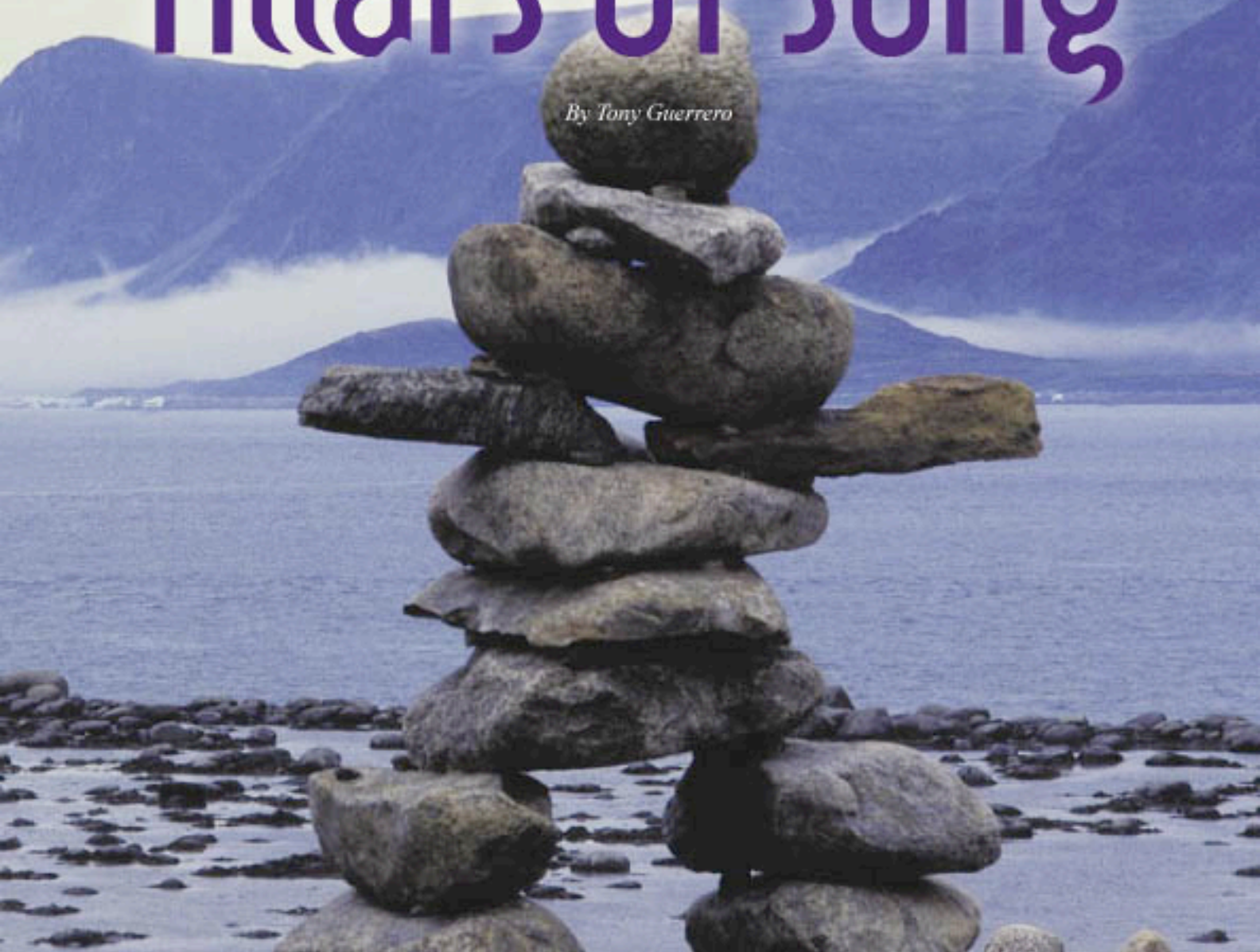




Altars of Song

By Tony Guerrero



WE don't build altars anymore. Sure, we build churches and place altars in them. All-purpose altars, designed to handle all the ritual services and events that make up church life as we know it. But I'm talking about personal altars. Altars created by the work of our hands for the sole purpose of remembering what God has done or what He has promised. Altars built simply to honor and worship God. Stones piled high signifying that we are marking this spot as a place of significance: Here I will pause to worship God. Here I will return to remember God. Here will stand a memorial to God, who moved in a mighty way. I will

build an altar here out of obedience and reverence.

Scripture is ripe with examples of people building altars. Noah built an altar to remember God's deliverance (Gen 8:20), Abram built altars to remember God's promises (Gen 12:7 & 13:18). In Joshua 22 we see an altar built as a reminder to future generations of faith. Saul built an altar offering his repentance for sin (1 Sam 14:35).

Marking God's Work

Altars were built for a variety of reasons. Primarily, they were designed to be memorials to God, to be reminders of the varied ways He would interact with people. They stood to memo-

rialize God's promises, God's power, God's protection, our trust in Him, our commitment to Him, our hope in Him, and for numerous other reasons.

