



SONGWRITING
THE JOURNEY OF A SONG

THE WORSHIP SERIES INSTRUCTIONAL DVD
with **PAUL BALOCHE**

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Introduction

If you've picked up this DVD, you obviously are a songwriter or strive to be one. It is my hope that you will take what I've learned throughout my writing career and make it your own. I hope to inspire and encourage you in your own songwriting journey.

*My heart overflows with a good theme; I address my verses to the King;
My tongue is the pen of a ready writer." Ps. 45:1*

Lifestyle

Songwriting is not something that you can do every now and again. Great songs do not come out of a once a week hobby. In order to write great songs, and become an expert at songwriting, you have to make songwriting your lifestyle. It is more than sitting down with your guitar or piano in the evenings to try out new chords or wrack your brain for clever lyrical ideas. Yes, this is a part of the process, but the songwriting process starts with the beginning of your day—in the very things that are routine for you.

Making songwriting your lifestyle means looking at life and the world around you through a different lens. Everything can be inspiration. From the way the morning light shines through your bedroom window, to the conversations you have with family, friends, and strangers—these are all opportunities to tap into your creative intuition.

Maybe you're watching this DVD first thing in the morning. Maybe you've had a long day at work and are just now settling down in your living room for a relaxing evening. Either way:

- What inspiration did you see today?

- What did you note about your surroundings?

- Did you witness examples of human emotion in yourself or others today?

Grab a pen. Check the time. In ten minutes, capture your day so far. Maybe this will only take a minute or two, but list it all out on the next page:

- What does your list look like?
- Is it a play by play of your actions?
- The things you accomplished?

Let's take it a layer deeper. Next to each item on your list, write down your corresponding emotion or feeling. Every action is packed with emotion - even if it is lack of emotion. There is a feeling to our actions throughout the day. There is an emotion or feeling attached to how we respond to the outside world and to other people. Begin to tap into these emotions.

One way to do this is to try looking at the world with child-like eyes. Think about it for a moment. If you have kids, you'll know what it means to see seemingly everyday occurrences or situations with wonder. These are the eyes you need to cultivate in order to be successful in your songwriting. If music is anything, it's emotional.

Let's take your list again. Along with the items you original wrote down about your day and the corresponding emotions, write down what this would look like through a child's eyes.

- What caught your young eyes?

- Does your child's mind note aspects from your day you neglected to list in the first place?

- Did your list expand, change, become more colorful?

Tuning in to your surroundings is a crucial first step to making songwriting a lifestyle.

Inspiration

Childlike inspiration is the foundation for songwriting. Tapping into this mentality of constant wonder and acceptance, observation and learning will cause you to notice the beautiful, sometimes blatantly obvious, details, feelings, and emotions of life.

This childlike mentality is not concerned with the act of songwriting. It is not focused on getting a record deal or writing the next nation-sweeping worship song.

The best songs, the ones that touch people on a very real level, the ones that move you, the ones that give voice to the cries of your heart, the ones that feel bigger than life...these songs are not written from a state of career ambition.

These are the songs that come from an authentic, honest heart looking through a childlike lens at the world and at the self. They come from someone who seeks connection with God every day, someone who pours their heart out in prayer, someone who is not afraid to experience, share, or show their emotions in the presence of our Lord.

It's not about writing a song; it's about trying to sing a prayer that's authentic. That's where the best worship songs come from.

- What have you prayed recently?

- Where was your heart?

- What was the feeling behind it?

- The subject?

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- Did you write the prayer down?

Maybe you're the kind of person who quietly talks to God while driving to work or the grocery store. Maybe you're the type to silently open your heart to God in an act of prayer. Either way, take time to write these prayers down. Take some time to attempt writing out the atmosphere of your heart. If it is the stuff of prayers, it is the stuff of songs. In the end, our songs are our prayers. They are a physical performance of the state and atmosphere of our hearts.

Tune your antenna to pick up on the subtle prayers of the life surrounding you.

- What prayers, thoughts, or emotions come from the sermon you heard recently?

Take this as a homework assignment. Next time you're sitting listening to someone teach or preach, write a song about what you're hearing. This is a good practice for capturing your life and experiences into song. You may never do anything with the song you quickly wrote, but it's an exercise that could facilitate a great song later. It will at least be an exercise that makes you more in the mindset and practice of writing songs.

Not every song you write or finish will be a song you will perform or even publish. It's all part of the process. I promise you, every great songwriter today has hundreds of songs no one has heard. Not every work has to be a masterpiece. If you're walking into the process of songwriting with the goal of getting your song published, you will quickly get nowhere. Let your aim be to glorify God and encourage the body of Christ through song.

Sing your prayers

The songwriting of your everyday life is to capture the moments of the day, the experiences of life, and the attitude of your spirit. When in this mindset, there are no wasted words, chords, or ideas.

