

Called to Compose

By Jony Guerrero

"Sing to the Lord a new song..."

Psalms 96:1 & 149:1

"... We will write songs to celebrate Your mighty acts!"

Psalm 21:13

"Compose new songs of praise to Him..."

Psalm 33:3

"He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God..."

Psalm 40:3

We are called to compose. That's right – I mean you! Maybe you've never written a song, or you never thought you could. You may not realize that you do have something in common with Darlene Zschech, Paul Baloche, Chris Tomlin, Matt Redman, Tommy Walker and all the great worship songwriters of our day. There was a time when each of them had not yet written their first song and didn't know if they could!

As reflected in Scripture we see that God places value on our creative praises. He wants us to be inventive and write new songs. Another way we know this is that Scripture is loaded with lyrics (the Book of Psalms is just that – a book of lyrics). God went to great lengths to preserve the lyrics because they contain theology that is to remain consistent. But we have no idea how those melodies went, since unfortunately the Psalms didn't come with sheet music. Creating melodies that are culturally relevant to our times is our job. What we sing about never changes, but how we sing about it does.

One could argue that "singing a new song" is the same as singing someone else's new song (i.e. the latest Darlene Zschech hit), but I believe that it's not. Don't get me wrong, it's not that incorporating existing songs doesn't have value – of course they do. But "Shout To The Lord" will always be Darlene Zschech's statement of faith. We can agree with it, we can feel the same, we can express our love of God through it and we can worship with it, but the bottom line is that we are called to make our own statements in addition to agreeing with the statements of others. The act of worship is obviously about our hearts, not the songs themselves or where they came from. But each congregation should be encouraged to have its own musical voice as well – songs that are coming out of its members. Every great movement

in church history has been accompanied by new music, and chances are the reason you've heard about some famous church somewhere has more to do with songs you've heard from there than with the message of its pastor.

I want to encourage you to take that step you've probably always dreamed about and help get you started on composing your own songs, even if you have no musical background or ability.

TIPS ON GETTING STARTED:

1. DEFINING A SONG

Songs are really just melodies and lyrics. Everything else – the chords, harmony and rhythm – is just part of what we use to accompany the melody. That's why you often hear the same song done in so many styles (for example: a reggae version of "Amazing Grace"). In fact, you can only copy-right the melody and lyrics to a song – never the chord progressions or rhythms.

2. CREATING MELODIES

One of God's great gifts to mankind is the ability to sing out loud in our cars and showers with no musical training at all. Here's a great way to begin songwriting: Find a simple one or two sentence verse in the Bible (Psalms is a great book to start with) and just start repeating it out loud. You'll soon notice there is a rhythm to your phrasing. Keep repeating it and start letting notes overtake your speech pattern. You already do this naturally without realizing it. Speaking without musical tone is called "monotone" and is often

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how we impersonate a robot. Just start exaggerating what you are already doing naturally to the verse that you have selected. Randomly start picking words to break away from your natural speech tones by making bigger leaps between tones, or by holding some words out longer than others.

3. CHORDS, HARMONIES, RHYTHMS

Once you've created a melody to work with, you can start finding the chords to play behind it. If you play a polyphonic instrument, such as piano or guitar, and know some chords already, you are already ahead of the game. If not, find a musician in your worship team or circle of friends with more training to collaborate with (see point 4). As you repeat your melody, you'll be amazed at how some chords sound right and others don't. And there will probably be a 'eureka' moment when suddenly you hear the perfect chord being suggested. Our minds often naturally harmonize a song in our heads even though we are unaware.

4. COLLABORATE

Collaboration is a great way to begin writing, especially if you have no musical training. Having a well-trained musician or composer to bounce your ideas off of is incredibly valuable. They can often suggest things you would never have thought of or polish a song to where it sounds like the real deal. If the person you've chosen to collaborate with isn't into your songs, find someone else! Keep showing your work to people until that one person who hears what you are hearing comes to light! You'd be amazed at the rejection stories of the great composers.

5. LYRICS


Writing good lyrics has always been a struggle for me. The best remedy I've discovered is to take what I'm writing about and turn it into a Bible study. For example, if I am inspired to write about God's forgiveness, I'll go to my concordance and start seeing what the Bible says about it. The Bible is a wealth of lyrics and ideas.

6. EXPERIMENT

Once you've started – change it up. Try different chords in different places, try different rhythms or phrasing or even try changing a lyric or two (being ever mindful of its theological soundness). Mold and refine your creation. Rarely is a masterpiece birthed at its inception.

7. PRACTICE

Don't give up! This process may take years to refine, but you can do it! You should also begin carrying a small tape recorder around so you can capture ideas before you forget them. And don't get discouraged.



enjoy the process!

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