demand more out of ourselves. Often the people around us don't understand the inner drive to write. "There are plenty of songs in the world," they might say, "so who needs another one?" Truth is, there's always room for another great song and especially another great song about Jesus and who He really is. Sadly, we're living in a time of great struggle for songwriters and artists, in general, and our work is pirated like never before. We're watching as the value of song, even in our churches, is being cheapened and diminished like never before. The ubiquitous internet has brought up whole generations who don't think they should have to pay for music or video content. It's a real problem, but the need for great, world changing songs has never been greater. You need to write yours, too, for the sake of the world. The challenge is always to demand of yourself something that maybe no one else is asking. In my years of managing songwriters for large music companies, I always tried to push the writers to be better than they even thought they were. I questioned their songs, if needed, and tried to get them to go the extra mile in their writing and not cheap out.

Now that writers are mostly left to their own devices, most don't have someone putting greater demand on their gifts and talents and the result is a world flooded with mediocrity. I really want to see this change and I hope that you do, too. [YouTube](#) and all the other user-uploaded channels are a constant dribble of awfulness. Our art has been denigrated, cheapened, sold out, and downright vandalized. Now, lest you think I'm just an old fuddy-duddy who hasn't kept up with this new "internet economy," at this writing some of the most important legislation on copyright law ever seen by Congress is before them and the outcomes cannot be overstated for writers and artists of all kinds, especially songwriters. The digitalization that has resulted in the pirating of music is so important an issue that people such as [Taylor Swift](#) and [Adele](#), among others, have pulled their music from [YouTube](#) and [Spotify](#), just for two examples. Thankfully, those ladies are phenomenal writers and artists in a position to do something like that. The rest of us need to stand our ground, as well, and realize that further cheapening out and writing pabulum when we could become great writers is nothing short of inexcusable.

**“When we want to write great songs, we must learn to demand more out of ourselves.”** [\[Tweet this\]](#)

So, with that rant behind us, let's look at five ways to resist shortcuts in your writing and five legitimate time-saving tips that could get you well on your way to becoming a great Christian songwriter.

# COMMON WRITING SHORTCUTS AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

## 1 Writing just one verse to a song

Okay, I know. You're probably asking, "Does anyone really write just one verse?" The short answer is, "Yes — they often do." This is especially true of worship song writers who have grown up in the day of "praise choruses." Think of it as a holdover from another era when choruses sung in church that weren't hymns were brand new. Early pioneers such as [Bill and Gloria Gaither](#) gave us some of the most endearing and enduring praise choruses such as [There's Just Something About That Name](#), [Because He Lives](#), and many more. Despite the fact that some of them actually had verses, many churches only used the choruses and a whole movement was born from them. I worked for years with a prominent worship writer whose songs you probably sing often at your church. He would frequently bring a wonderful song to me with only one verse. He thanks me to this day for challenging this practice and it makes me happy every time I sing second verses to his songs that may not have existed had we not worked together.

## 2 Settling for tired, over-worn phrases

The trap of using tired phrases is probably the most common shortcut an aspiring songwriter can fall into. It's easy to do. But other writers, publishers, and even the average listener picks them out in what may otherwise be a substantial lyric. Imagine that you're listening to a song that has really captured your ears. You've put down whatever it was you were doing, stopped looking at your smart phone or laptop, and begun to really *listen* to what the song is saying. The writer has really set this thing up and drawn you in, when, out of nowhere, he or she cheated out on a phrase and substituted something you've heard at least a million times. Hurts, doesn't it? Yes, it does. Because when one song out of so many thousands has jumped out at you, the last thing you want is for a cheap line to pop up and ruin it. I worked with writers constantly who just wouldn't wait for the right line to come along. They got anxious and wanted so badly to finish the song that they settled for a trite line. Just say, "No!" the next time you want to rush through a lyric, okay?

**“The trap of using tired phrases is probably the most common shortcut an aspiring songwriter can fall into.”** [\[Tweet this\]](#)

I've found that great songs have a way of writing themselves, if you let them. Whether they happen in a few minutes or a few months, songs seem to just know what they want to be. My song written with [George Searcy](#) called [Our Heart](#) was written in about an hour and a half, though we started with most of a verse and chorus lyric that I'd scratched out in my songwriting notebook. This version is by [Travis Cottrell](#) on a [Beth Moore](#) project called [Voices of the Faithful](#), but it's been used worldwide since 1994 as one of the most impacting missions songs ever. My point isn't to pat us on the back, though I'm very thankful God has used our song like this. My point is that there are no cheap phrases, in my humble opinion, in the song, and it just practically wrote itself as we listened to it and followed what it wanted to be. Yes — the Holy Spirit was guiding us, but His guidance was to help us allow the song to be birthed, even in such a short time, without cheapening it with rushed out phrases. I've had other songs that took much longer as I waited on the choicest of phrases in each line and didn't settle for cheap.

### 3 Bad Rhymes

Bad rhymes are everywhere. Rhyming is an art all unto itself and you must spend a lot of time getting it right. True, pop music is chock full of cheap rhymes, just as it is full of trite, over-worn phrases. But you can be better than that. You don't have to settle. You don't have to cheap out. I call the worst of these "moon June" rhymes because they're so basic and so bland that they have zero impact on the listener. We, as songwriters in America, have forsaken our first love with words. The digital revolution (here I go again) has robbed us of the higher call to make great art. *When no one appreciates great art, why create it?* Because we must create great art for the sake of the Gospel and for the survival of all mankind, one great rhyme at a time. The space here fails me to argue in depth about this fact: God has created us to be artists in His image and *God don't make bad rhymes*. I used to tell writers who came into my office with a bad song saying, "God gave me this song" that He gave it to them because He didn't want it anymore! Okay, not really, but I often thought it.

If you cheap out on bad phrases, odds are that a bad rhyme isn't too far behind. In fact, the reason the rhyme may be bad is because the phrase is bad. They can go hand in hand. If you up the quality of your phrases, you'll almost automatically up the quality of your rhymes. Bad imitates bad, but good imitates good, too, so go for the good. [Twila Paris](#) is one of my all time favorite classic writers and rhymers. She once brilliantly used the word *amalgamation* in a song called [Bonded Together](#). Amazing. So few people can write like that. For a complete look at her lyric go to [Bonded Together Lyric](#). Notice especially the stunning use of that word, but this lyric, even though it was written decades ago, still remains one of the tightest lyrics in my entire publishing experience. Ms. Paris eventually retired from writing and touring, but her songs are still classics sung the world over. She never made bad rhymes. We'll be exploring rhyming and all that goes into it in future [Nashville Christian Songwriters](#) blogs, interviews, masterclasses, and webinars, so stay tuned!

**“Bad imitates bad, but good imitates good, too,  
so go for the good.”** [\[Tweet this\]](#)

#### 4 Refusing to rewrite

I worked with the amazing [Bill Gaither](#) for many years as a songwriter and publisher. I will be recalling several of his wise sayings throughout this book and in future [NCS](#) materials, but one of the first things he ever said was, “With a rewrite, a good song can become a great song. And, with a rewrite, a great song can become a classic.” Wise indeed. I’ve thought of it many times when rewriting my own songs and working with co-writers. The great songwriter has accepted the fact that rewriting is, well, a *fact* of being a writer, and the refusal to rewrite belies arrogance and ignorance, to be blunt about it. No successful writer has gotten by without it, no matter what they say. All great writers rewrite. It just *is*.

**“With a rewrite, a good song can become a great song.  
And, with a rewrite, a great song can become a classic.  
- Bill Gaither”** [\[Tweet this\]](#)

Like the great masters who painted many versions of one scene before the masterpiece was a masterpiece (think [Cezanne](#), for one), great writers welcome the art of rewriting as part of the process to greatness, not a compromise or a failure. All great writers rewrite until the song is great. And, should you be one of those aspiring writers who think it comes “straight from God and right the first time,” you shouldn’t be here in the first place. That kind of over-spiritualized idea has no place in learning to write great songs. If you have a direct spiritual line to God and He downloads complete masterpieces to you, we’re all thankful and you don’t need the rest of us. We’ll watch you on the [Grammys](#). Otherwise, please don’t ever, ever say “God gave me this song” unless it’s better than anything anyone has ever heard on this planet before. Don’t make God party to your bad songwriting. In fairness, I understand that what writers really mean by that is that God *inspired* them to write a song. That’s a great place to start. Just don’t settle for the first version as the final one or people will dismiss you and your song no matter who you think gave it to you.

## 5 Inconsistent Prosody

Prosody refers to the patterns of rhythm and sound in poetry, or, more succinctly for our purposes, how words and music work together. If poetry is impacted by the sound of the words in conjunction with the rhythmic patterns of the lines, how much more a song lyric that is married to a melody? The impact of song could be said to be the impact of poetry *compounded*. To read a poem has a certain impact on the listener, but poetry sung has the added impact of musical frequencies hitting the ear and ultimately the soul. Song is poetry on steroids, sort of. In other places, I’ll argue that great poetry doesn’t always make for great lyrics. That’s why we don’t really have traveling minstrels going from town to town singing epic histories of our culture anymore. The grand oral traditions of storytelling as a way of preserving history and culture are gone. They’ve been replaced with the sound bite, the shortest imaginable moment (think [Snapchat](#)) of history captured in a song that may or may not endure the test of discriminating time. Good prosody is the result of studying how words and melodies work together to make a great song.

