

7 Marks of a Decent Worship Song

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So you're a musician, worship leader or songwriter. At its best, what's a song do?

#7: Pan-generational Gathering infants and elders.

There are two types of people in the world: those who like to divide people into groups and those who don't. [Wait for chuckle.]

A decent worship song sings us into **harmony across generations**, noticing our diversity in age and blessing us together.

One of the fallouts of so-called "contemporary" worship since the 80's (I was there-- the one with the mullet and the fiery red strat) has been the dis-integration of the multi-generational worshipping assembly.

We think we're smart to niche-market our worship. We try to give people what they want according to their preferences. We imagine teens desire something different than their parents and grandparents.

One result can be a fragmented (or neatly divided) worshipping community. It's the biggest reason people call me for consultation.

A good worship song presents us as one global Christ-body, to use Paul's metaphor. And it's not only so we kindly include people in the room. It's that we deeply affirm that there are gifts and challenges for each season of life, including tender babyhood, passionate adolescence, ambitious young adulthood, transitional "half-time" mid-life and wise elder years.

When we are together in worship, we pay attention to all that we are-- tender, ambitious, transitional, wise. When our moments of song and prayer do not speak to all of these, we find ourselves in a body without an arm or an ear.

Contrary to what our surrounding pop culture preaches, **it's good to get old**. Youth need to know this, as well as our elders. Imagine the alternative that is happening now.

Contrary to what our culture says, **it's good to be kids**. Grown-ups need to know this, as well as youths. What happens to a civilization where this isn't true?

Is your community's repertoire speaking to all the seasons of life?

#6: Expansive

Because Christ-life is more than we think.

When I first heard Marty Haugen's Psalm 23 song, I cracked open. "*Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears from death into life.*" Jesus Christ. [Don't you love non-blasphemous invocations?] Psalm 23 will never be the same for me.

That song was both instructive and expansive. That is, it both taught the Psalm and expanded my reality. The song helped the Holy Spirit break through the borders I had set up around what was true.

In singing, we embody more than theology. We make the sound of a world-wide community transforming. Listen closely, and you can hear boundaries breaking.

Ask any United Methodist, they he or she will tell you a good song can be a sermon. The Wesleys had it down to a science. Some 21st-century writers are working at it, too.

A good worship song not only unpacks and prays our scripture, it takes a wrecking ball to our idolized ideas.

In worship we are meant to offer heart, mind, soul and strength to the Holy One of which we are a part. And you can bet these hearts, minds, souls and strengths won't come back to us the same. I'm thinking of Jesus' irritating, holy habit of saying, "You have heard it said... but / tell you..." and his metaphor of wineskins. **Sometimes that old container has to go.**

Take a careful look at your congregation's singing repertoire. Are there enough songs that blessedly expand our ideas?

#5: Integrative

Some re-assembly required.

When Psalm 25 sings, "**To You, O Lord, I lift up my soul**," the Psalmist is not chipping out a wedge of life's circle graph. In fact, in Hebrew there is no word for a separate spiritual part of the self. For it to ring true, the spiritual life is integrated with all dimensions of one's experience. A better translation might be, "**To You, YHWH, I open my life.**" (Hear my rendition of Ps. 25: "[To You.](#)")

A good worship song helps us integrate aspects of our lives that are otherwise *dis-*integrated. Because our surrounding culture and the weather of life can fragment us, right?

A few examples: In a time of such fear as we are in right now, we may be told that certain people or particular nations are the problem. Worship snaps us out of such fear, antagonism and superiority, leveling us with the least of Jesus' brothers- and sisters-in-Love.

In an era of global power struggles, we may be tempted to see our nation-- wherever we may reside-- in competition with the rest of the planet. Sunday morning offers us the vision of everything created and belonging to One, our common citizenship to the One Holy City (Ps. 87).

In a TV/mag/online culture celebrating individualism, we may feel alone. Experiencing spiritual community wrecks our walls and invites us to a powerfully vulnerable part of the Holy Whole.

A good worship song helps us integrate Holy Reality into our conscious lives. It pushes against the surrounding culture, and, as we sing it, helps us rehearse this integrated life and practice it with breath, words and gesture.

What great old hymns, Taize chants or new rock songs help you integrate Holy Reality (aka Kingdom of God, emerging Christ, Holy Spirit) into your life?

#4: Focused Function

We're beings doing.

A worship song is folk art in the traditional sense.

When I took a Norwegian Woodcarving class at college (doesn't everyone?), [Harley Refsal](#) taught that a true piece of folk art has a specific function. A beautifully crafted chair is meant to be sat in, not just to look pretty. That gorgeous quilt is for the bed, not the wall. A hand-thrown pottery bowl wants to contain soup, cereal or ice cream.

The design of the piece is not arbitrary; its form serves the needed function.

Same with decent worship songs. Songwriters take great care to craft a song that serves the community in a particular way. Where some songs are meant to proclaim grace or invite celebration, others stretch our minds and invite resistance. Good worship songs don't parrot scripture or repeat a line eight times to force meaning. They make our imaginations pop around a specific point.

Worship leaders, knowing this, take great care to select songs that serve our transformation. He or she may choose a song to help us embody passionate praise in one moment, surrender in another. It's not shoving any old song into the slots. Good worship leaders intentionally select music that engages our mind-body-spirit experience and carries us further into it.