They were built to mark a specific moment in time, but designed to last for future generations, so that all who passed an altar would be reminded that God worked here in some way. They were intended to be places where people could return, long after the event that led to their construction, to remember God and His work.

And they were often given names. Gideon called his altar "The Lord Is Peace" (Judg 6:24). The tribes in Joshua 22 named theirs "A Witness Between Us That The Lord Is God."

Altars for Today

We don't build those kinds of altars anymore. If we did, every church and every Christian home would be crowded with piles of rocks. This pile is to remind me of how God protected my family in a crisis. This pile celebrates God's goodness. This pile is to honor God for the time He provided needed money for a mission trip. This pile celebrates our trust in Him. You get the picture.

In this day and age, perhaps the only example we see of these kinds of altars comes from the songwriter. Most Christian songwriters write songs for the same reasons people built altars—to honor God and celebrate something God has done. We write songs to celebrate His greatness, to thank Him for His protection, to remember His intervention, to offer our trust and obedience, to worship Him. We give our songs names that try to convey the entire reason we wrote the song. And, like an altar, a song can be revisited, time and time again, to remind us of what God did or how He was affecting us at a certain point in time. Like an altar, our songs can last far beyond our own lives, reminding future generations that God was evident in our time.

Songwriters don't need much incentive to write. It is a natural instinct to us, an unstoppable creative release. And Christian writers usually have so many reasons to write, so many examples of God's greatness. Unfortunately, many Christian writers get caught up in writing for the same reasons that secular writers write—to have "hits," to make money, to be popular. It is probably unrealistic to expect that these natural human motives can entirely disappear from the community of Christian songwriters, but perhaps we can be reminded in the process that we need to write songs for the same reasons that people built altars. We need to write songs that will

stand for all time, that sing the praises of who God is, what He has done and what He promises. They are statements of our faith, our trust, our obedience and our praise.

Little Altars Everywhere

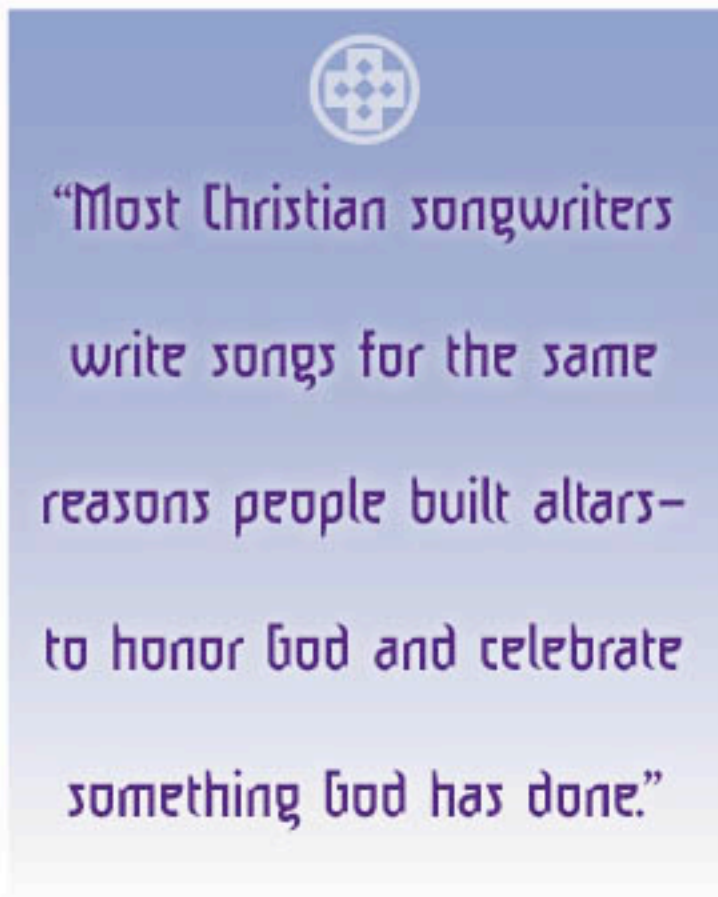
By the time I started writing worship songs, I had been writing secular songs for years and had decent success in the jazz market. But the songs I was writing to be "worship" songs were not really turning any heads. They weren't really coming from any direct interaction with God. They were not products of my heart, but of my head. I knew how to write a song—what formulas worked, where to put the dramatic key change, how to rhyme

a word—but I wasn't really writing in response to God. It wasn't until I went through a major crisis in my life and started writing about God's work in that time and my own response to Him that my songs started to make sense and other people began to "visit my altars." And while our goal should be to honor God with our writing and not to have "successful" worship songs, we certainly cannot expect others to sing our songs if they don't really mean anything. My earlier songs were decently crafted, but it was the songs that I wrote as "altars" to God that really began to get noticed. These were the songs that others would revisit even when I wasn't around.

It has since become my intention as a writer to build altars. I want my songs to stand for something. I want

them to commemorate God. I want future generations to know what God did in my life. I want others to sing my songs, not because they have a nice beat or melody, but because they want to visit an altar built to the Lord.

Songwriters, let's cover the landscape in altars.



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