

IS THIS MY STORY? IS THIS MY SONG?:
AN ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP THROUGH SONG STORIES
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Abstract

Many who sing Contemporary Worship songs hold to a variety of assumptions regarding the compositional process. A composite picture of such assumptions could portray songwriting as always done alone in pensive moments of meditation with God, perhaps in response to extraordinary life circumstances. Is this portrait of Contemporary Worship composition an accurate or misguided assumption?

Answers arise through an analysis of song stories, a “genre” of literature that emerges alongside the surge of Contemporary Worship compositions in the 1970s and 1980s. Though multiple sources exist for a proper analysis of song stories, this study examines the ninety-seven song stories published in *Worship Leader* from 1996–2016. Each song story in *Worship Leader* upholds a similar approach—primary interviews with a composer are packaged into brief narratives with ancillary details. This paper analyzes all ninety-seven song stories by comparing the stereotype of the compositional process as a pious, intimate, and divine “story” with the actual reality of the compositional process as revealed through the composer’s testimony. When juxtaposed, the statistics mined from the *Worship Leader* song stories construct a different picture of the songwriting process than what popular stereotypes suggest.

This study utilizes statistics and quantitative analysis, following a method similar to the scholarship of Contemporary Worship historian Lester Ruth. The implications of my own quantitative analysis interact with other scholarly analyses of Contemporary Worship music, including those conducted by Bryan D. Spinks and Robb Redman. Additionally, the juxtaposition of compositional stereotypes and the *Worship Leader* data becomes more apparent by considering the works of Joseph Campbell and James K. A. Smith to explain the nature of story as a genre.

Perhaps most notably, this study seeks to ground expectations or assumptions about Christian songwriting in verifiable data, and the research from songwriter interviews challenges anecdotal assumptions on at least five points. First, co-writing and collaboration are increasingly more common than an individual approach to songwriting. Second, not every creative moment is intimate and organic, as evidenced by the institutionalization of compositional practices in Contemporary Worship music. Third, Christian songwriting involves more human initiative and ongoing labor than many anecdotes suggest. Fourth, roughly half of the songwriters surveyed testify to instantaneous or extemporaneous creativity. And, fifth, the circumstantial settings for song stories are more ordinary than extraordinary. One way of reconciling such conclusions is to highlight a prevalent tension in Contemporary Worship—and perhaps Evangelicalism at large—between the aspirational and the actual.

Questions for Discussion

1. What questions remain unanswered? Or, where is the study incomplete?
 - For example, it might be wise to trace the denominational/tradition backgrounds of the songwriters?
2. The project currently lacks focus. What approach might be most fruitful?
 - An encouraging word for songwriters?
 - A theological analysis of compositional practices?
 - Should I use this study to consider the theology of evangelical Christians, especially those producing and consuming Contemporary Worship music?
3. I would like to pursue publication, in some form, but what type of publication might be best?
 - The original paper was roughly 10,000 words. I condensed it to 3,000 for a conference paper, but that felt a little limiting.

Trends Regarding Divine Authorship in Composition

The language and description of divine activity in Song Story interviews is rarely consistent. After proper reflection on the variety of responses across ninety-seven song stories in *Worship Leader*, four¹ distinct categories emerge to describe God's role in the composition process, representing a full spectrum of possibilities for cooperation between the human and the divine.

On one end of the spectrum, the first category of compositions can be classified as *God-given*. Songs of this type give God an active and direct part in the songwriting process while minimizing the work of the human agent. As the author of "He Has Made Me Glad" explains, "God would give me the melody to every word. I don't know a note of music or how to play any instrument!"² Songwriters in this category typically speak of the composition as a gift from God. Describing "All Hail King Jesus," composer Dave Moody recounts: "I suddenly realized that the Lord had given me a new song."³ Only twelve percent (12%) of compositions belong in this category.⁴

The second category along the spectrum can be labeled *collaborative*. Here, both the divine and human agents play active roles. As Robin Mark recounts concerning "Days of Elijah": "I believe I wrote what God was telling me to write"⁵ Notice here the dual emphasis on God's direct voice but also the corresponding work of the human agent in writing. Marie

¹ A fifth category could be ten songs (10%) that do not include a direct interview with the composer. As such, these ten songs do not provide sufficient evidence to determine God's role in the composition process. Eight of the songs in this category constitute Public Domain hymns, and the other two are songs not registered with CCLI and seldom sung in worship services.