But back to songs. Consider your most moving musical experiences, whether they be in church, on the dancefloor or driving your car. It was specific, right? The perfect song at the right time. Not general. A good story doesn't mention tea; **it's a steaming orange mug of Earl Grey.**

A **Gathering** song is inviting. It might remind us we're all in the same boat, and are welcome for exactly what we are. Maybe it sets up the theme for the day. A good **Offering** song might remind us it's good to share, and we all have a part. A **Prayer** song offers sound to hold delicate spoken petitions. Or they disrupt our idolatrous ideas of how we think prayer works. A **Sending** song might remind us that we bear the Christ out to the world, and we are each unique in the ways we are faithfully doing that.

A good worship song functions for a particular occasion, the right tool for the job at hand. Review the current [Top 25 CCLI songs](#) and test my theory amid the awful ones and the brilliant ones. (Here's your pass to be judgmental. Enjoy.)

By the way, good worship songs are in every genre and form-- liturgical, pop choruses, ancient hymns, contemplative chants, etc. Don't resist any when they are called for.

The next time your worship team has an hour to kill, together make a list of the best songs that serve the movements of worship: Gathering, Proclaiming, Responding, Sealing (the Sacraments) and Sending. Listen carefully to one another's experiences with the songs.

Honor the differences. When you see functional gaps -- "Hey, we don't have a really good song for _____," email your local songwriters and we'll get right on it in the workshop.

#3: Prophetic lyrics

Words that comfort us and mess with us.

The role of an artist in a community is to stir up imagination, invite people to stretch their minds.

A decent worship song does, too.

Just as scripture contains vital tensions of law & gospel, grace & discipleship, "easy as pie" & "give up your life," our worship music challenges us to grow to maturity in Christ.

A good worship song wonders over our sense of what we're sure of.

When I was in seminary, Marty Haugen helped me see that at the time I was good at writing songs that brought comfort and grace, but that I was short on the prophetic edge that offers the holy gift of bewilderment. (By the way, my friend Bono always tells me not to name-drop. It's tacky.)

For example, it's important for our growth to be reminded that our pet names for God aren't the only game in town. As much as God may be like a father to us, God is also like a crooked judge, a woman kneading dough, and a still, small voice in the breeze. The alternative is the prospect of idolatry: worshipping a hedged-in *idea about* God instead of the Ever-Living God.

Does this mean **we will not always agree** with the words we are singing? Does this mean we won't *like* all our songs?

It seems to me Jesus' ministry was centered not in teaching information but delivering provocations that were seeds of renewal, forgiveness and restoration.

We need a steady diet of songs that don't just reinforce the way we are thinking presently. Spiritual life is built to stretch.

Is your congregation's repertoire sufficiently challenging?

#2: Singability

Because that's the point, right?

A song enacts unity, and as such invites all present to participate.

This may be closer to the number one slot, because if a congregational song is not a place we can all meet, it's useless. Scrap it for parts. We usually know a decent song when we hear it, but here are a few suggestions to an intentionally singable community song:

- It's in a **good key** for most voices to sing energetically. Otherwise, people are frustrated at the get go. This, however, doesn't mean a song can't ask you to stretch for a few notes. Sung prayer requires energy, after all. Christmas and Easter hymns call us up to a high D. The [Star-Spangled Banner](#) is sometimes done in a key leading us to a high E or F, making it, ironically, a lousy community song. Mostly, we sing well together between C and C.
- **Accessible melody.** Whether it's a chant from [Taize](#), a Bach hymn or cutting-edge rock song, the tune engages all ages and all abilities. Rhythms are regular in pattern or at least This means contrary to what your praise band guitarist says, not everything you hear on the radio will work in your circle.
- **...But not too easy.** If the song is simplistic, it's not gonna last. A good song needs a little work to get right.
- **Vocabulary check.** Our songs use language we understand or can come to understand. Sounds simple, but often with ancient texts or present-day jargon, we may not be on the same page without a little education. Not a bad thing if we're aware.

#1: Ancient-Future Tension

So *what* time is it?

A decent community song reminds us that we have a heritage of faith going back generations. It also engages our present-day reality and pitches our imaginations into the future.

The number one mark of a decent worship song is also among the most important descriptors of faithful worship.

Tradition

A good song connects us to ancient things. Does your community know that faith is old? Roots are important. It's a disservice to faith to have it look like a trendy thing, something we just discovered with the latest pop singer. Why? Because that's so today's media culture-- here today, gone tomorrow-- and it's just the tip of the iceberg we are about subverting in worship.

Does your community's repertoire have good old ground we can sink our roots into?

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Innovation

While our roots of faith are deep and ancient, we have 21st-century imaginations. Let's not pretend we don't have cell phones.

Aren't we genuinely curious how the spiritual life is faithfully lived in us, you know, *now*? If so, won't we be experimenting constantly with the freshest language and music to pray, celebrate and lament? Our songwriters will be always riffing on the culture, asking us to attend to changes in our jobs, families, bodies and politics. A decent worship song always invites us to pay attention to our spiritual life, both communally and individually.

All this puts us in the now, leaning into the future. Inventive, adventurous words, grooves and symbols will always be part of our music.

Put another way, a good song does not parrot our ancestors. It honors our lineage by always reforming, always evolving into God's future.

So. Discuss.

This article is a gathering of individual pieces around Worldmaking.net's "Top Ten Marks of the Decent Worship Song" developed in the [Worldmaking.net newsletter](#).

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