Prayer is such an integral part of connecting with God, and in turn, creating great song ideas. I encourage you to spend time throughout your day praying. Embrace the idea of unceasing prayer.

Also embrace the idea of singing your prayers.

- You can sing to the radio.
- You can sing in the shower.
- Sing your prayers.

No one is listening but God and yourself. I guarantee God is not criticizing your performance, and neither should you. Have you been in those moments where you pray in a few words or sentences over and over to God in fervent desperation or intention? Sing them. Express them in song, in a resounding chorus, in a melody that expresses the attitude of your heart. You just might end up praying a song that coincides with the prayers of others. The great worship songs are those that sing the human heart condition and the prayers of others. Together as a community, those prayers are lifted above.

Pay attention to the prayers of others. What are they saying that rings true in your own heart? How are others responding to those prayers? Are they responding in kind? Is this a universal heart song? Take those words, take those prayers, write them down, pray over the prayers of others, and see what potential songs are in them.

Scripture is another inspirational tool for songwriting. Scripture is one very tangible connection we have to God. These are His words. These are His people and His relationship with us as his creation.

Use your spiritual imagination with what you read in Scripture. Envision the heart and mind state of the author of any particular part of Scripture. Envision what the words are describing about God. Envision the Lord in all of His glory in each and every situation in the Scripture you read. Be creative. We serve a creative God. Scripture is creative. Be creative with your experience with Scripture.

I encourage you to open your Bible to one of your favorite verses. Whether this be in Psalms, Genesis, Or one of the gospels, take a moment to write the scene of God.

- What is His demeanor?

- His expression?

- His heart toward His people?

Explore this image of God. Envisioning the Lord in Scripture is one way to capture different facets of God - different ways to describe the One we serve.

Part of this connection with God is spending time in worship. Yes, sing your own prayers to God, but also worship to your favorite songs, your favorite writers. In your own life, make time for bringing God in through song. It's this connection and heart that will feed your own creativity and authenticity with songwriting.

When you're able, attend other worship gatherings as well. You might be on the worship band at your church, so take some time to attend another worship gathering in your community. Be an observer instead of a leader.

- How has the picture changed?

- What do you notice that you did not before?

- What is the atmosphere of the gathering?

- What collective prayers are called out?

Participate, observe, document. Write down the prayers of these worshipers. You're not intruding—you're capturing the hearts of God's people.

Let's take a moment to come back to this very important point: take your focus away from a CD or performance ambitions. This focus will likely not ever produce a great song. Sure, we all want our 15 minutes of fame, we all want to share something great with others, we all want to be "that guy" who wrote amazing songs that have shaken worshipers all over the nation; but let's face it, you won't get there by willing it to happen and focusing on that end result. The most successful songs are written with a desire to put life's beauties and people's hearts into song. These are the songs that will ring true to the multitudes.

What songs have you personally identified with and sung as your own prayers?

Generally, the best songs are the simple ones that strike a chord in our hearts.

Journal

Let's get practical for a moment. We've been talking a lot about writing down ideas, inspiration, thoughts throughout the day, and all of these tidbits for writing—you have to have a journal. Your journal is your ever-constant songbook. This is something that you can have always on you, always accessible, and always something you're using. Thoughts are fleeting. Inspiration is also fleeting. Writing down ideas when they come to you is crucial. You'll believe this if ever you saw my collection of napkins, mail envelopes, and any other bit of paper I had to write an idea down on when my journal was not handy. These are the source of good writing. These are your ideas. These are your songs in the making.

A song's title is the center of a song. It is the one idea that tells the story and that every other lyric supports.

One exercise I do in my journal is to write down possible song titles. Take ten minutes: see how many song titles you can come up with.

Keep this practice up whenever you have free time. Always be thinking of new titles. These are little sparks of creation from the inspiration you see around you. Later when you have time, look over these titles.

- Do any titles stand out?
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- Are there any in there that could be the beginning of a great song?
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- What further inspiration can you glean?
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- Is there a good idea in there?
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- Is there a start of a really inspiring song in those titles?
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It's important to journal about your everyday life along with these other exercises. From what we've discussed already, your normal routine can hold so much inspiration, so much beauty, and so much emotion. This is what songs are made of! The hard part is remembering. I've been in situations where something is so moving, so beautiful, and I've had this moment of inspiration where the perfect words came to me to describe it, and I think no matter what I'll remember this moment, these words, but without writing it down, you don't remember. You don't capture it in the way you think you will. This is why it's so important to document—to be writing down your life as it happens in your journal. Even the seemingly inconsequential things are the ones you need to be documenting. This constant writing helps you be a writer at heart - a writer in your everyday life.

