

## Leading the Way with a Song

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Have you ever thought about the powerful influence a song can have? Have you ever had a song really motivate you or emotionally move you to some sort of action or response? The truth is, music has an amazing ability to touch us emotionally. And music, married to the right lyrics, can be a powerful tool of motivation and change in the lives of individuals, churches and whole societies.

Take a song like John Lennon's "Imagine". It's such a simple song musically. The keyboard part is something that any non-keyboardist could learn to play in a very short time. The vocal can't be considered exactly beautiful or technical – mostly stylistic. But the song has a very memorable and sing-able melody tied to simple words that contain a revolutionary message. Now, I really don't like that song because of what it has to say. In fact, it's so well written and familiar that I hate to hear it, because the lyrics, "...imagine there's no heaven...it's easy if you try...no hell below us...only earth and sky...", get stuck in my head and I can find myself humming this very anti-Christian song. But think of how this simple song, with an atheistic answer to bringing peace on earth, has become the motivating anthem for countless people around the world! It's almost frightening how much power one song can have!

Now think about the hip-hop culture. Here, you can't point to a single song as a primary influencer, but here is a whole musical form based heavily upon lyrics and rhythm. Sadly, the prime message coming out of hip-hop is hedonism, anger and violence. But this music has had the power to both reflect and shape the values of a whole generation – across racial lines. What a powerful tool music can be!

So if you're a Christian songwriter, how are you using that power? I think that many times we find ourselves writing nice songs, but not necessarily "influencing" songs. As a songwriter and former Worship Pastor and now leader of a ministry, I feel a great call to "pastor" and influence those who both sing and listen to my songs. I want to not only write songs with content that the listener and singer can agree with and sing along with, but I want to write lyrics that will, hopefully, influence them to go to another place spiritually than where they're already at.

While I was a worship pastor at a mega-church for 11 years, I really had a sense of the general spiritual climate of our congregation. Hearing the pastor speak in several services each weekend and interacting with congregants throughout the week, gave me a sense of where we were at as a congregation and what we should be singing about. There were times when we really needed songs of repentance. There were times when we needed songs that went beyond "I praise you" to "I submit to Your word that says...". The challenge in writing, was and is, to try to write those type of messages in a relevant, poetic and sing-able way – with music that can be married well to the lyric. In that context I wrote about submission in songs like "We choose to Bow" – acknowledging that worship is a choice we need to make in all circumstances. When we were in a series about sexual purity, I wrote a songs like "Your Ways are Right" and "May I Follow You". And in my most popular song "It is Good", I wrote a bridge that asks questions

like “why give Him praise?” and “Is it always easy” so that those singing we be encouraged to press in to worship even when life is very difficult.

For the past 11 years, as I’ve led Heart of the City Ministries with the multi-racial Heart of the City Worship Band, one of our key purposes is to bring unity to the Church across racial lines. Lyrically, I’ve tried to bring teaching on unity to the context of worship with songs that are prayers like “For Your Church” and “Remind Us” or songs of declaration like “We Can Do Together” and “What We Really Need.” But one of the ways that I lead the way in songs is to write in culturally eclectic styles. So even when I’m using lyrical content that is strictly praise and worship oriented, I’m using diverse styles that are stretching the listeners and singers to break down musical prejudices and sub-cultures and to become accustomed to and embrace other musical forms. In doing so, we’ve influenced thousands of people to listen to, worship with and embrace Black Gospel, Reggae, Latino, Native American and many other styles of music who had only worshipped with hymns or pop “white” worship music in the past. So in that context I’m using the actual style of music to teach and influence as well.

So as you write your next song, think about what music and lyrics your song will need to highly influence those who listen to and sing that song in the future. What does the Church need to hear? What does the Church need to sing? “Imagine” Christian worship music bringing about significant change in the lives of believers and the world around them...it’s easy if you try.