**“Song is poetry on steroids, sort of.”** [\[Tweet this\]](#)



Unfortunately, we can't learn all we need to know about prosody in this book. We can, however, take some basic instruction and put it to good use. First, go listen to your favorite song right now and think about it in terms of the parallel lyric and melody structure. What happens when the melody goes up or down, or even stays in a mid-range? How does the feeling of the song change as the melody goes higher and higher? Are the words working with or against the melody? When I'm talking about this in class, I always ask, "If the melody goes up would you be singing the word *down*?" Probably not, but this is a simplistic example. Prosody is much more than singing the word "down" when the melody goes up, of course, but think of the song [You Raise Me Up](#) and try to imagine the melody going down while [Josh Groban](#) sings the word "up." Tough to do, right? Prosody has to do with the flow of the entire lyric and how well the melody interprets it and vice versa. Songs are a magical mix of words and melody brought to life by a singer or a gathering of people who sing it. The greater the prosody, the greater the song.

So, if these five shortcuts tend to cheapen a song and stunt its impact, what are some legitimate shortcuts or timesavers to help the aspiring writer? Here are some that have worked for me for many years. They're not ranked by importance and you have to discover your own best practices, but maybe these will help get you started.

## FIVE SONGWRITING TIMESAVERS

### 1 Keep a song journal

Okay, I know it sounds basic, but not all writers have learned that a song journal is a good idea. It is. First, a journal is your go-to place to write down your hooks. I keep whole pages filled with hook after hook of all kinds. Not all of them are great, of course, but they're there when I need them. And, a good hook idea can be developed into a great hook with a little work. If I tossed the original undeveloped idea, it might never be remembered and developed into something good. I keep hook idea pages in the back of the journal (for no real reason) and then use the front pages to write down lyric scraps, those bits of flotsam and jetsam that float through my head like seaweed sometimes. For the same reason I write down even the smallest hook idea, I try to capture every scrap of lyric that I think of. I can't tell you how many times they've come in handy as I've sat down to write alone or with a co-writer and one of those little pieces has jump started me into writing an entire song. They're invaluable. And, just like thinking you'll remember a dream in the morning, song ideas and lyric scraps tend to float away never to be recalled even when we're awake. The best thing to do is to keep a dedicated journal and let it become a "shortcut" when we sit down to write again.

## 2 Keep a voice recorder handy

Just like in point number one, keeping a voice recorder (now conveniently included on your iPhone or Droid), is the quickest way to remember those melody snippets you start humming while walking through the mall. I've thought of many melody snippets even in church and somehow hummed them onto my phone to go back to later on. This also tends to happen to me in the car where I can't run to the keyboard and plunk out the melody I'm hearing. I just whip out the phone and sing the melody *a cappella* to go back to. They're not always good, but they have often been a place to start, and, believe me, a place to start is sometimes all a writer needs. Just *having* an idea is a gift and shouldn't be squandered. Keeping a voice recorder handy at all times is a terrific way to save time and jump start your writing. And never be afraid to sing *a cappella*! Many writers I know believe with me that the greatest songs should be able to be sung *a cappella* without losing their greatness!

## 3 Stay inspired

You are a Christian songwriter for one reason, hopefully, that God inspired you to be one. The testimony of His presence and goodness in our lives should be the number one reason we write, but sometimes that reason can become obscured. In Matthew 13, Jesus told the parable of the sower. One of the main reasons He gave for the Word not bearing fruit in our lives was that the seed fell on thorny ground and the "cares of the world" rose up to choke it. This happens to all of us. We live in a highly stressful culture that is off the chains in stress, addiction, terrorism, and Hedonism beyond description. Our children know and see things we couldn't mention at their age and we're constantly bombarded with cares that want to choke out the truth in us. If we're going to write great Christian songs, we'll have to resist the cares of this world, whatever they look like for us, and seek to stay inspired by the Gospel, by worship, and by the living presence of Jesus in our lives. This isn't an easy task. Everything around us is mitigating against us. How can we stand against it and stay inspired to write great Christian songs?

**“If we're going to write great Christian songs, we'll have to resist the cares of this world, whatever they look like for us, and seek to stay inspired by the Gospel, by worship, and by the living presence of Jesus in our lives.”** [\[Tweet this\]](#)

**First, we have to be people of the Word.** That means that there needs to be some input of the Scriptures into our lives on a daily basis. Artists usually don't do well with routine, so the *get-up-at-5:00 am-devotional-thing* isn't necessarily the answer for us. It may look more like listening to a great podcast from a Bible teacher or watching a video with strong Word content in it. You know what you're naturally drawn to, but I like a handful of Bible teachers and I go back to them often for Bible input.

**Second, a little reading goes a long way.** Great Scripture doesn't always make great modern song lyric, but the inspiration oozes from even the smallest passages. I try to read the Psalms regularly and have had years where I read five psalms a day, reading the entire book in a month. I need to do that again. It's awesome!

**Third, we need to read authors who inspire us.** Maybe its [Beth Moore](#) for you, or [Andy Stanley](#). I love [Henri Nouwen](#) and [Brennan Manning](#). Their perspectives and prose never cease to inspire me and I always want to write after I read them. God uses them to inspire and fill me again and again.

#### **4 Reach Out to Other Songwriters**

People are created by God to live, love, and learn in community. Without a sense of belonging, we starve and never reach our fullest potential in life or creativity. To think that you can "go it alone" is shortsighted, at best. We all need people around us who are trying to accomplish similar goals, people willing to share our struggles and help us learn in the process. That's why doctors go to conferences. That's why professional associations are formed for its members to inspire and share with each other. That's why we're forming [NCS](#) and why you should be seeking out other writers both here with us and in your own neighborhood with which to share your journey. For all of our modern technology, people have never been lonelier or needed community any more than right now. You will have to make it happen. It's rare that anyone knocks on our doors these days, so if it is going to happen, you'll have to get up off of your blessed assurance and go connect with other writers. Some of my best songs have been written in collaboration with others and perhaps yours will, too. You might be surprised at just how quickly your writing improves once you've been rubbing shoulders with people trying to write. Being with them will both affirm your call and confirm some things you thought about the writing process. You will enjoy being with them and they you. That's just how it works. Go ahead. Reach out and make some new friends!

## 5 Subscribe to writer websites

Of course, [NCS](#) is offering what we hope to be the premier subscription site for you, but there are others to be discovered. Why not fill your mind with the encouragement and excitement that comes from broadening your horizons and gleaning from a broad range of sources? You'll know pretty quickly which ones resonate with you and which ones don't. Regardless, with just a glance at blog posts you'll know which ones you need and what they'll do for you. Today's internet, for as much damage as it has done to music, offers vast storehouses of content-rich sites with information and instruction about so many things it is insane. So, cull through the existing sites and see what is attractive to you. Check out [nashvillechristiansongwriters.com](http://nashvillechristiansongwriters.com) and fill your life with fantastic resources.

Now that you're over the temptation to seek shortcuts and are fully convinced there are none to songwriting greatness, let's move on to our next section about how to make songwriting a lifestyle and not just a hobby.

**“Without a sense of belonging, we starve and never reach our fullest potential in life or creativity.”** [\[Tweet this\]](#)

# MAKE WRITING A LIFESTYLE, NOT A HOBBY

*"Hobbies take place in the cellar and smell of airplane glue."* - John Updike

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Hobbies are wonderful things to have. Everyone should have a hobby like, say, flying kites or building classic boats from a kit. Hobbies are relaxing and help relieve stress and everyday worries. Unfortunately, writing isn't like that at all. In fact, songwriting can actually cause stress and anxiety, especially if you really want to be great at it. Become a serious songwriter and you'll probably need a good hobby to alleviate some of the stress. Songwriting isn't for the faint of heart. It's a labor of love and requires a lot of mental effort, not to mention the emotionally disturbing prospect of rejection when the people you want so badly to like your songs seem less than impressed. Where's that kite?

**“Become a serious songwriter and you'll probably need a good hobby to alleviate some of the stress.”** [Tweet this]

Maybe there's a fine line between a hobby and a lifestyle, but when it comes to doing something as demanding as becoming a great Christian songwriter, nothing less than total commitment, like a lifestyle, will get you where you want to go. Hobbyists can leave their hobby for a season and be okay. True writers could never leave writing for long. It drives them because it brings more than pleasure to them. Writing is *life*. I've personally been in a season where about the only time I feel truly free is when I'm out for my run. I don't run fast and I don't run long, but that thirty - forty minutes when the shoes are strapped on my feet and the wind is whipping past my ears are my best of the day. Stress drains away, cares have to let go of my mind, and I love how the muscles feel as I pound the pavement listening to [Danny Gokey's](#) amazing song [Hope in Front of Me](#). Running isn't something I could easily lose at this point. It's moved from hobby to lifestyle.



People who do extraordinary things know that a hobby is casual, but achievement is lifestyle. Just talk to anyone who's run a 10k or a triathlon. They didn't do those things just playing at their sports. They were dead serious in order to make it to the goal line. They understood the commitment it would take to achieve something beyond the ordinary and were of the mind to rearrange their lives around their goals, not letting the inertia of life overtake them. You can read a lot of books about songwriting, but until you choose to rearrange your life choices around learning the craft, you'll just play at it and not become all you want to become.

**“People who do extraordinary things know that a hobby is casual, but achievement is lifestyle.”** [\[Tweet this\]](#)

I shudder to think of the songs that won't be written if you don't make the shift. I believe that potentially millions of people could be affected in a very positive way if you take up the “mantle” of writing great songs. And, ironically, when Elisha took up Elijah's mantle in 2 Kings 2, the Bible records that he did twice as many miracles as Elijah. Wouldn't it be fantastic if you make a shift from hobby to lifestyle writing and write twice as many wonderful songs as you have so far? Here are three ways to begin making the shift from writing as a hobby to writing as a lifestyle:

## **1 Writers write**

I've heard it said that the number one reason authors are never published is that they never really write. They just dream of writing a great book. It seems that everyone wants to *have written* a book, but no one wants to write one badly enough to write it. The real mark of writers is that they write. Period. Not that they're published, though we all hope that happens, but that they write. They write because they are driven to write by their own consuming desire to express what God has placed inside of them. They write because He has touched their lives in a significant way and they cannot help but get it out somehow, even if no one seems to be paying attention yet.

