

Writing in the Margins

By Jonathan Green

The mystery of songwriting

Songwriting is a mysterious experience: at times the whole process seems pretty simple and on rare occasions even effortless. More frequently the creation of a song is an altogether more complex and subtle activity as we try to blend words, rhythms and melodies into a unified whole. The craft of songwriting can fill us with wonder and awe as we watch a song develop over weeks, months and even years. It is humbling when you finally stop tweaking it and play the creation to others and wonder why you were fortunate enough to be a conduit for something that moves and even has the potential to change another person. On the other hand, at other times, you play someone a song and the reaction is quite the opposite and you know that it might be time to rewrite.

I consider writing songs for the church and the wider world to be a sacred activity. Therefore, the process deserves and most certainly requires times set aside to engage meaningfully and wholly in the experience — to be present to the song as the song presents itself to us requires patience and time.

In this first article I want to explore the first step in the writing process — creating the space and the right conditions to receive songs into our lives. Of course, if you write poetry or plays or sermons or paint and sculpt, then many of these principles apply!

s p a c e

One thing that I have come to believe is that if we are going to write well, if at all, then we need to create a context for songwriting. Not only do we need to be rooted in a community where we can draw inspiration and meaning from, but we also need to create margins in our lives. S p a c e s between the limits of our activities and the times we spend crafting a melody, harmony or lyric.

I don't know if you have ever tried to read something that has no margins, but I think you will agree that it is rather difficult. Margins make web sites easier to read, books nicer to read and of course makes reading texts quicker too, as your eye has to work less to follow the words. As you can appreciate, margins help us to interpret a paragraph and therefore helps us to understand it better. Spaces are really important for the reader.

And when it comes to life it is exactly the same. Spaces or margins around the activities of our daily lives allows our minds to grasp life as it happens... to process conversations and interactions — to understand and perceive.

What is margin? Dr Richard Swenson, in his book *Margin* says that it is 'Room to breathe. Freedom to think. Permission to heal. Our relationships are being starved to death by velocity.'¹

So creating margin helps to counter the dis-ease we often feel with overload and the sheer breathless pace of life in the 21st Century. Bill Gates famously quipped that 'the 21st century will be about velocity: the speed of business and the speed of change'.² Creating margins or healthy spaces in each area of our daily lives helps us to experience and appreciate the individual moments as they happen. It follows then, that creating margin helps the meanings of our experiences to sink in, to be better appreciated and can eventually find an expression in songs and other art forms.

I love what the prolific song writer Matt Redman says; 'I want God to write a song in me before I even write it on paper.' So the songs are written in us, as we live through our experiences, and then the songs filter through us over time. In a way, although I don't keep a diary, the songs I have written tell a story. Art is a journal and you can read something of the story of the songwriter by paying attention to the songs he or she is writing!

A lenten wilderness

The season of Lent is like a "holy margin" in the Christian calendar where we hypothetically cease from over consumption and create spaces to listen, observe and change. The 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness shows us how Jesus valued the margins. In fact, we are told that the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness.

Wilderness was a time of reflection and drawing away for Jesus, it was also a time when testing came in the form of temptation. The wilderness is characteristically a place of struggle as we work through various conflicting thoughts and emotions... and whilst physically weakened the Devil came and personally tempted Jesus with a quick pathway to power and success. The equivalent of writing a hit record that goes platinum in multiple countries for 22 weeks £££££

We know relatively few details about what else happened in the wilderness but we can deduce that patterns were laid down during this time because retreating to lonely places became a regular habit for Jesus that sustained him throughout his entire ministry.

¹ For more on this timely idea see the excellent book, *Margin: How to Create the Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves You Need* by Dr Richard A. Swenson, NavPress Publishing Group, 1995.

² Bill Gates, *Business @ the Speed of Thought: Using a Digital Nervous System*, Grand Central Publishing, 1999
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The continual flow of input and output

There is a lovely pattern to Jesus' life of input and output, or, put another way, activity and renewal. There is a story told in the Gospel of Luke of activity and renewal. In Luke's gospel we read:

"While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" And immediately the leprosy left him. Then Jesus ordered him, "Don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." Luke 5. 12-16 (NIV)

It is not the first time that Jesus withdrew from the demands of the crowds. It happened in the previous chapter too in Luke 4:38-44. Other people didn't dictate Jesus' agenda, he responded to the Father's prompting and rested as he needed too. I want to suggest that if Jesus, the Son of Man — the image of what it means to be 'fully human' — needed to withdraw to lonely places and often... then it might be that we need to consider a similar pattern if we are going to be effective. I also want to suggest that creatives may need to go there even more often!

