

Song Concept

Introduction

Concept is a crucial aspect of song writing. It provides focus, direction, cohesion and clarity. Without it our songs meander through forests of thought and feeling, often getting lost or bogged down along the way. So what makes for a strong song concept?

One Thing

Every song needs a single, simple central idea – one thing – that can be summarised in a few words or a short sentence. This is the song’s concept, vision, or theme. It might be an emotion, a thought, the message of a story, an opinion, or a particular slant/angle on something. It is like the seed or DNA of the song that everything else grows from and is determined by.

Whatever its exact nature, if that “one thing” has something universal about it, if it can be understood by or strikes a common chord with many people, then the whole song will resonate strongly with listeners. This is one of the skills involved in great song writing: being able to pivot from the personal (writing the song in such a way that it is meaningful to you) to the public (writing the song so that it becomes engaging and meaningful for others).

Screws vs. Nails¹

We can look at this “one thing” as a screw that we screw in, following its thread, rather than a nail that we hammer in. Having one message or concept doesn’t mean that we have to say the same thing in exactly the same way throughout the song; we can still progress and go on a journey with our central theme or vision. For example, we could tell a story that encapsulates the message, we could move through time with it (past/present/future, or before/after), or we could use contrast or highlight different aspects of it (e.g. with/without, internal/external).

Writing From & To Concept

As you write and edit your song you can use your song concept as a “lens” through which to examine your work. Ask yourself, “Does this line/title/melody support my song concept? Does it carry and contribute to it in some way, or is it distracting from it?”

Title

Our song’s “one thing” is closely connected its title. A good, hooky title is unusual, memorable, and intriguing rather than generic, clichéd and uninteresting, and aims to encapsulate the song concept with artistic skill, efficiency, and beauty. Usually the title appears in a strategic place in the song (often the first or last line of the verses in A-based forms, or the first line of the chorus in Verse-Chorus forms), and is repeated often enough (but not too much!) – or with such effect – that the listener is able to determine the title just by hearing the song. It is always worth asking yourself, “Is this the best choice of title or is there something better?”

¹ Thanks to Andy Smith for this illustration, taken from his Preaching Training course 2019-20.