So, your first step towards writing as a lifestyle is to write daily. Even if you only have ten minutes, write the best you can for those ten minutes. When your time is up, rejoice that you wrote for those moments and move on with your day. If you get to come back to it, fine. If not, fine. Just celebrate the small victories and let it be. Think about it — if you spent ten minutes a day just brainstorming hooks by listening to other songs and jotting things down in your writing journal, in a month you could have dozens of fantastic starting points for your songs. That beats sitting down to a blank page any day! Once you've started a lyric, those ten minutes each day could add up to hours spent on refining your verses, chorus, and bridge over a month's time. The alternative is that you spend no time thinking about writing and when you finally set aside a little time to do it, you're at a cold start. Writers *write*, even if it's just a few minutes a day.

## 2 Writers organize for writing

I've already mentioned the writer's journal and the voice recorder on your cell phone for capturing thoughts on the fly, but this is just where the fun begins. If you want to get serious for writing, some organization has to kick in. Now that you have the first two tools for capturing your ideas, your next step is to begin organizing your songs. You do this by transferring your scraps from the notebook into documents on your computer in a file marked something like "Song Files". My wife laughs at me because my two main files in the filing cabinet are labeled "Miscellaneous" and "To Be Filed". She's much better at details than I am, but I do keep all of my song files in the same place on my laptop. That way I don't lose them and they're always accessible when I'm ready to work.

You may want to consider filing them under the "Completed Songs" and "Songs To Be Finished" categories, as I do, or you may be satisfied enough to have them under one general heading. I find that the finished songs kept separately from the ones in progress are a better system for me. Plus, I'm always looking for ways to move songs from one category to the next and putting them in the finished file is very satisfying. Whenever I hear of an opportunity to plug a song to a publisher or an artist, it's a lot easier to identify which ones may be good candidates from the finished file as opposed to trying to remember which ones in a general file are complete and which need more work. Just do what works best for you.

People rarely want paper files these days and rarely need printed lyric sheets. Once you have a completed worship song, though, and you're using it in your church, the need for paper files increases as you print lyric sheets, chord charts, and lead sheets for your band and singers. The use of iPads for those is increasing, but until they're as ubiquitous as the iPhone, there'll be paper around. I've found the more organized I can be with even the paper I have to manage the better off everyone is. Folders, notebooks, and filing cabinets are a must, not only if you're managing the paper trail for the praise team, but for your own filing of important charts and lyric sheets.

### **3 Join professional writer's groups, associations, and conferences**

Yes, this will be a plug for [Nashville Christian Songwriters](#), but the principle holds true across all professions. Those who are serious about growing in their craft always join groups and associations where they will be challenged and grow by rubbing shoulders with people trying to do what they're trying to do, and they will attend no less than one professional conference per year. I had a new executive headshot done just last week by a wonderful photographer named [Kari Douma](#) in Grandville, Michigan, and, as we talked, I asked her how she got started and wound up with such a successful studio. She told me that she hadn't gone to school for photography, but had been self-taught. By attending conferences, and by joining photography groups and associations, she grew in her abilities to the point where she now teaches many of the workshops she used to attend. This is also true of many of the wonderful writers at [Sue C. Smith's](#) annual [Write About Jesus Conference](#) (WAJ) in St. Charles, Missouri. Several past winners of the annual song contest have gone on to become published songwriters and now teach classes at WAJ each year.

How do you pick the conference and group right for you? For Christian songwriters, it's not that difficult because there just aren't that many. The [National Worship Leaders Conference](#) usually has classes for worship writers. The [Immerse Conference](#) in Nashville is another one that focuses on worship writers, but you can glean a lot even from a focused topic like worship writing. All of the same general rules apply. Other groups you can check out are the [Christian Songwriting Organization](#), [Christian Songwriter's Network](#), and [The American Christian Songwriters Association](#). The long-standing [Nashville Songwriters Association International](#) (NSAI) also offers excellent classes and conferences with 150 chapters worldwide. While the NSAI doesn't focus exclusively on Christian songwriting, they are the most well-established organization and have been around for 50+ years now, offering a lot of valuable content, both free and with your paid membership.

All of that being said, my hope is that you will find here at [NCS](#) the highest quality resources and inspiration to further your songwriting, as well as a sense of belonging to a community dedicated solely to making Jesus famous as you become a successful writer. We're the "new guy on the block," but we bring 30+ years of songwriting and publishing experience to the street that we know will be a great help to you, should you decide to join us. More on the benefits of joining [NCS](#) a little later, but the point is that you will go further if you go in a group and choose to grow in community with others. It's just the way people are wired. We are created to live in community and to benefit from belonging. Smart writers take advantage of the collected wisdom and experience of a group and apply it to their own writing. This is a quick way to learn, be challenged, and grow.

**“Smart writers take advantage of the collected wisdom and experience of a group and apply it to their own writing.”** [\[Tweet this\]](#)

Do those three things and you'll be well on your way to transitioning your writing from a hobby to a lifestyle. There are no guarantees in life or songwriting, but the more you write (and the better you write), the greater the chances are that your songs will be heard. Now that you're a little more organized and are looking for the best group and conference for you, let's move on. Our next section is about developing a healthy detachment from your work, a very important topic for creative people who tend to wrap their entire self-worth around their creativity, especially songwriters. I want to help you see that your work is an expression of you, but it *isn't* you. Read on.

# DEVELOP A HEALTHY DETACHMENT FROM YOUR WORK

*“An essential aspect of creativity is not being afraid to fail.” - Edwin Land*

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I’ve written some really stupid songs in my life. No, it’s true. Especially when I was a much younger writer trying to figure out that extremely fine line between catchy and corny. Sometimes you just don’t know that you’re being kitschy until you’ve grown up as a songwriter and look back on the scattered trail of unsung songs, the dried carcasses of would-be hits that were over the line in ways you couldn’t have figured out then, but see all too painfully now. Sometime in the 1980’s, I wrote a song called *Plant Life*. Oh, yes, I did. I thought I was so clever turning that phrase from being about a silk orchid in the window to *planting life* in the people around me. Clever, eh? No. Kitschy and not even quirky enough to be cool. There’s such a fine line sometimes, people, and often we need help from others to understand just why what we think is catchy might be something closer to mawkish and pitiful.

**“... often we need help from others to understand just why what we think is catchy might be something closer to mawkish and pitiful.”** [\[Tweet this\]](#)

Given that I’ve grown a lot since the 80’s and have a much better hairstyle, I can see ever so clearly that this particular hook and song were nothing short of awful. But had I been staking my self-esteem on this composition, the rejection it repeatedly received could have been devastating, to say the least. After all, *God* gave me that song, right? Isn’t it His will that life be planted all around the world in people who need to know Him? Yes, yes, of course. But it was a bad, stupid song. It didn’t deserve to live. It wasn’t really from God, just from my undeveloped imagination and neophyte writing skills. I hadn’t learned better. I can’t remember pitching it too hard once people laughed out loud at the ridiculousness of it all. The years of psychotherapy have helped process the pain, too.

So, where is that illusive distinction between *us* and our *work*? People call their songs their “children,” and such they are. But what people often forget is that sometimes our children aren’t as pretty or smart as we wish they were. They behave badly in public and scream at inconvenient moments in the theatre. Sometimes they even go rogue and act like criminals. Yes, songs are children, but not always good ones. I have a few “song children” incarcerated for life without parole. Children are *us* in that we birthed them, fed them, clothed them, and raised them to the best of our ability. But, at some point, they are what and who they are, needing to stand up and walk by themselves, feed themselves, wash themselves, and move on with their own little lives. If my 23-year old starts screaming bad things in public, she’s on her own. Yes, still my kid, but now responsible to act like a grown up. Songs are kind of that way, too. They need to grow up.

Songs are a reflection of us like a snapshot is a reflection of us in a certain moment of time. Hopefully, we’ve lost 25 pounds since last year’s vacation at the beach and we don’t look quite as much like [Shamu](#) now, of course, but that Instagram still floating around out there represents us as we were and not necessarily how we are right now. To pin our whole identity on one song or a thousand songs is useless and can be harmful to one’s dignity (just think of my song, *Plant Life*... oooooooooooh, I shudder!). There is a certain amount of detachment from our art that is healthy and needed if we’re to grow. If we hold on mercilessly to the first way we wrote a song or to the feelings of rejection we feel from others when they don’t appreciate our babies, we’re going to be very sad writers.

Healthy detachment is knowing the difference between me and my creation, that little song over there. That’s why it’s so dangerous to play the “God Card” and say He gave it to you. I wrote about that earlier and won’t harp about it here, but pulling God into the writing process (or blaming Him for not really being in it) is an unhealthy ploy and shifts blame from you to Him for however good or bad it might be. And, seriously, other writers and publishers will laugh you down the street if you try to play that one on them — it’s just not done by any serious writer. Realizing the subtle, but very real, difference between yourself and your output is critical to success. If you can’t be objective, at least a little, you’re stuck and can’t get better at what you do. This is true in everything in life, from recovering from addiction to cooking dinner. If you’re a bad cook and the meatloaf always turns out to resemble a Starter Log, you need to recognize it and get some help.



Unhealthy detachment is born of narcissism, arrogance, and perfectionism, all of which are rooted in fear and pride. If we're needing our songs to boost our self-esteem, we'd better be darn good at it. Fear of rejection is high on the list of things we avoid in life and for good reason. No one wants to be stung by rejection in any circumstance. Some of us are so extremely sensitive to rejection that a slight look of disdain directed towards us sends us spinning. How much worse is it when someone downright rejects your song? Better grow a thick skin, like overcooked egg casserole, because it hurts, believe me. The feeling that what we produce is always perfect is self-delusion, at best. We all need objective critique and fresh eyes to see how our little ones can be made prettier, be better behaved, and grow to become the little stars we know they're destined to be.