This can happen in many different ways and different personality types will probably approach this discipline in different ways too, but even for the 'A type' personality or the extreme extrovert, getting away to commune with God the Father regularly will lead to good things. Taking time to explore our interior world, though extremely painful at times, will help us to live more fully and freely and may even lead to a song or two.

I recently returned from a week's retreat on the Island of Lindisfarne with the community of Aidan and Hilda. Lindisfarne is often called a 'thin place' and perhaps one of the reasons why it is described in such a way has to do with its isolation, beauty and stillness (apart from the wind) and the genuine lack of distraction.

My time there wasn't a time of fervent songwriting. In fact, although I did play a few of my songs for the community during devotions, I didn't go there for that reason. In another sense, if I call myself a songwriter then the process is a continual one. As Matt Redman said, 'the song is being written in me.' The things I take in, the things I pay attention to, the notes I write in the margins of my note books... these are where the various fragments of songs come from. This is an important part of the creative process and it is part of learning to dive into the depths of creativity rather than skimming the surface.

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I don't know about you, but songs rarely come when I schedule time in my diary to write. In fact, I have never made a space in my diary to write, precisely because it's not the way I go about it. Songs usually come at the most illogical times; in the shower; whilst washing up; in the cinema; on a crowded train; in the middle of a day long board meeting (yes, one of my favourite songs came to me almost in entirety during the afternoon session of a day long meeting and yes I did excuse myself for a moment whilst I sang into my phone). Some of the best things we write, some of the most important ideas we can have are written in the margins — of books, articles, diaries, meeting minutes, in the margins of our lives! They can come at any time, so be ready. Song writing is an attitude and a state of receptivity

An attitude and a state of receptivity

What flows out of us as songwriters and creatives in all of life is directly related to what we input, the things we pay attention to. Being a songwriter means that we learn to be receptive to the world around us, to pay attention to the things others say, to our own thoughts, to God's word to us, to the BIG things and the little things, near to the surface and over time deep deep within us. To record and write down the ideas that come to us, however banal or off the wall is the discipline of the song writer.

Sometimes, it is okay to go chasing an idea, but in my experience, the best songs, the ones that others connect with are received in a moment and the moment can come at any time. It is the inspiration of the song, its impetus, but it is not the end. On only three occasions has a song nearly come to me as a whole, they are the exception in my own experience. Usually, the journey from that moment of inspiration to the final version (if such a thing exists) can take months of exploration and rewriting... and rewriting... and rewriting. As one of our college lecturers, Conrad used to say, 'the best writing is rewriting'. And, sometimes, its not!

You shouldn't hurry the song

Which brings me nicely to my last observation.

The song writer should not be in a hurry!

Songwriting is not a race. It is a craft and it takes time, not only to learn how to use the tools but to refine and rewrite and exhibit. For the songwriter, exhibiting is letting go of the song and letting others experience it in different ways as they sing them in every conceivable way imaginable and so your song continues to evolve.

This is relevant!

I wrote much of this article on the train back from a retreat on the Holy Island, and towards the end of my journey I felt that it was all very idealistic and over the top. Then I walked through Kings Cross Station in rush hour and saw the effects of 'marginless living.' The anguish on people's faces. Hardly a smile and so little laughter... hardly the conditions for creativity. Yet, at a point during 2008, more people now live in an urban context than do not. That is over 3 billion people! The rush of urban living can crowd out the sounds that we might hear if we just had the space and the time to listen. Therefore, I make no apologies for what I have written and instead hold it out as a challenge as one who struggles with the push and pull of being a church planter and pastor in the heat of the city and as someone who is also called to write songs for the church and the world.

I do hope that you find some of those margins soon and that many good things will flow from that place!



Jonathan Green describes himself as a 'songwriter trapped in a church planter's body' and has always struggled to write in the third person! This is the first edition of 'God Talk' which is a space to speak well about God and how our experience of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit impinges upon everything that we are and do and say.

These articles are free to download and read but do ask nicely if you want to use it in part or in full in another publication.

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Jonathan standing on the frozen Baltic Sea during a recent trip to Umeå, Sweden.