Capturing your idea

This constant writing will help you in one of the critical elements of the songwriting process. It's easy when working on a song, when you really get down to hashing out lyrics and chords, to get stuck on a specific line, or a specific chord progression. Don't let those blips get in the way of moving on. If you're planning on making the song from beginning to end, in sequence, as perfect as it can be, you won't get very far. At times, you just have to go with what's coming to you, the creative flow that's moving, if a line is blank and you have nothing for it, move on! Keep moving! You can always come back to a certain line or the details of the song. The moment, the inspiration you are feeling, might hang around only so long. Take advantage of the moment, and get as much as you possibly can written.

After the moment is gone, you've come to a wall with your song for the moment, now is the time to analyze a little deeper, to spend time brainstorming what might fit in a specific line or part of the song. One tool I use for this process is free association. Ask yourself:

- What is the main feeling of your song?
- What is the subject matter?

Take a phrase or a word that encompasses your song and spend ten minutes writing down everything that word or phrase makes you feel or think about.

- What do those thoughts or feelings make you think about?

Whether it is a pen on your paper or hammering away at on a keyboard, don't stop writing for a full ten minutes. Follow your thought process along the entire way. Most of it might be babble, but some of it could be gold. In that stream of consciousness could be your missing lyric.

Let's take a song you've been working on. Learn to say more: learn to expand and rephrase. How many different ways can your idea be expressed in words?

- What lines do you love?
- What could be said differently?
- Does it take away from the song, or does it open it up to new levels with simple rephrasing?

Don't be afraid to try new things with your lyrics. Just because you're playing around with the line doesn't mean you need to change it. Exploring your lyrical options is a great practice to being a better songwriter.

Cultivating the creative process

These exercises are helpful when you've got the basis of the song written. I understand it can be overwhelming to even begin writing a song. We've discussed how your songs are your prayers. Your prayers can be your songs. Embracing this attitude will relieve the pressure you might be feeling about the whole process. Take the mystery out of the songwriting process. Position yourself in an attitude of worship throughout your day, look at the world through childlike eyes, and keep an attitude of longing for revelation and discovery alive. I find that the most sincere prayers come out of my mouth at the beginning of a service or in between songs when I'm not trying to write a song. In those moments I'm not trying to write something impressive or clever: I'm just trying to be honest and real before the Lord.

To help with changing your mindset, let's do a short exercise. Take a few minutes to list every single motivation you have for writing a song for the purpose of having a successful career, or landing a record deal. List all of your fears or insecurities about the process of writing. List what intimidates you. Be honest with yourself. We all have fears about being creative. We all have fears about creating something ugly or stupid.

Now, next to this list, take a few more minutes to write down every possible motivation or reason for writing that only has to do with serving others and creating union with God. Maybe this list is harder to write. Maybe it's simpler and much easier. Either way, this second list should be your mantra. This should be your focus. Anytime you're stuck, you're not feeling inspiration - take a look at this list.

In addition to keeping these reasons close to your heart, keep God's word even closer. Scripture communicates the heart of God, and the connection between God and His people. It's so critical that we get grounded in the Scripture and we let the Scripture get off of the page and saturate our hearts. One way to integrate God's word into our hearts is through memorization.

I find 3 x 5 index cards to be a perfect memorization tool. Write down your favorite verses. Reference these cards throughout your day. Read through them before every meal, or before bed each night. Create a routine for memorizing Scripture. When something grabs your attention in Scripture, or you discover a new facet of God, write it down—memorize it. Keep it close in your mind and in your heart. Keeping these words at the forefront of your heart and mind will benefit your songwriting greatly. You are creating a bank of ideas—stores of inspiration and expression. Most of the time, we should just be singing Biblical, Godly truth that comes from His timeless word. Memorizing His truth will influence your songwriting to follow in this vein.

95% of songwriting is capturing an inspired idea. The more you read in Scripture, the more you pray, the more you listen to others' prayers, the more creative language you have to express this idea. One thing to keep in mind, though, is not to let lyrics hold you up when you are in the moment of writing a song and inspiration is flowing. You might get three lines of a verse written, get stuck on the fourth, and not keep moving. Don't let this happen, you might have lines five through eight in you now. Don't worry about the holes in your songs. These can be hashed out later when the initial moment has passed. Don't expect to write a complete and finished song in one sitting. The songwriting process is just that - a process.

Finding the right sound for your song is part of this process. Keep your original idea in mind - the point you are conveying or the emotion you are capturing. Reference this foundation when making stylistic decisions about your song. Make sure all the elements of your song work together to enhance the feeling of the message. Don't be afraid to try different sounds and styles with your song. Trial and error is the way to eliminate what doesn't work, and to discover what does. Music is a feelings commodity. Every chord progression, every melody and beat conveys emotion. Every lyric conveys emotion. Marrying these two elements is only possible when the emotions of both are compatible.