**“Unhealthy detachment is born of narcissism, arrogance, and perfectionism, all of which are rooted in fear and pride.”** [\[Tweet this\]](#)

So, here are three ways you can develop some healthy detachment from your work and start losing some of that nasty perfectionism.

## 1 Remember the 50-for-1 Rule

In sales of any kind, the would-be salesperson knows that for every 100 people who look at the product, half of that number will get serious about buying, and then less than half of the half will actually buy. Their actual percentage skews depending on the market they sell in, but for songwriters, especially young and aspiring writers, you probably start with the *50-for-1* ratio. That means that you'll probably write fifty bad to mediocre songs before you finally pen that amazingly great song. Your goal is to greatly alter that rule by learning everything I'm trying to teach here and make it a 30-for-1 rule, then a 20-for-1 rule, and so on until you're writing is so developed that you beat the rule altogether. But for now, settle it. You'll have to write a lot of bad to mediocre songs until you start writing great ones. That's how we learn. That's how we grow unless we're [Taylor Swift](#). And we're not, even though I bet even she has a few clunkers in the closet somewhere even she would feel ashamed of now.

Learning that rule helps us to become more objective about all the songs we write, relieving quite a bit of emotional pressure built up around the success or failure of any one of them. We understand that it boils down to a numbers game, pretty much like sales. We have to produce a lot of okay songs in order to land on those major ones. Another great analogy would be all the batters who strike out more than they connect with the ball. They don't let the strikeouts keep them from getting up to bat again and again.

## 2 Use each song as a lesson in writing

The famous [Edison](#) quote about finding “10,000 ways that didn’t work” to create the light bulb is golden here. Each attempt to write a great song is a lesson that can accrue towards the really great songs in the future. If [Edison](#) had given up at 9,999 tries, I wouldn’t be typing on this laptop. Instead of thinking of a less-than-great song as a failure, let’s reframe it to become a lesson in what worked and what didn’t work. That way, we take baby steps toward understanding the best practices of songwriting and learn to become our own editor, which is actually what a skilled songwriter is, his/her own editor who knows what it takes to write a great song and can self-edit along the way. Every song you write should be like the stones in a garden path you lay to the magic fountain. They can be heavy, but each stone is important in the path and has to be there in order for you to reach the payoff and drink the magic water that makes you young forever and makes people love your songs. If you skip a stone, you never make it to the desired result. So, look at each song attempt as a lesson and you’ll be a lifelong learner.

## 3 Think of writing as a journey, not a destination

Just as in our snapshot analogy earlier, thinking of songwriting as an expression of your life’s journey is one of the best ways to develop some healthy detachment. Sure, you need to lose a little, but there’s still time. Yes, that vacation in Cancun wasn’t all you wanted it to be, but, after all, it was pretty good. And, just like no relationship is perfect, no song is actually perfect, either. Some are closer to perfect than others, but nothing and no one is perfect this side of heaven. That’s a fact. When we can adjust our thinking about art and creativity to become more like a journey rather than a specific destination, we can enjoy the ride more and go easier on ourselves along the way. If you’re around people who are so uptight about themselves or life, you know it’s not much fun. If you’re being that person, stop it now. You’re making life hard on a lot of other people and not making life better for them or for yourself. Songwriting should be a fun and enjoyable thing, not a drudgery. When you can think of your songs as passengers on the train of life riding alongside of you, it alleviates a lot of strain on them, you, and everyone else onboard.

Healthy detachment is a necessary attitude in more areas than songwriting. When we exercise it with our partners and children, we set them free to become who and what they need to be. When we’re demanding and perfectionistic with the people around us, we alienate them and suppress the beauty and joyful development they can experience. When we’re demanding and perfectionistic in our relationships, we’ll transfer that attitude to our songwriting and never develop joyfully into the writers we long to become. So, lose all the negative and embrace the positive. Healthy detachment is your friend.

# UNDERSTAND THE CURRENT SONGWRITING MARKETPLACE

*“For a songwriter, you don’t really go to songwriting school; you learn by listening to tunes. And you try to understand them and take them apart and see what they’re made of, and wonder if you can make one, too.” - Tom Waits*

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Let’s just get it out now — the current songwriting marketplace is in bad shape, judging by things some people say. It’s true. There are fewer “cuts” available than ever before and even my established songwriting friends have great difficulty getting their best songs placed. It’s become an artist-writer marketplace and all the top Christian artists try to write their own material for the benefit of increased royalties, at least partly. Sad in a way, but true. Sad because not every fabulous Christian artist is an equally fabulous Christian songwriter. But, that’s the writing world we live in. I have a Bible teacher friend who often says, “We must love the world we have, not the world we *wish* we had.” That advice is true for us as songwriters, too — we have to be realistic about the state of the music industry and write *anyway*.

**“Remember: a writer writes.”** [\[Tweet this\]](#)

Remember: a writer writes. Our motivation flows from a different place in our souls that is rarely the same motivation as the general music industry, which exists primarily to sell music and make money. Nothing wrong with that, either, just to be clear. Selling music is a good thing because it blesses the people who buy it and supports the people who make it. The open sharing concept rampant in music is bad, very bad, because it cheapens the world of music for everyone and makes it impossible for writers like you and artists everywhere to make a living at what we’re all called to do. But, regardless of all that, we write because we must write in response to the loving call of Christ on our lives.

Therefore, when we talk about the current songwriting marketplace, we must take a broad look at how music publishing works and respond accordingly. I'm a firm believer that "the cream rises to the top" and "you can't keep a good man (or a great song) down," so we must take this industry assessment with a big grain of proverbial salt. God is much bigger than the Christian music industry and can promote a great song throughout the entire earth with or without its help. I've seen Him do it. In fact, my great friends, [Kirk and Deby Dearman](#), wrote a little worship chorus back in 1980 called [We Bring the Sacrifice of Praise](#) that stayed on top of [CCLI's Top 100 Songs](#) for years. It is the quintessential praise chorus based on Psalm 100 and found its way into thousands of churches, home groups, and grass huts predominantly without any commercial propulsion. Remember, this was back before the internet. There was no downloading and sharing and compact discs weren't even around, and yet God promoted it to the nations, church by church, person to person. That can and will still happen. (Incidentally, this is a great example of a praise chorus that had no verses until I encouraged Kirk and Deby to write some for a recording we were doing - check out this awesome version from [Integrity Music](#) sung by [Kelly Willard](#).)

As I write this section, I'm cruising through Apple Music and sampling current Christian songs. The music sounds great. Wonderful production and the vocals are all stellar. Occasionally there's actually something musically interesting that doesn't sound like a thousand other songs, but, I have to say, the lyrics are as trite as ever. Nothing fresh. Nothing interesting. I'm listening to the same hash we've served up for thirty years and I'm getting sad about it. I will say a lot about lyric content through this book, but this is one of the greatest reasons the music business is in bad shape — we've lost our creative edge and sold out to current pop trends and sound alikes. Yes, there are some notable exceptions like [Chris Tomlin](#) and a handful of others, but, by and large, it's "kingdom come/will be done" rhymes that no longer connect the way they used to. Songs are all about *connecting* with listeners. When we say the same thing over and over and over in the same way, listeners tune out. Can't blame them.

Music business executives are looking for "the next Hillsongs" or "the next Michael W. Smith" or "the next Matt Maher" type of artist to record (or "the next Taylor Swift," etc). Whenever an artist breaks out and has a runaway smash, there's a truckload of "also rans" and "wannabes" in their wake. It has always been like this and always will be like this. It's true in all types of businesses and every marketing exec in the world is praying for a breakout in their genre to create a gravy train of cash. That's how business works. No one can fault business people from wanting to have a hit. You and I want one, right? I mean, this is still America and capitalism is still the way it works. It's not nice of us to throw rocks at people we're jealous of just because they got a hit before we did. We need to celebrate everyone's wins and hope that they will celebrate ours when they come.

So, publishing execs at the various music companies are always looking for great new songs to promote to established or up and coming artists. Some companies have a bevy of “signed writers” who write exclusively for their company in hopes these writers will write the hits they need. When an exclusive writer doesn’t perform well, he or she may be cut loose from their contract. Contracts range in scope of financial advances and benefits such as travel expenses and demo recording costs that may or may not be covered by the publishing company. It all depends on the level of clout a writer has earned based on past performance and the catalog of songs they have. To actually get a publishing deal means you’ve written something significant enough to capture the attention of the harried and overworked music biz exec who is hungry for what you have. If you don’t have what they want, you don’t get past the front desk, if that far.

We’ll talk more about it as we go, but to compete in today’s marketplace, you must understand it. If you’re trying to create in a vacuum, your music might suck (haha - sorry for that one!). Here are three ways to stay or get current on the marketplace.

## 1 Wake Up

Artists and writers tend to get stuck in their own creative worlds. Think [Van Gogh](#). I mean, he cut his ear off. Creative people create the world around themselves to a large extent and can lose touch with the real one. Before you realize it, you may have actually been lulled into thinking that your music is good, *really* good. You wonder why others around you just can’t see how good your music is and you begin to get upset, even angry, about it. This is a terrific sign that you’ve snoozed somewhere along the line and need a wake up call to what people really like. The alarm clock may have actually been ringing on the bed stand for a long time, but, like when you’re so asleep that you *dream* you’re asleep hearing the alarm clock, you may need to really wake up to the fact that you’ve lost touch with real music in a real world. Shake yourself for a minute. Take some deep, cleansing breaths. Sit up, open your eyes, feel the crisp, cool morning, and throw back the rich, velvety curtains around your perspective and *wake up* to the wild and wonderful world of music around you.

