

Songwriting Article #11

From some of the commentary I've received through various venues where I talk about songwriting, I think that a review of the basics about the songwriting industry might be appropriate and how they relate to what we do as Christian songwriters.

We've all heard that the biggest no-no of the industry is to write a song that is over 4 minutes long. I still have young songwriters argue that in Christian songwriting, it shouldn't matter how long a song is, that if God gives you the inspiration for it, the song should be as long as the inspiration. Sorry, I'm not buying it.

First of all, the Bible says to"Study to show thyself approved, a workman unto God, rightly dividing the Word of Truth." This applies to every area of our lives that God has given us gifts in. Let's talk about this "rightly dividing" concept. It means weeding out the things that are NOT relevant and true about God's word and concentrating on the things that ARE. The same thing is true of our craft as songwriters. In our case, we need to weed out verses or parts of verses that have no relevance to the actual core idea of the song itself and stick with the things that do. Also, if it is too wordy, there are probably ways to say it better. Keith and I quite often get hung up on a part of a verse that has the idea that we want, but it isn't working with the rhythm of the way we are saying it. We work at it until we either get it, or we have to leave it and come back to it. Sometimes we will use it as it sits and then weeks or months later, it will suddenly dawn on us how to say it better. We never hesitate to make the cut or replacement.

Keith has one friend who has written some beautiful songs and has even won a songwriting contest, but he refuses to cut his songs to 4 minutes or even re-craft them in any way. Quite often if he would just cut a chorus or a key change/chorus repeat, he would have a great song length and a more commercially viable product. He will argue until he's blue in the face that the song needs to be the way he has it. No one has ever recorded his songs and done anything commercially with them. My guess is that they won't until he learns the principle of "rightly dividing".

Let me hasten to say that I am fully aware as a Christian songwriter that my goal is not to win Grammys or songwriting awards or to have a #1 hit on the Billboard charts. My goal is to reach people for Christ with my music. I can do that the best if I have catchy songs that have good hooks and lyrics and that speak to people where they are. BUT, since we know that the audience we are trying to reach most likely listens to secular music, we have to have product that is as good as and/or better than what they are currently listening to. Verse, Chorus, Verse, Chorus, Bridge, Chorus in less than 4 minutes has been around a LONG time kids and you probably aren't going to get rid of it any time soon. Well then, why not learn to capitalize on it?

Your "assignment" for this month is to take a look at some of your longer songs and see if they can be reworked into a more commercial format. Keep in mind that too short can also be a problem, but not nearly as big a problem as too long. Many times a 2 ½ minute song is just what a program director is looking for to fill in a spot on a show that just needs a little more music. We'll talk about weeding words in our songs next time, but I thought this was a good way to start. If you want to submit stuff for comment, send it to clayh@kcchmusic.biz or keith@keithcaldwell.biz. Until next time, keep writing!