

AN UNAUTHORIZED POSTSCRIPT

to

Brian McLaren's *Open Letter to Worship Songwriters*

John Mortensen

A Preface to the Postscript, or, A Word About Words

McLaren has taken the words out of my mouth, or rather the thoughts out of my head, only he said it better.

Nevertheless, before discussing music *per se*, I would venture to add a few points about texts:

A sense of self-congratulation seems to pervade many songs. We seem to be impressed, not with our works (because that would be heresy) but at least with the admirable way we've responded to grace. This trend is also evident in the many songs of outrageous promise: Forever I'll love You, Forever I'll stand, I will sing of Your love forever, Over oceans deep I will follow, and so on. That last promise sounds like one that Peter made. One wonders whether we might be singing in praise of our own competence.

There is an antidote for this spiritual posturing: a dose of postmodern skepticism of self. If we cannot agree with all of postmodernism's deconstructions perhaps we can at least learn to deconstruct some of our own self-satisfaction. But this is doing no more than our Bibles tell us: taking our own depravity seriously.

McLaren suggests studying good poetry. Indeed, let's do that. But we must first recognize that "good" poetry no longer plays any role in our culture, except on the occasions when it shows up in song lyrics. Song lyrics *are* the poetry of our culture, so naturally if we go back to Shakespeare or T.S. Eliot we will find the language nearly foreign. The poetry of those masters is gourmet cooking and we have yet to succeed in making Bisquick pancakes.

So, leaving aside our hopes of writing the most exalted poetry, is there anything basic that could guide our amateur efforts? Indeed, there is.

First we must understand that good lyrics are composed, not inspired. We must be willing to scribble, cross out, revise, and think hard. Lyrics should go through many revisions because when it comes to versions, first is worst and last is best.

We must become aware of meter. What is the natural rhythm of the text? Where are the strong and weak syllables? Is it in triple meter, like a Dr. Seuss story (“My *name* is Sylvester Mc Monkey Mc Bean”) or somber iambic rhythm like much of Shakespeare (“So *foul* and *fair* a day I have not seen”)?

Different meters have different moods. The meter of the lyrics should be carefully chosen and matched to the content of the words.

What about rhyming? Ah, rhyming is hard. (Many songwriters have darn near given up on it.) First of all, can we agree to a ten-year ban on rhyming “adore you” with “before you”? Thanks.

If we wish to rise above the greeting-card level of poetry, we may need to thumb through the dictionary and make long lists of words that rhyme. There is no shame in this. The best rhymes come from hard work, not spontaneity. Our rhymes should sound natural, not contrived. The final rhyming word, especially, should sound like it really belongs, not like it got stuck there just for the sake of rhyme. A minor rhyming disaster may be observed at the close of the song *My Lord, What Sacrifice* where the lyricist needed something to rhyme with “You took the fall” (never mind the bizarre metaphor of faking defeat in a boxing match) and chose “You thought of me above all”. Not only does the final line sound limp and contrived, but it commits a theological misstep: Christ thought of Me above all? Really? Above doing the Father’s will and defeating powers of evil and the immediate sensation of pain? Begging your pardon: the only person who thinks of Me above all is Me.

But rhyming can also be fun. The simplest form is couplets, where lines rhyme in pairs:

And the hands of the Son of God tore off the chains of death: See Him rise!

And the shouts of the seraphim, echoing thundrously, shake the skies!

(Notice that this is in triple meter, by the way.) Rhyming lines can also be interlocked:

I sing the mighty pow’r of God,

AN UNAUTHORIZED POSTSCRIPT

to Brian McLaren’s *Open Letter to Worship Songwriters*

by John Mortensen

Page 2

That made the mountains rise;
That spread the flowing seas abroad,
And built the lofty skies.

(This one's in iambic meter – that's weak-strong, starting on the weak.)

And how about the old sonnet form? After several interlocked lines, the couplet at the end has a concentrated, focused intensity because the rhymes are finally right next to each other. This could really work for some great lyrics. Any takers?

Now, about imagery: Next time you sing, notice how many words are abstract and how many concrete. That is, which words invoke something you can imagine clearly? "There is a fountain filled with blood" – Egad! Disgusting! But very concrete and evocative.

Let's look for imagery in another popular song:

"You are beautiful beyond description" – Nothing there.

"Too marvelous for words" – Nope.

"Too wonderful for comprehension" – Not yet.

"Like nothing ever seen or heard" – Especially not in this song, as there is nothing to see or hear or taste or touch.

Good poets, like the psalmists, are forever using vivid concrete language. They do not write about Intimacy, Love, Sacrifice, or Blessings (Abstractions which cry out for capitalization!) but rather of trees, mountains, horses, lips, hands, blood, and wine.

Let us get down to earth, indeed get earthy, with our imagery.

The Current Situation, or, The Postscript Proper

What if we took McLaren's observations and suggestions about lyrics and brought them to bear on the music itself? Because, you know, music isn't words. Music is music. And words are words. Like raspberries and chocolate, they go nicely together but they aren't the same thing.

