

Telling Our Stories
(Without Bumming Everyone Out!)
John Chisum

We all have stories.

Our stories make us who we are and form the backdrop of why we do what we do and how we do it. We all want to be unique and recognized for our stories, whether we've been through really awful stuff or have been relatively spared from them.

It's our nature to want to share our stories - it's how God made us because He is communal and shares Himself in community, Father, Son, Spirit. He commissioned the Son part of Himself to change the story people were telling about Him on earth. Jesus said "Yes" to the mission and became the "exact representation of His (God's) being" according to Hebrews 1. Jesus said, "If you've seen Me, you've seen the Father" (John 14:9), so, when we look at Jesus, we see the Father enacting the Kingdom through the Son.

Mission accomplished.

It's so cool.

I talk to dozens of aspiring Christian songwriters each week and all of them want to tell their stories and I completely get it. Some of you have told me that, too, and that's cool. But I feel inspired to coach you a little on how telling our stories can really work in a commercially viable song.

Truth is, no one really wants to hear about your pain. I know, that's awful. Everyone should want to hear and care about the divorce, the near-death experience, the loss of jobs and love and whatever. But they don't. They're all far too caught up in their own pain to care very much about yours.

Rumi, a 13th Century mystic and poet wrote,
"People want you to be happy.
Don't keep serving them your pain!
If you could untie your wings
and free your soul of jealousy,
you and everyone around you
would fly up like doves."

I have my own painful story. I grew up in an abusive situation that led me to serious drug and alcohol abuse as a very young teen, as well as into horrible promiscuity and dangerous activities. I could've died on several occasions from overdoses and car wrecks. I was looking for love, but had no idea what that even was. I was a hellion because of pain. I was self-medicating and just trying to cover it all up.

At eighteen-years old I encountered the truth of Christ and responded, thinking (subconsciously) that it/He was going to magically "fix" everything that was wrong and painful in my life. It/He

didn't. Many problems ensued through the years and I fell in and out of disappointments (with God and people), eventually becoming bitter, angry, and spewing my own version of psychic/emotional pain on everyone around me. It all went back to childhood pain, just triggered by current situations. Maybe you know what I mean.

But, what I discovered was that I cared a lot more about my pain than anyone else.

I eventually got a clue that I wanted to share my pain for my own reasons, not God's, and mostly to be validated in it, especially in my "victim status." There's a big payoff in being a victim. Receiving sympathy for what we've been through is a huge attraction and that's why so many people, practically the whole world, stays in that place. But I've learned something else very important to my songwriting and to my success in all of life. I've learned the difference between merely sharing my pain and using my pain. Let me explain.

Sharing my pain is about garnering sympathy.

Yes, I may think I'm sharing it to encourage and help someone else, but that's not usually the case. "Sharing" means to draw others into the negative energy and space of the bad that happened to me, whatever it was. It sets up a kind of sadness and low-level commiseration that doesn't really help anyone. Yes, there is a time and a place to talk about our pain, such as in recovery groups, where others going through similar issues may find courage in any growth you've experienced in overcoming it, but, the songs many of us want to write about our painful stories aren't geared for those groups, generally. We may still be trying to get over the pain we feel deep inside and we believe, wrongly, that writing songs about it will heal us. Authors think this, too, so we're not alone in this.

But using our pain is a whole different story.

I am a cathartic writer. I really feel what I write and want to write what I feel. The downside of that is, if I'm feeling down and write a "down" song, I'm not highlighting the real answer to the pain and I'm severely limiting the effectiveness of the song. I read a book years ago called "Don't Waste Your Sorrows" ([link below](#)) that talked about letting God use the pain you've been through instead of wasting it. I know that's what each of us are trying to do in our songs. But the rub comes for me when "our stories" are the central focus and not the power of God to heal, deliver, restore. I believe there's a better way to use our pain in our songs than by talking about the pain.

Don't get mad at me. I care deeply about your story and your pain.

But your pain isn't going to heal anyone. It's your testimony of healing and the faith it engenders that's going to heal people. Every Christian song seems to start in the same place. It's darkness, brokenness, hurt, pain, etc. and then a one-line pivot into the "answer" of Jesus. But what if we decided to break OUT of that mold and started our songs from a different perspective? What if we stopped leading out with the pain and actually go POSITIVE to begin with and start a Christian song revolution?

What if we go counter-cultural and get really bold about what the Word says about us, instead of defaulting into the same old story again and again? You see, pain is the universal story. We all feel it, no matter what we have or have not been through. Why not let the pain drive us deeper

into the real Answer and find fresh, new ways of expressing It/Him? You may think I'm splitting hairs and ranting about nothing, but I don't think I am. The Gospel is a declaration of freedom from the pain. The Gospel is real, alive, more powerful than any therapy and substitute we could imagine. Why not go full on into writing about that?

I think the real issue is often that songwriters aren't being resourceful enough.

We all can be lazy writers from time to time and just don't feel like reading, researching, and even writing. There's a saying in the book publishing world that goes, "Everyone wants a bestseller, but no one wants to write one." So true of us songwriters, too. We'd much rather write out of our feelings than do the hard work of digging for great, and I mean great, hooks and lyrics. Misery loves company, so we must make sure that's not our inner motivation when it comes to writing from a place of pain.

What if we set our pain, our "stories," aside for a little while to figure out how to write songs without it? What if we studied time-proven hymns to see why they're still so loved? What if we studied, really studied, the songs that are working all over the world and counted how many are about "sharing pain and our stories" with how many simply find more interesting and catchy ways of proclaiming the Gospel? What if we asked God to open our eyes to see how to rise up out of our pain and learn to use it instead of just share it? I like what Rumi said, "People want you to be happy. Don't keep serving them your pain!"

One more thing.

I've found that the more we're healed from the pain, the less important it is to us. There's a tendency to define ourselves by the pain. To let it go feels like we're letting go of a part of ourselves, but that's not really true. The truest part of us is the "new man" Paul talks about in Ephesians and Colossians. It's "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27b). So, as long as we're feeling the need to "express our pain" in songs, it probably means we need more healing from them. When we finally get some strong healing and freedom from the pain, we can then use it to fuel healing messages for others. That's how it really works.

Healing comes in fits and starts. It's always a progressive thing and sometimes we have setbacks. But, on the whole, the more healed and free we are, the more good we can do with it.

The good isn't in the catharsis, but in the testimony of healing.