## 2 Research current music trends

The pop artist [Prince](#) (or whoever he is right now) has been quoted as saying that he doesn't listen to anyone's music but his own. I suppose iconic musical geniuses who've spawned vast creativity and pop culture shifts can afford to make a brag like that, but the rest of us can't. Bragging isn't an attractive Christian trait, or even an attractive human trait, for that matter. Humility is the mark of a believer. The only way to begin to get a handle on the plethora of music out there is to research it. This can be done in many convenient ways such as turning on the telly, checking out streaming sites like [Pandora](#) and [Spotify](#), or by doing an [iTunes](#) sweep. The latter is actually one of my favorite ways. Here's what I'll do every month or two. I'll get my laptop and a pair of earbuds (I do this sometimes when my wife is watching yet another Hallmark Channel movie). Just open [iTunes](#) and start scrolling through their featured albums and artists on the their landing page, then start sampling.

The coolest feature about [iTunes](#) is that you can listen to samples of songs from entire albums. Some samples are longer, some are shorter, but it doesn't take me more than about twenty - thirty seconds to get the gist of a song. By this time in my life, I've listened to thousands and thousands of songs. When I was a full-time publisher, my writers wrote hundreds of songs that I had to listen to and we received hundreds and hundreds each year of "unsolicited material" entries from people trying to be heard. I tried for many years to find that one shining exception of a great song in the unsolicited category, but I can't remember one. As I said earlier, you can't keep a good song down and you can't raise a bad one up by pummeling publishing people with them. If you're not connected enough to have a publishing person listen with you sitting there, you're probably never going to be heard through the mail. I know, that's sad. But it's just true. That's why researching is so important for you right now.

I've spent hours sampling 30-second pieces of songs on [iTunes](#) at one sitting. After a while it all sounds alike, but stumbling across the rare exceptions is delightful, something kin to tasting cake that isn't dry. It can be quite fun. Just as in Christian music, though, pop and even Indie music can be homogeneous. Artists borrow from one another to the point they lose their distinctiveness. Writers do this, too, and it's a constant fight to be unique, but it's so worth it. Sampling for a few hours each month on [iTunes](#) may be your single greatest weapon in understanding current music trends. You don't have to know how to recreate any of it and you probably never will. The point is to gain some understanding of what's out there so you can write better songs and not embarrass yourself. Believe me, I've embarrassed myself enough for all of us.



### 3 Lose the judgmentalism

Christians are notorious for making value judgments on “the world.” We draw lines in the sand dividing between who is “saved” and who is “lost” based on our understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and our desire to see people move to the “saved” category. I’m 100% with you that we want everyone to come to know this wonderful Savior we know and to worship Him “in Spirit and in truth” (John 4). But, if we’re going to grow as creators, we have to stretch ourselves beyond the typical borders of our “Christian” creativity and art in order to be more informed people. If we’re writing from an extremely narrow viewpoint religiously, we’ll never succeed in telling the Greatest Story Ever Told about Jesus and win people to His love. I firmly believe that only strong Christians can risk understanding what other religions and non-religious people believe in order to offer the better thing in Christ. If we’re afraid of Muslims and Ba’Hai’s and Moonies and anyone else, we’re sunk. This has been a struggle for the Church from Century Uno.

You may be asking, “What does this have to do with writing Christian songs?” Actually, it has a lot to do with it. The narrower our worldview, the less we’re able to communicate with the world itself. If we just “hunker in the bunker” and toss songs out like hand grenades, we’re only causing small, meaningless explosions that just annoy people, not bless them. A great Christian songwriter loves *everyone*—the whole big world full of different kinds of people — and uses this love to write the most meaningful songs possible. If there’s a people group you reject, even “in Jesus’ name,” you’re only hurting your chances to communicate with them or anyone else. Love must be the compelling reason we write, not just to impress people who believe exactly as we do. *Selah*.

**“A great Christian songwriter loves everyone...”** [\[Tweet this\]](#)

Further, the Christian music industry is filled with as many different types of believers (and non-believers) as the world. If you try to get in the door and have a bigoted view of “all those other people” you’ll narrow your chances of being heard for the writer you are. Just saying. People are people and the business people are no different. Music company execs and personnel are socially conscious people who care about the world, at least to some degree, so to waltz in with a *holier-than-thou* attitude isn’t going to get you very far. Be forewarned. Judgmentalism is a very bad habit to begin with and will only cut short what could be a vital songwriting ministry. That doesn’t mean there has to be compromise in your songs, but quite the contrary. Strong Gospel messages are still the goal. I’m really referring to the way you handle yourself in a professional setting where not everyone behind the desk at a publishing house may share your particular bias. Word to the wise, okay?

#### 4 **Subscribe to periodicals, attend workshops and conferences, join [NCS](#), and hang out with other writers and music people**

You're off to a great start by downloading this book. Way to go! Researching your craft is one of the best ways to master it and to get where you want to go with it. Every major profession has organizations that serious professionals belong to for reasons we've mentioned along the way. I imagine the lonely plumber or trim carpenter who joins the Local Union #344 to meet other plumbers and carpenters and to keep up with union developments. Doctors and lawyers have their professional organizations, as do teachers and therapists. Conferences, workshops, and masterclasses are important events that bring knowledge and exposure to current trends in any field, but I maintain that one of the greatest benefits to any of it is a sense of belonging, a sense of "placement" and experiencing the joy of knowing you're not alone in the fight. Being a creative person is a challenge, especially a lonely one.

Whether you join [NCS](#) or not (though I hope you do), it is important that you find places to meet other writers and creative people. Being a church member isn't what I'm talking about, though I hope you have a great church home, too. Had we more space here to explore the thought, history is replete with wonderful examples of creative communities formed for this very reason. Think [Hemingway](#), [Stein](#), and others who formed [cafe cultures](#) in earlier eras. However you slice it, the need to belong is built into our lives, hardwired in our psyches, and must be serviced in order for us to be the most productive writers we can be.

There are a bleak number of periodicals that service the Christian music writing niche. [Worship Leader Magazine](#) has done a great job serving the local church worship leading market and sometimes offering articles on songwriting. These articles are searchable on their website [here](#).

Now that we've been encouraged to examine the current music marketplace, let's think about how to think beyond it. Read on, pilgrim.

# DREAM, THINK, AND PLAN BEYOND THE CURRENT MARKETPLACE

*"There is nothing permanent except change." - Heraclitus*

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I was only about four-years old when the first British invasion of music hit America. Whenever I see those old black and white clips of the screaming, fainting girls swooning over [The Beatles](#) in 1964 on [The Ed Sullivan Show](#), I realize that I've personally witnessed more than one epochal shift in my lifetime. The last one is the wave of modern praise and worship music that I was blessed to be a part of with Integrity Media as a writer, publisher, and producer (see Robb Redman's book [The Great Worship Awakening](#)). There's simply no overstating the vast changes in music and culture that have occurred since the day of [Elvis Presley](#), but one thing is for sure — music and culture will *always* keep changing. As important as it is to understand the current songwriting marketplace, it is equally important to envision what the marketplace will be like in the not-so-distant future. If you are struggling just to understand where it is today, think about competing for attention as it all changes again.

I played racquetball for years with some music industry friends, but I was never good at it. We played almost every morning before work, but I never won a game that I can remember, and my friends must've just tolerated my terrible playing. I just couldn't figure out where that little ball was going to go *next*. I could serve the ball and get a hit or two in, but when it bounced up in the corner or low on the wall and came shooting towards me or away from me, I just couldn't get my mind to tell my body where to run to hit it again. It was a failure to imagine the trajectory of the ball that kept me from being a better player, and, in the same way, a failure to imagine where music is going could keep you from becoming a better writer, as well. So, what to do?

Let's use the worship genre as an example. Without going into the entire history of its development, every churchgoer over thirty-years old knows the revolution of praise and worship and its impact upon local church worship practice. A multi-million dollar industry grew up around it and artists such as [Michael W. Smith](#) have spearheaded its commercial success. What once was a folk movement in the 1960's [Jesus People](#) era matured into an over-produced homogeneity that currently needs another revolution (in my humble opinion). The complaint that "it all sounds the same" is one I rejected for a long time, but even I must admit that much of the current commercialized music in the genre sounds a lot alike. There are bright exceptions, of course, but it appears that few writers and worship leaders are trying to blaze new trails these days.

For instance, I attended a large conference in Nashville this past summer headlined by internationally renowned speakers. One of the main speaker's sons was the worship leader for the week and the budget for the event was large enough to afford all the sound, lights, and media one would expect at an event of this size. The musicians were amazing, the tech crew highly skilled, and all the background singers young and dressed in the predictable hipster gear. I'm fine with all that. But where I became discouraged was in the song content. The beautiful young worship leader had a new CD of his material for sale and his songs were the ones being sung each night. It all looked and sounded amazing, but as each song passed, I looked around and saw clearly that very few in the congregation were singing along. Further, each song sounded just like the last one and very much like everything that is on the radio right now. I could accept that if these songs happened to be good songs, songs that engaged me and the would-be worshipers around me, but they weren't good and they didn't engage many people. In my opinion, failing to get worshipers to worship isn't good worship leading.

As further testament to what I observed, at the end of the preacher's message he spontaneously led an *a cappella* medley of praise choruses from thirty years ago. The atmosphere became *electrified* as the vast majority of the crowd sang gustily from their hearts. People want to sing, they really do. When our worship songs don't engage people, we've failed to be great worship writers and worship leaders. The point is to get people to *sing*, not admire our songs as we stand and sing *for* them. Sadly, that is the state of the current worship marketplace. We're not helping a lot of people engage with God and with each other. So, I want to predict that there will be a backlash on all of this and soon. We've seen a few precursors to this in groups like [Rend Collective](#), but I bet there'll be a lot more backlash even in younger generations. How can we prepare for it?