In normal conversation it is very common to hear “I like this song” which generally means “I like the words to this song”. Almost all discussions about music, especially worship music, center around the text. Well, that’s not a bad thing: God has given language an exalted role in the universe, so let’s get very serious about how we use it. Like Brian said, we can do better.

But when was the last time you heard someone say “That is a beautiful melody” or “What an interesting rhythm” or “Those two instruments make a wonderful sound together”? Nobody (except a music geek) talks like that. And that should tell us something. It should tell us that throughout most of our experience of music (in worship, the arts, and entertainment) we’re hardly listening to the music at all.

So it should be no surprise that songwriters have little motivation to write beautiful music. Why bother? No one is listening! Besides, many songwriters have a musical vocabulary that contains little except a few shop-worn chords and timid melodies.

Most worship songs are written as imitation, not composition. That is, few writers are making the effort to think through all the ingredients that make music. (More about ingredients later.) Instead we are hearing an endless round of the same half-dozen shrink-wrapped clichés. Most non-musicians are surprised to learn that the vast majority of popular tunes consist of three chords. That’s why most songs sound the same.

Mass-produced popular culture, or masspopcult, does not influence our worship; it *is* our worship. Masspopcult gives us the songs, the background tracks, the sheet music, the celebrities who show us how to sound and look and move, and even special DVDs with eye candy for our large screens. A contemporary church service is nearly impossible to stage without contributions on many levels from masspopcult.

Aside from the natural suspicion we should harbor toward an industry that aims to profit from our worship, there is another reason to unplug from the masspopcult machine: its power to stifle local creativity. Consider the dynamics: A music industry producer selects and promotes a celebrity, and that celebrity’s songs, based on marketability. Marketability usually means a magical combination of youthful good looks, edginess, and above all *novelty* in sound and appearance. It must be new and catchy and viscerally appealing at the first aural and visual encounter. The consumer, thoroughly conditioned to respond to novelty, accepts the product uncritically. The only response the producer receives in sales figures.

Accepting masspopcult songs is so easy, and writing our own good ones is so hard, that any creative impulse in the local community is overwhelmed.

MASSPOPCULT DYNAMIC:

Producer→Product (Celebrity/Songs)→Passive Consumer→Feedback (Sales)

By contrast, overthrowing the domination of masspopcult would allow for a very different dynamic. The lyricist, sensitive to the needs of the local community, labors to write a good text, seeks counsel from wise spiritual friends, and strives to match a spiritual message with evocative imagery and pleasing rhyme and meter. The composer then takes the text and crafts a melody suited to the words and fit for singing by an assembled community. The composer plans to use an interesting combination of instruments from among those already played within the church. Then, after a few tries, both lyricist and composer listen to the response of the people.

COMMUNITY DYNAMIC:

Lyricist/Composer→Truth/Poetry/Music→Community→Feedback (Dialogue)

Now instead of control by the magnates of masspopcult, a community dialogue determines the nature of worship music. And yes, I know how laughably unrealistic that is. I don't care. It's the right thing to do and we should try it.

After all this conspiracy-theory ranting about the evil machinery of masspopcult, the picture may seem bleak. But there are plenty of reasons for optimism!

Unplugged-ness

A musician remarked to me recently that students have changed in their attitudes toward electronic music. Whereas five years ago they may have preferred to use a synthesizer to create the sound of, say, panpipes, today they would prefer buying a real set and learning to play them. Likewise djembes and congas have proliferated like rabbits, and acoustic guitars outnumber their electrified cousins. Willow Creek, by popular demand, has brought its acoustic piano back from exile.

This preference represents a shift toward an unpolished, “unproduced”, unsaturated sound. I think it is an aesthetic echo of the postmodern attraction to authenticity, whether in faith or in music.

Interest in Real Culture

Similarly, the interest in authentic cultural music is growing. This is an encouraging trend, especially in light of the all-consuming nature of masspopcult. Most students I know have “special” musical interests (jazz, bluegrass, celtic, whatever) that they prefer over mainstream masspopcult music. This shows both a desire for identification with a real community and a preference for more serious musical substance.

These authentic cultural sources of music can provide refreshing new combinations of instruments, beautiful and unpretentious melodies, and an intriguing glimpse of “every tongue and tribe” worshipping Christ. The drawback, of course, is that masspopcult can very quickly neuter these musical sources by extracting a few “authentic” sounds and adding a drum loop.

Crossovers

Though crossovers from art music to popular music may have begun as nothing more than a clever marketing strategy, they have some healthy qualities. The vocal and instrumental virtuosity of art music is needed in folk and popular styles, and the informality and simplicity of folk can lessen some of the snobbery of art music and make it accessible. This resonates with the postmodern proclivity to break down categories and include diverse voices.