All of this being said, you cannot force a song into creation. There will be times where the song is very nearly there, and the temptation to insert some well-known worship cliché will hover in the horizon of your creative process like a promising ray of sunshine. Resist! If it means you keep revisiting the song over the course of years, so be it. Do not sell yourself or your song short by caving to lyrical clichés. If you don't want to wait that long for the inspiration to finish its course on your song, seek out some help.

The craft of songwriting

To gain a new perspective on your work, I find that co-writing can help. It can illuminate aspects of the song or take it in a direction you could not have come up with on your own. Co-writing involves giving up some ownership of your song. You won't get everything you want with co-writing, but it might result in a complete and moving piece.

I've spent much of my time working with other artists on songs or ideas I've had in my head for years. Co-writing is a lot like marriage. Your ideas can flow smoothly together, but there'll have to be a little give in the process. The beauty of co-writing is you take somebody that is coming at it from a completely different perspective and blend it with your own.

Are there people in your community or church who are also interested in writing? Finding people who are on the same songwriting path as you will help you along your way. Make a list of people you would consider co-writing with in the next few months.

Consider starting your own songwriter's forum in your community. Plan to get together at least once a month. Share ideas, worship together, and sharpen your songwriting skills, bounce song ideas off each other, perform the songs you're working on, get advice and give advice, and encourage each other in the Lord. Start small and see what happens.

Critiquing the song

So you have a completed song, what now? This is where we revisit our songs with an editor's eye. The entire beginning process has focused on your inspiration, capturing that great idea, going with the feeling of the idea, and cultivating the creative process. The next part is the nitty gritty down to the details part of songwriting. This is the time to be critical. This is the time to look closely at each line, each phrase, each chord, and each transition.

- What can be stronger?
- Where are the weak areas of the song?
- Is there too much going on?
- Is it too wordy?

This is the part of the process where you prune away what is unnecessary and strengthen what works. One thing to keep in mind during this refining period is to make sure the lyrics of your song are universal.

- Can people relate to what you're saying?
- Is the idea easily comprehensible?
- Is it clear enough to identify with?
- Does the song relate to all age groups?
- To all walks of life?

One exercise is to imagine how your lyrics will look on the big screen.

- Are they easy to follow?
- How does it all flow together?

This is also the place where you break out your rhyming dictionary or your thesaurus, or any other program out there for the purpose of matching words and phrases into lyrical forms. Look at what you have.

- Does every word match with your original idea?
- Could it be said better?

Do not be afraid to rewrite what you have. Your song might change a million times before it is done but all of these changes means your songwriting skills are growing and maturing. Stay true to your original idea and keep your foundational feeling of the song intact. As always, document everything. Your journal is your best friend during this process. Be a packrat when it comes to your song ideas, the phrases you like, your thoughts, your prayers, expressions of your heart or others.

This is one area where you can never say too much. You can never write too much. You never know, what doesn't work for one song might be the driving force of another. Don't dismiss an element because it doesn't work with one song. Keep it tucked away...you might use it in a different song.

So you've got your song. It's been pruned, gleaned of excess, analyzed, and perfected. What now? Perform it! Share it! You don't need a crowd of thousands or hundreds of people. Play for whoever will listen. More importantly, listen to their feedback.

- What did they identify with?
- What moved them about your song?
- What parts felt funny or disjointed?
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Play your song over and over. Make changes along the way if you feel the advice you're given is valid. Then perform it again. No song can be wrong. Songs are emotional and songs are feelings. Focus on what feels right and what might feel funny in your song. Ask others to be honest with you as well with their opinions.

Making a demo is also another way to move forward with your song. Pick your strongest songs—maybe two or three. Only focus on these. Glean out the ones that aren't so powerful or strong. Focus on the songs that really capture your listeners. This is a good time to consider the feedback you got from performing. You should have good direction for what songs people connect with or respond to well.

If you have the resources to do so, practice your song ideas with a praise team. Again, pick your strongest songs - don't overwhelm those willing to work with you. Keep it simple; stay humble and grateful for those willing to help out. Your goal is to be a life-long student of great songs. Pay attention to what makes a great song. Look at what makes a great song in the current culture. Trends change in songwriting. Study great music from the past, but make sure to study great music that is happening now.

- What are your favorite current songs? Why?

- What emotions do they provoke?

- What idea is behind it?
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This might give you a sense of the type of style you want to work with, and it will also give you an idea of what other people respond to. Stay familiar with what is going on musically today. Immerse yourself in the world of songwriting and the world of music.

Most importantly, immerse yourself in God. Study His word, spend time in His presence, and cultivate His Spirit in your life. Let your thoughts, experiences, and actions be your prayers. Let those prayers resound in song. I pray you stay inspired. I pray you stay childlike. I pray you never stop creating.

Psalms 22:25 "From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly"

Many of the concepts in this DVD are also covered in great detail in Paul's 300-page book ["God Songs"](#), published by Leadworship.com. Available in our store.