**“When our worship songs don't engage people, we've failed to be great worship writers and worship leaders.”** [\[Tweet this\]](#)

First of all, regardless of the genre we like to write in the most, researching it fully is the best way to understand where it came from and where its going. Like worship, each genre has its base and a certain trajectory it is following. Whether you like “new country” or not, it’s built on the foundation of classic country and the early western swing music of artists like [Gene Autrey](#) and many others. Having been to [The Grand Ole Opry](#) twice in two months this year, they do a great job presenting an inter-generational show that includes the old, the new, and everything in-between. Just recently we saw [Connie Smith](#), an Opry staple for fifty years now on the same bill with a guitar duo named [Striking Matches](#) whose blazing riffs brought the house down despite the un-country vibe. They were celebrating their fiftieth appearance on the Opry the night we saw them and I applaud the organization to showcase them often. Point is, each genre has a past, present, and future. If we take the time to understand that fact, we have a greater chance at participating in its future. Here are a few ways I suggest to dream, think, and plan beyond the current songwriting marketplace.

## 1 Dare to Dream

Scriptures tell us that “without a vision, the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18). We could just as easily translate that verse as “without a dream, a writer never writes anything anyone wants to hear.” Having the *dream* of writing is as important as writing, if not more so. Without the dream of writing you’ll never write, or at least not write enough to get great at it. Dreams are good for us and come from God to encourage us to keep going in life. When our dreams die, we “perish” in more ways than we know. Dreaming, having a vision for ourselves, isn’t a luxury. It is essential. Another verse related to this idea for me is Hebrews 11:1, “Now faith is assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen.” If we have no hope of becoming a great Christian songwriter, we won’t strive for it and do anything towards that hope. It all starts with a dream.

What would it take for you to dream of becoming a great Christian songwriter? I get inspired when I hear great songs or read great books. The words themselves strike my soul and suddenly my dream of writing words and music that will strike other’s souls fills me. Many of my best songs have been written in response to someone else’s great song, even though mine bears no resemblance whatsoever to the one that inspired me. It’s about the inspiration, a word that means “to be in-spirited” or filled with the Spirit, not about sounding like someone’s song. The other word I love along this thought line is the word *enthusiasm*, which comes from *in-theos* in the Greek, or, to be *God-filled*. To be *enthused* is to be filled with a *God-dream*, or filled with the Spirit. To lack a dream is to lack enthusiasm, spirit, inspiration, and hope. Dream. Above all things, dream.

## 2 Think better thoughts

1 Corinthians 1:30 tells us that Jesus has been “made unto us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.” Paul also said in another place, “But we have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16). Although these are heady concepts, these Scriptures point to a spiritual reality we seldom tap into — we are created to think higher thoughts than we usually think. If we’re to write words that encourage and lift others to think higher thoughts, we have to strive to think higher thoughts first. All great writers do this. It is required of us to think higher thoughts if we’re to inspire higher things in other’s lives. But thinking higher thoughts requires work, a lot of it. It starts with a decision to pursue them, to do the hard work it takes. Thinking better thoughts requires living a better life on all levels spiritually, mentally, and physically. Though we often segment our lives into those categories, all three are so delicately intertwined that sometimes going for a walk is as spiritual as fasting or praying. Living a healthier life mentally and avoiding those things that depress us or pollute our thinking with cynicism and sarcasm is a key to writing healthier songs. Sometimes thinking beyond the current marketplace means putting yourself in a receptive posture to the Spirit of the Lord by taking better care of your life in general. Jesus told the parable of the [Wise Virgins](#) who stayed ready for the Master’s return. Living a “prepared life” means you’re ready for all shifts and changes as a songwriter, too.

## 3 Plan beyond the current marketplace

As odd as it seems, you’re songwriting is a mini-business and you’re the CEO. Every good CEO spends the appropriate percentage of his or her time planning for future conditions and so should you. If you’re serious about becoming a successful songwriter, you must plan the best you can for future market conditions. This starts with understanding the present conditions as we discussed earlier, and doing what you can to predict future conditions such as musical shifts and changes (i.e. the worship genre shifting from over-produced to acoustic-driven). This mindset will help you spot cultural shifts as you do an [iTunes](#) sweep or watch movies and television. As you become sensitive to the possible shifts and changes, you’ll begin to see and hear them and adjust your writing accordingly. Fortunately, the Christian music scene tends to follow a few years behind the general marketplace, so you have a little lag time in which to respond to the shifts. The point is to prepare for upcoming changes that are inevitable and try not to be left behind (no pun intended, though it’s quite appropriate).



Successful songwriting is some blend of skill, philosophy, and what some call “luck,” though the Christian belief about that is called *providence*. The writer’s job is to become sensitive to all the elements required to write and then pray for providence to smile upon us. I’m reminded here of the story golf legend [Gary Player](#) told of an onlooker commenting on how “lucky” he was. His response was, “Well, the harder I practice, the luckier I get.” This is true of us as writers. The more we practice the more chances surface of writing a hit song. It is, in some ways, a numbers game.

Hopefully, as we develop a writer’s mentality and a writer’s lifestyle, we’ll stumble providentially upon our own kind of originality and what people refer to as “style” or “sound.” It’s impossible to mention [Mick Jagger and The Rolling Stones](#) without thinking of a certain rock style, or even someone like [Chris Tomlin](#) without identifying a certain rock worship sound that has some originality to it. But what I want to talk about next is the balance between an *intelligent* originality and just a *wack* kind of originality that misses the point and winds up sidelining your writing career. Read on.

# DEVELOP INTELLIGENT ORIGINALITY

*"Originality is really important."* - Jim Carrey

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There's simply no substitute for *originality* in great Christian songwriting. Given the staggering number of bad sound alike songs in the world (a constant theme for me in this book), the need for originality is at an all-time high. Given that the world is crying out in fierce desperation for the truth we espouse in Christ, another unoriginal and poorly written, watered down, useless song does more to harm the Kingdom than build it. Okay, yes — this is a soapbox issue for me. I am on a one-man crusade to rid the world of bad songs. But how? The only way I know is by helping you think better thoughts about what you're doing, why you're doing it, and how to pursue greater originality in your own songwriting. I just *know* you can do it. I believe in you!

As goes the old saying that "one man's trash is another man's treasure," so goes originality. It comes in all shapes and sizes, innumerable so, with one person's version of it being diametrically opposed to another's version. Think [Lady GaGa](#). All moral judgments aside, she is an iconic pop star who's sold over 128 million records worldwide and has been named as one of the most powerful women in music, among many other awards and worldwide recognition as a groundbreaking artist. But not everyone likes her. The bubble dresses and meat suits are a bit much for some, despite the fact that she's actually an amazing singer as her work with [Tony Bennett](#) attests. Whether you like her or not, Lady GaGa is a terrific illustration of originality that propelled her and her art into the forefront of pop culture, which is no small feat these days. She's one smart girl, but what about us?

In Luke 16, Jesus tells the parable of the shrewd manager. It's one of those hard sayings of Jesus that nice people blink at and can't understand why Jesus would commend the guy for doing something dishonest. If you remember the story, the business owner cornered his manager for wasting his possessions. Knowing he needed to act fast, the manager called in all the people who owed his master money and reduced their debt to pave the way for his own future possibilities. He "cooked" the books. In the story, Jesus, in the voice of the "master," actually *praises* the manager and states, "For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light" (v. 8). He wasn't praising what he did, necessarily, but that he did *something*. He took action. In the book [A Glimpse of Jesus](#), [Brennan Manning](#) quotes theologian [John Shea](#) as saying, "The unjust steward who, hearing he is going to be fired, doctors his master's accounts to secure another job is commended precisely because he acted. The point does not concern morality but apathy. Here is a man who finds himself in a crisis and, instead of wallowing in self-pity, acts resourcefully." Manning, Brennan (2010-10-12). A Glimpse of Jesus (Kindle Locations 946-948). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

Shea's point is mine here, that more of us need to *do something* and do it fast if we hope to impact the world with our songs. Originality is one of those primary tenets of songwriting that cannot be ignored if we hope to be noticed. It is a crowded, noisy world awash in a cacophony of sound that can only get louder and more confusing. Choosing to pursue originality in songwriting is the choice to try to penetrate the noise with the clearer sound of truth. Now, that's a bold statement, but consider the result of not pursuing it. You and your songs will be swallowed up in the vast morass of mediocrity flooding the airwaves, never to be heard or appreciated or touch anyone's heart. That's not a good prospect. But originality must be embraced intelligently. What Gaga did in her field probably wouldn't work for you. Besides, meat suits attract ravenous stray dogs. Better find something else to do. So here are three things I would recommend to begin your pursuit of originality.

## 1 Refuse the status quo

If you play guitar or piano and write songs, do you find yourself playing the same chord progressions over and over? That's the status quo. When you sit at your computer or get out your pen and paper, do you find yourself writing the same kind of words over and over? That's the status quo. When you turn on [iTunes](#) or [Spotify](#) to listen to music, do you listen to the same things over and over? That's the status quo. When you think about what's "acceptable" and "what people would like" do you censor yourself and toss out anything that you judge as "unacceptable"? That's the status quo. Do you only hang out with people who agree with your own political, religious, and social ideas? That's the status quo. Originality, even in small doses, comes only by stepping out of the status quo, if only for a moment. Start with one line, even. Sit down and write some words you wouldn't normally write. Read something you wouldn't normally read. Not something sinful or awful that's bad for your spirit, but something that falls within the boundaries, but still inspires you in a brand new way.

**“Originality, even in small doses, comes only by stepping out of the status quo, if only for a moment.”** [\[Tweet this\]](#)

Here's a slightly different way to look at it. Preachers and Bible teachers I listen to sometimes talk about overcoming difficult or even sinful things in our lives by "walking in the opposite spirit." Say someone is hating on you for something. The only way to truly overcome it, whether they ever stop or not, is for you to choose to walk in the opposing attitude, or spirit, of love for them. If we're going to overcome the prevailing status quo for ourselves, we must dare to do something differently, to walk in the opposite spirit of openness and creativity and exploration. The old adage that "insanity is doing the same thing over and over again while expecting a different result" is so true. If we write the same old way we've always written, we'll get the same old uncreative results.