Interest in Ancient Spirituality

One of the ways masspopcult oppresses us is in its use of time. For commercial reasons nearly all songs are three minutes long. Is a three-minute time span adequate for the expression of any facet of our faith? We may begin to suppose that all these areas of faith, doubt, suffering, friendship, and redemption can be adequately raised, explored, and resolved in three minutes. Obviously, we need to develop the ability to compose (and hear and sing) longer songs, songs that lead us through an unhurried meditation and don’t need to cut to a commercial.

In light of this problem, we note that younger folks are beginning to show an interest in the spiritual practices of the ancient church. This connection with Christ’s community through time is plainly a good thing. We need to learn the humility of singing *Kyrie Eleison* and the unity of the *Credo*. Solidarity with the

AN UNAUTHORIZED POSTSCRIPT

to Brian McLaren’s *Open Letter to Worship Songwriters*

by John Mortensen

Page 6

ancient church frees us from the contemporary demand to be instantly perky when we worship, and gives us permission and time to mourn, meditate, and wait...in short, to be human.

How Shall We Then Write?

The single greatest obstacle to writing a good song is creating a good melody. Most contemporary worship melodies come into being as a by-product of noodling around with chords on a guitar or piano (I speak from experience here). This is a natural result of the fact that many songwriters think of music mainly as chords. In this mindset, to write new music is to play some familiar chords in a different order and try to find a tune that fits.

Now, good chords can make an adequate tune sound great, and no mistake. But to start with the tune as the soul of the song, and add harmony later – that is a horse of a different color.

One way to avoid the difficulty of writing a good tune, and also learn something about tunes, is to re-craft existing melodies. Rich sources of melody include hymns and folk songs, both American and foreign (especially the British Isles!).

But sooner or later we will want to write our own, yes? So, a few things to keep in mind:

>Use the text. Try to discover the natural rhythm of the words. Avoid accenting syllables that are weak, and be willing to write in meters other than four-four.

>The selection of pitches should be purposeful, creating an overall shape, not wandering aimlessly. Notice how the tune *Be Thou My Vision* starts low and begins climbing in the first phrase. The second phrase keeps the tune at a middle level and builds a sense of expectation. The third phrase reaches the high point of the tune, then falls away gently. The final phrase is almost an echo; it rises briefly but comes to rest with a sense of both gentleness and finality.

>Another excellent device is melisma. This is the use of multiple notes on one syllable. (Syllabic writing is where every syllable gets a separate note.) Melisma is especially effective if written in a clear pattern. Notice the melisma in *O the Deep Deep Love of Jesus* and the chorus of *Angels We Have Heard on High*.

>Most importantly the tune must be conceived for singing by an assembled group, not an individual. It cannot be awkward, overly syncopated, excessively quick, or too difficult.

>A good tune is like a carefully-packed suitcase: Everything fits together and there is no wasted space.

Rhythm

We must learn to love rhythmic freedom and break out of rhythmic prison. It is a great irony that masspopcult music is generally supposed to have a great sense of rhythm. Exactly the opposite is true: most pop tunes are securely locked inside the straitjacket of a four-four backbeat. Why? Because it's good? No: because it's easy. The first step toward rhythmic freedom is to learn how to write and play in all kinds of meters. Next, we should recognize that syncopation (accenting a beat that would otherwise be weak) should be purposeful and planned, not thoughtless and pervasive. Constant syncopation creates rhythmic blandness. Finally, percussion needs to be crafted, not programmed. It is downright oppressive to lock into a pattern on the drumset, varying it only with the occasional tom-tom roll and cymbal crash. The drummer needs to be creative, to realize that less is more, and to value his own silence as the rest of us do.

Chords

As with texts, melody, and rhythm, so with harmony: we must re-examine our vocabulary, which is all too limited—in most cases to three chords. There are, of course, many other interesting and expressive harmonic combinations to explore. A good place to start is to experiment with inverting those chords we normally play in root position all the time.

Vocal Style

One of the most dubious legacies of masspopcult is its vocal style. In this singing style, the melody is of secondary importance. What matters is the projection of the personality of the celebrity. Thus, all kinds of throaty, self-indulgent, “look-at-me” mannerisms have been widely accepted as part of normal singing. Michael Jackson and Britney Spears are examples of this problem at its most pathological.

It need hardly be said that this is all wrong; the personality of the singer matters least, and the melody and text most. Singing certainly need not be professionally polished, but a simple and unpretentious vocal style should be cultivated in

worship. C. S. Lewis wrote of a boy soprano's voice soaring up to a high note "blissfully free of all personal emotion."

Postscript to the Postscript

Many are noticing that contemporary praise music seems increasingly lifeless and artificial. It may be possible to work toward a more authentic expression of worship but it will come at the cost of much creative effort. The noisy products of masspopcult need to be shushed so that writers from within the community might have a voice. The community itself will need to encourage its writers, bear with them, and (probably) forgive them.

Both music and texts need to be taken far more seriously; lyricists must craft their meaning, imagery, and rhyme until they are worthy expressions of worship. Composers need to match such texts with finely-wrought tunes of unique singable beauty.

Worship songs that emerge from within a community can speak most poignantly to the sorrows and joys of that community, and are its best expression of love to Christ.