² Phil Christensen, "Song Story: Leona Von Brethorst's 'He Has Made Me Glad,'" *Worship Leader* 6, no. 4 (1997): 21.

³ Phil Christensen, "Song Stories: 'All Hail King Jesus' by Dave Moody," *Worship Leader* 5, no. 5 (1996): 22. Also, the human composer commonly describes his or her role as simple or insignificant by comparison. Twila Paris explains, "I didn't feel like I wrote 'Lamb of God.' I felt like I just happened to be the one that was having my quiet time at the piano when it was the moment for that song to arrive." Phil Christensen, "Song Stories: Twila Paris' 'Lamb of God,'" *Worship Leader* 9, no. 4 (2000): 18.

⁴ More specifically, ten of the ninety-seven entries (10%) represent this category, which constitutes roughly twelve percent (12%) of the eighty-seven songs that speak to the composition process.

⁵ Robin Mark, "Song Story: 'Days of Elijah' by Robin Mark," *Worship Leader* 16, no. 1 (2007): 44.

Barnett accounts for a similar process: “I began singing, ‘This is the air I breathe’ and the rest of the song flowed by the Holy Spirit.”⁶ Seventeen percent (17%) of entries fit this description.⁷

In a third category of entries, the composer collaborates with God exclusively through the Bible.⁸ Such songs can be considered *inspired*. Karen Lafferty’s “Seek Ye First” originated while contemplating Matt 6:33.⁹ Henry Smith’s “Give Thanks” came after hearing his pastor quote 2 Cor 8:9.¹⁰ Brian Doerksen composed “Come Now Is The Time to Worship” after a prayer walk and reflection upon a passage in Isaiah.¹¹ Twenty-nine percent (29%) of entries belong in this category.¹²

A final category of *human-wrought* songs do *not* mention God’s involvement, nor do they insinuate that Christian Scripture inspired the song. Reuben Morgan’s “My Redeemer Lives” fits this classification when he espouses: “I cry out to God for songs and I work hard at the songwriting craft.”¹³ Mark Altrogge shares a similar experience regarding “I Stand in Awe”: “I remember working on this song for quite a while before it finally clicked.”¹⁴ Forty-three percent (43%) of songs fit this description, making it the largest of the four categories.¹⁵

⁶ Angelica Del Vasto, “Song Stories: Marie Barnett’s ‘Breathe,’” *Worship Leader* 11, no. 4 (2002): 18.

⁷ Fifteen such songs constitute roughly seventeen percent (17%) of the eighty-seven songs in the available data, while representing fifteen percent (15%) of the ninety-seven total entries.

⁸ For research purposes, each song could only satisfy one category. Thus, the songs in this category do not constitute every instance of a song inspired by Christian Scripture. If God played a more direct role in composition, the song belongs in that respective category. Songs in this category, then, contain no reference to God’s direct activity other than Christian Scriptures speaking as inspiration.

⁹ “I was thinking about the verse [i.e. Matt 6:33] and realized the melody fit.” Phil Christensen, “Song Stories: Karen Lafferty’s ‘Seek Ye First,’” *Worship Leader* 6, no. 6 (1997): 24.

¹⁰ “And I remember my pastor quoting II Corinthians 8:9” Phil Christensen, “Song Stories: Henry Smith’s ‘Give Thanks,’” *Worship Leader* 8, no. 1 (1999): 22.

¹¹ “Doerksen cites Isaiah 45:22, 23 as scriptural inspiration for this song.” Angelica Del Vasto, “Song Stories: ‘Come Now Is The Time To Worship,’” *Worship Leader* 10, no. 6 (2001): 18.

¹² More specifically, twenty-five of the ninety-seven entries (26%) fit this classification, which comprise twenty-nine percent (29%) of the eighty-seven songs with available data.

¹³ Cari Jenkins, “Song Stories: Reuben Morgan’s ‘My Redeemer Lives,’” *Worship Leader* 10, no. 4 (2001): 19.

¹⁴ Phil Christensen, “Song Stories: Mark Altrogge’s ‘I Stand in Awe,’” *Worship Leader* 8, no. 6 (1999): 17.

¹⁵ More specifically, Thirty-seven song stories fit this description, making it the largest category represented in the Song Story series. Such songs constitute forty-three percent (43%) of the eighty-seven with available composition data and thirty-eight percent (38%) of all ninety-seven song stories.

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