Start with one line, then branch out from there. Write a love song for your spouse or child. Write a lullaby or a sonnet. Read some [Shakespeare](#) or some [Anne Lamott](#) (*not* that they're equals - ha!). Listen to your records from high school or go for a walk. Just do something differently from your normal routine and see if it doesn't awaken some creativity in your soul. Follow that creativity where it wants to lead you. No reason to be afraid. God is big enough to guide you, even through the fire swamps with [ROUS's](#) (think [Princess Bride](#) here). In fact, while you're at it, let Him out of His box in your life. Just watch how creative *He* is. And with Him, it's never status quo.

## 2 Nurture originality

An article on [Wikihow.com](#) called [How to Be Original](#) had some similar viewpoints that could be worth a look for you. The article reflects many of the things I'm advocating here, but the overall message I'm preaching on every page is to nurture your originality in songwriting. No one else is going to do it. The number one reason writers aren't published is because they never write. The second reason is that, when they do, they write just like everyone else. It is my firm belief that God has something better for you, if you look for it. Everything good in our lives has to be cared for, nurtured, tended to, and paid attention to like children. If neglected, our creativity and originality dries up and becomes ineffective when we try to call on it. I have a triathlete friend who says every time I ask how he does it, "Well, you make room in your life for what you want to do most." If you want to become a great songwriter, start by nurturing originality.

### 3 Remember that “different for different’s sake” isn’t necessarily a good thing

Intelligent originality means that you understand the craft of songwriting well enough to channel your talents into fresh ways of telling the story we love. A [Lady GaGa](#) approach to writing in the Christian world might not be a great thing, at least at face value, depending on where you want to perform your music. Every now and then, a Christian band or artist breaks from the pack like [Jars of Clay](#), [Lenny Kravitz](#), or [U2](#). It is possible to compete on the world stage and be devout believers in Jesus, but you probably won’t do it merely by being a whack oddity. It’ll probably take being an amazing writer, musician, vocalist, and communicator who utilizes originality in a very intelligent way to stand out from the crowd enough to be noticed and appreciated. I contend that GaGa’s a very talented lady. She can really sing and she knows how to be different enough to stand out above others who can sing, too. We can learn from her and adapt originality into our art for God’s glory.

Most artists and writers I’ve known struggle to stay fresh and inspired. In the next section, I want to share with you a few proven tactics for staying creative and plugged into your greatest gifts.

# TAPPING INTO HIDDEN INSPIRATION AND CREATIVITY

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” - Maya Angelou

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I’ve worked with a lot of writers and artists over the years. Almost to the person, each of them has struggled to stay inspired and plugged into their creativity from time to time. Some have had short intervals of feeling uncreative and others have struggled with long writer’s blocks that shut them down completely. I know what this feels like. I didn’t write for almost nine years until just recently when I found hidden inspiration and creativity after going through some trying circumstances in my life. Truth is, people write for many differing reasons. I’ve primarily written from personal experience and catharsis, both positively and negatively (if there is such thing). I’m not sure that I was “blocked,” but I was definitely uninspired. I’m so grateful, even for the trials I’ve suffered, now that I’ve rediscovered my deepest inspiration and creativity to express myself in songs again (see my new album [Beauty Will Save the World](#) in [iTunes](#)). I believe that you can, too. Wherever you find yourself today, there’s still immense inspiration and creativity to be had. You’ve just got to believe it.

Deep feeling makes for deep writing. Whether you’re writing to offer praises to God or to explain a theological concept, you’ll write more convincingly about it if you *believe* it. You may have heard songs written by talented and skilled writers trying to “be religious” and connect with the Christian audience, but something in the song was insincere and failed to hit the heart. Some of the words were the right ones, but there was something missing in the core of the song that kept it from ringing true. Some of these songs are very successful because they hit closely enough to an inspirational sentiment that a large number of people embrace them. Think about [Wind Beneath My Wings](#) (Silbar/Henley) or [You Raise Me Up](#) (Graham/Lovland). These inspirational classics can be attributed in some aspects to God, but not necessarily. I’m not critical of this. Everyone needs inspiration, but not everyone will embrace our Christian source for it. The difference comes when we claim that our songs are “Christian” and therefore need to be backed by Scripture and theological accuracy and balance. This, admittedly, requires much attention and great skill, as well as deep feeling in order to convey biblical truth in an emotionally captivating song.

**“Deep feeling makes for deep writing.”** [\[Tweet this\]](#)



As in the [Maya Angelou](#) quote above and my comments about inspirational songs here, people *want* to feel deeply and will always remember how your song made them feel (or didn't feel). The success of your song depends on how the listener *feels* when hearing it. Leave them flat and they change the channel. This is true when a song comes on the radio or is played and sung in church — people will tune you out faster than you can blink if your song doesn't touch them in their own hearts. That's just the way it is (thank you, [Bruce Hornsby](#)). I mean, think about it. You don't give anyone else's songs a second chance if they don't speak quickly to you, so why should anyone give yours a second listen? Songs are like ads on tv — if you don't hook someone in about four seconds it's all over. People have very little patience for things that don't speak directly to their situation and a song is no different.

[Dale Carnegie](#) wrote in his classic [How to Win Friends and Influence People](#), “Personally I am very fond of strawberries and cream, but I have found that for some strange reason, fish prefer worms. So when I went fishing, I didn't think about what I wanted. I thought about what they wanted. I didn't bait the hook with strawberries and cream. Rather, I dangled a worm or grasshopper in front of the fish and said: ‘Wouldn't you like to have that?’ Why not use the same common sense when fishing for people?” When it comes to writing great Christian songs that connect with worms, I mean *listeners*, we have to think the same way, asking ourselves, “What is it in me that cries out for truth in Jesus? If I believe that every listener has this same God-hunger, how can I most personalize this song to connect with them?” The great psychotherapist [Carl Rogers](#) also said, “What is most personal is most universal.” That is to say, if we feel it, most everyone else feels it, too. If we can tap into our deepest feelings when we write, the chances of connecting to the deepest feelings of others will skyrocket.

This means that the greatest depths of inspiration and creativity are already within you. Why should it not be so? Throughout history, a writer's “muse” was seen to be something extraneous, a force or person other than the writer (see Elizabeth Gilbert's great TED Talk on [“Your Elusive Genius”](#) here for more information). But, for the *Christian* songwriter, the “genius” or the “muse” isn't something on the outside, but *Someone* on the inside; Someone who is none other than Jesus Christ indwelling us by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. That may be the most important line I've written in this whole book. If we could get hold of this concept and practice its reality on a daily basis, more than our songwriting would change. Our relationship with God would take on more joy and freedom. Our relationships with loved ones would deepen and be made whole in every way. Our relationship to the world around us would be marked with compassion and justice on every level, right down to returning the excess change the cashier gave us in the mall when we could've pocketed her oversight. Jesus in our hearts *should* change everything, but how much more our songwriting?

If you're still depending on sunsets alone to inspire you to write about the glory of God, you're missing three or four thousand years of fodder, not to mention His presence in your own heart. People have been writing about this mysterious Presence for millennia, people like [St. John of the Cross](#), [Polycarp](#), [Justin Martyr](#), [Irenaeus](#), [Theresa of Avila](#), and thousands more, not to mention the Apostle Paul and the Gospel writers. What's more, God has inspired thousands of modern day writers to write about His presence, people such as [Brennan Manning](#), [Thomas Merton](#), [Henri Nouwen](#), [Fr. Richard Rohr](#), [Beth Moore](#), and on and on. If we lack inspiration, it's only because we're either spiritually lazy or emotionally disconnected. I immediately want to write almost every time I pick up a book by any of the foregoing and start reading how God warmed their hearts or carried them through troubled times. It's just automatic. When I feel inspired (*in-spirited*), my creativity surges and I just *have* to write. I can't help it.

So, in the end, the Source of true inspiration and creativity is as close as the breath we breathe and the beating of our hearts. He's always there and always ready to inspire us if we'll just look to His presence within. Further, He's inspired countless others through thousands of years to write amazing words that can jump start our writing by causing our creativity to surge when we hear them. Just recently, my pastor read from the writings of one of America's founding fathers, [Pastor John Robinson](#). Robinson was the "sending pastor" of the original group of pilgrims who sailed from Holland to the New World, circa 1620. We were sitting in church listening as he read this paragraph:

We are daily to renew our repentance with our God, especially for our sins known, and generally for our unknown trespasses...[For] sin being taken away by earnest repentance and the pardon thereof from the Lord...great shall be [a man's] security and peace in all dangers, sweet his comforts in all distresses.

When my hook-sensitive brain heard the phrase, “sweet His comforts in all distresses,” an entire lyric unfolded in my mind. I loved that line so much that I jotted into the [Notes](#) app on my iPhone over the next few minutes this lyric, which became entitled *Jesus, Friend of Sinners*.

Jesus, Friend of Sinners

Sweet His comfort in distress  
Pure the passion in His breast  
Kind and gentle, giving rest  
Jesus, friend of sinners

Strong His arms to hold us near  
True His promise in our ears  
Glad our hearts, His presence here  
Jesus, friend of sinners

Friend in joy, Friend in shame  
Friend who sweetly calls my name  
Friend forever, come what may  
Jesus, friend of sinners

Tender mercies in His eyes  
Endless love that never dies  
Boundless grace beyond the skies  
Jesus, friend of sinners

John Chisum  
November 23, 2015  
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Whether anything ever happens with this lyric or not isn't the point. The point is that inspiration hit and I was able to capture an entire lyric in just a few minutes. I know the Source of my inspiration and creativity is Jesus. By being a lifelong student of the Scriptures and by practicing the presence of the Lord every day, writing comes easily. Yes, I've had long seasons of dryness like a lot of people, but I'm thankful that none of us are sentenced to that forever. We can rekindle our inspiration and writing, if we only want to. He's always there inside us wanting to give us great and beautiful gifts with which to help people experience His goodness. And, noticing how something like that phrase makes you feel is a good indication of how it might make others feel. When you hear something that causes hope, joy, love, empathy, or peace well up inside of you in a meaningful way, jot it down and come back to it later to see if it still does.

**“We can rekindle our inspiration and writing,  
if we only want to.”** [\[Tweet this\]](#)

Here are three things that can help keep you inspired and tapped into the True Source of your creativity.

## **1 The great Christian songwriter is a student of the Scriptures**

While not all great Scripture makes for great modern lyrics, Biblical truth is the standard for great Christian songs. If a song reflects something other than great Christian doctrine, it fails the test and should be considered a general market song. The great Christian writer is a lifelong student of the Scriptures and learns the art and craft of weaving the Gospel into his/her songs, even the songs that do not ostensibly appear to be about the Gospel. He or she reflects a Christian worldview in ways that honor God and Biblical faith, in general.

## **2 The great Christian songwriter uses his/her deep relationship with Jesus to tell the truth and never loses sight of the Source of his/her deepest inspiration and creativity**

This songwriter understands that great Christian songwriting demands great relationship and writes from that understanding. Though all writers hit seasons of dryness, this writer refuses to wait for outside inspiration and seeks the internal Presence of Jesus Christ as the True Source of inspiration and creativity. He or she appreciates sunsets and starlit skies, but doesn't wait for clear nights and beachside strolls to become inspired. Rather, this writer learns to listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit and follow Jesus into “greater works” (John 14) of creativity and communicating the Gospel.

### 3 The great Christian songwriter taps into the millennia-deep resources of classic Christian writers and leaders

The great Christian songwriter researches and taps into thousands of years of Christian tradition for inspiring words from which to jump start new songs. He or she learns about the amazing writers of all types in the vast Christian tradition and gleans all they can from them. This writer listens to sermons and pays attention to poetic nuances that could inspire a lyric, even in church. This writer isn't spiritually lazy or emotionally disconnected, but is alive with the endless possibilities that words have when inspired by Jesus and all those whom He has inspired throughout history.

Now that we've walked through seven proven strategies for standing out in a crowded songwriting marketplace by tapping into the creative skills you already have, let's conclude this book with some thoughts on putting these strategies to work for you right now and seeing immediate results in your songwriting. This is gonna be good.

# PUTTING THESE STRATEGIES TO WORK IN YOUR SONGWRITING RIGHT NOW

*"And now we welcome the new year. Full of things that have never been."*

- Rainer Maria Rilke

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As I write these words, we're closing in on January 1, 2016. New Year's Day is inseparably linked with what people call "New Year's resolutions," those often short-lived promises we make to ourselves to lose weight or save money in the new year. Gyms and fitness centers make their entire year's profit on them, I imagine. As well-intentioned as we may be when we make these resolutions, too few of us follow through and make getting skinnier or richer a reality in our lives. By February or sooner, we're back on the sugar and spending everything we have. But it doesn't have to be this way and we don't have to wait until January 1st of any new year to make wonderful and lasting changes happen in our lives. The biggest changes almost always happen subtly, quietly, and with little fanfare, anyway. Here's the truth: you can make large-scale changes in your life in any area if you'll choose to make small changes every day.

While financial windfalls do happen, almost without fail the biggest fortunes have been built a few dollars at a time. Trust fund babies benefit from the fortunes their forefathers built when they came to this country with nothing decades ago. And, while there are "one hit wonders" in the history of music, most of the greatest writers wrote hundreds, if not thousands, of songs before they became known for one particular song and maybe a few more. And, songs are built one line at a time, yay, one *word* at a time. I wish I could snap my fingers and make you a great songwriter, but I can't. Only *you* can choose to take the broad perspective of how much change can happen in your writing over the long haul and then *make it happen* one day at a time. You can begin to see immediate benefits from using these principles, but the greatest change will be when you look back at them one day in awe, having written some amazing songs. So, in conclusion, let's revisit them with another thought or two added for giggles.

**Resist Short Cuts.** Even if you wrote the greatest Christian song of all time *today*, there's still a lengthy process involved in getting it heard by the world. These things don't happen overnight. Any temptation to take a short cut to great writing will most likely yield little result because good things take time to nurture, develop, improve, and become the best version of itself, including us. God uses the writing process to hone our characters as we exercise patience and apply our hearts to His wisdom process. Short cuts reveal a lack of trust and character. Repent.



**Make Writing a Lifestyle, Not a Hobby.** There's nothing wrong with a hobby unless you really want to be great at something like songwriting. Songwriting is one of the most demanding disciplines in the world. It requires talent, education, drive, and a lot of practice to be great at it, not to mention getting the right demonstration recordings and having people in power positions hear it. Hobbyists rarely excel to great heights in songwriting, though some "naturals" can and do excel with seemingly little effort from time to time. How serious are you about this? Are you willing to pay whatever your price is to become a great songwriter? Only you can answer that question and make the shift from hobbyist to a lifestyle songwriter.

**Develop a Healthy Detachment from Your Work.** Art is a tough way to make a living, especially if you attach so much of your self esteem to it that rejection becomes a heavy emotional toll every time someone hates your song. Rejection is reality. You will write many songs before you start writing great songs, so if your worth is tied up with your acceptance and celebration as a writer, you'd better get on meds now because you're going to need them. Not only is the music business full of rejected songs and songwriters, the church itself rarely celebrates its best artists, much less the lesser ones. Be forewarned. A healthy detachment from the work is the only way to survive and thrive as a songwriter. Celebrate each song as it goes by and welcome the next one.

**Understand the Current Songwriting Marketplace.** Few writers will become professionals. It does happen when many elements like originality, talent, the right demonstration recordings, and contacts align. Understanding where music is right now is important and helps direct your efforts. Being lazy about it handicaps your efforts. Doing things like [iTunes](#) sweeps and other music research is the best way to understand the trends and compete within them.

**Dream, Think, and Plan Beyond the Current Songwriting Marketplace.**

Understanding the current marketplace is vital, but so is dreaming and planning beyond it. A music business executive once explained to me that what is current today was avant garde yesterday and will be old news tomorrow. Whatever is fringe and avant garde today will be middle-of-the-road/mainstream tomorrow. If you start acquiring a taste for whatever is fringe today, your chances increase for being mainstream tomorrow. Music has cycles and they become apparent if you look for them.

**Develop Intelligent Originality.** In a world of sound alikes, originality is king. Nurturing intelligent originality is very important to gaining a hearing in the overcrowded marketplace of songs and music. In decorating, there's always a "pop of red" or some other popular color in a room to set it apart, kind of like a little surprise. One decorator I know says that every room should have one surprise element in it that catches the eye. She calls it "a pop of red." Songs are like that — every song should have a "pop of red," some surprise twist of a phrase or chord structure that sets it apart and makes the listener take a little more notice.

**Tapping Hidden Inspiration and Creativity.** In the final analysis, having Jesus as your personal Savior doesn't guarantee that you'll become a great Christian songwriter, but it sure helps. 1 Corinthians 1:30 tells us that Jesus has "become for us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption." We rely on the wisdom of God in Jesus to write songs that can move nations to believe in Him, as well as how to grow to become the believers and worshipers He desires us to be. There are vast supplies of inspiration and creativity in our "hidden" relationship with Him as Paul said in Colossians 3. All of our songwriting hopes and dreams must be tied to His hopes and dreams for us, for we belong to Him. He is inspiration and He is *the* Creator. As Christian songwriters, there is no higher tool or tip or trick to songwriting success. We write because He lives in us and we can't help but tell the world what that's all about.

**“Feel the fear and write anyway.”** [\[Tweet this\]](#)

*So don't wait.* Get out the pen and paper, the iPad, or laptop, and start writing. You have everything you need right now, every ounce of creativity and inspiration in you just waiting to be accessed by faith. Don't be afraid to fail because that's the quickest way to success. Every road to success is paved with false starts and failures. We learn by trying and failing, trying and failing, again and again and again. Fear is a cancer that eats at our souls and the only difference between the successful songwriter and the failing songwriter is the songwriter who will write in spite of fear. Feel the fear and write anyway. Dare to bare your soul, tell your story, write your song. Yes, a million songs have been written, but the world is waiting for yours. Let's get started.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



John Chisum is a pioneer in the Christian music industry and currently serves as Managing Partner of [Nashville Christian Songwriters](#). As a songwriter, arranger, producer, music publisher, and recording artist, he has served alongside some of the world's greatest and best-loved artists such as Bill & Gloria Gaither, Don Moen, Twila Paris, Paul Baloche, and many more. John is an internationally appreciated worship leader and speaker, known for his passion for Jesus, his creativity, and his sense of humor. He has recorded over ten music albums and has had over 400 songs professionally published.

John has also served simultaneously in the local church as a worship leader and pastor for over three decades in an array of churches utilizing a wide range of musical styles. Along with a wealth of valuable experience, John brings a deep knowledge of how to work with bands, orchestras, singers, choirs, and technicians. His easy-going personality allows him to build bridges in difficult situations. His love for people and his strong pastoral skills help everyone he works with feel valued as he encourages them to be and to do their best.

John holds a Masters of Arts (Worship Studies) from Liberty University. He has spoken at dozens of conferences throughout the U.S. and in other countries. He has been a clinician for the Integrity Worship Institute, Worship Leader Magazine's National Worship Leaders Conference, The Gospel Music Association's Academy of Arts, Regent University, and Liberty University. He has written dozens of worship-related articles and blogs, as well as one book entitled [Five Keys to Engaging Worship](#).

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