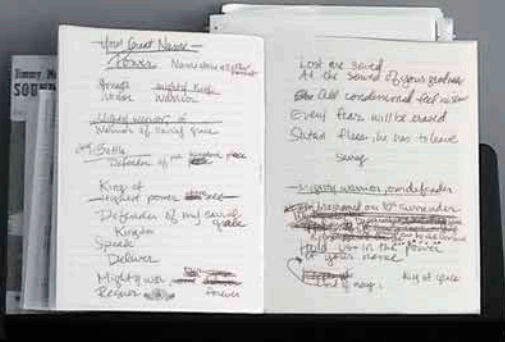


Krissy Nordhoff

Writing Worship



How to Craft Heartfelt
Songs for the Church

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Songwriting Is a Journey

*Only those who will risk going too far can possibly
find out just how far one can go.*

T. S. Eliot, preface to *Transit of Venus: Poems* by Harry Crosby

For me, writing songs began somewhere between the butterfly-spotted hills of my family farm in southwest Michigan and my grandmother's organ. Somewhere between hymns and "El Shaddai."¹ Without understanding or even thinking, I simply sang what rose to the top of my heart. Many times I stood on the crossbar at the end of my metal swing set in the backyard and sang into the pole that ran across the top because it echoed like a microphone.

My first music teacher was my grandma Millie. She played the organ and the piano by ear and completely captivated me. She was the first to move my little fingers onto the right keys to plunk out the melody to "Heart and Soul." Grandma Millie went to heaven when I was almost five years old. My young heart was broken. But years later, I realized that was the same year my first official song floated

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into the air near the back pasture of that farm. Now I understand that this mantle of music was an inheritance.

Through childhood my love of songwriting continued to grow. Without realizing it, I became a student of lyric and melody. I used to play a game whenever a new contemporary Christian music album came out. I would listen to the record bit by bit and write down all the lyrics as they came (repositioning the needle or rewinding the cassette as needed). I would then compare them with the official lyric sheet to see how many I got right. (Only a lyricist would think this was fun!)

In our little country church, I would study the hymnal, noticing depth and themes and rhyme and patterns, sometimes for the whole service. It was there I learned the hymn “Take My Life, and Let It Be,” which contains these lines: “Take my voice, and let me sing / Always, only, for my King.”² They took root in me for good when I was fourteen.

As I got older, I traveled with my family, singing “special music” in different area churches. Dad brought my little sound system (bought by my grandma Josie), along with my background tracks, and functioned as my tech team. Mom took me to piano and voice lessons during the week and cleaned the teacher’s house in exchange for my lessons since we couldn’t afford to pay her. Their support was sacrificial. They always believed in me.

My first recording was in high school. I sang in a Youth for Christ choir, and they chose to feature one of my original songs on their album. Soon after, I was able to attend Anderson University by the grace of God in the form of a scholarship. It was there I took Songwriting 101 from Gloria Gaither. I left that class with tears

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many times because of how deeply I was moved by God's heart through her teaching. I would've attended all four years just for that class. I didn't know then how much my life would be affected by it, but I know now.

I saved the final requirement for my degree, an internship in the music business, for last. I knew the Lord was calling me to move to Nashville, and I wanted to do the internship there. The week before I was to move, I had no job, car, apartment, health insurance, or internship. Still, I knew I had to go. Within a week, all those things fell into place in a God-orchestrated way I couldn't understand.

Soon after moving to Nashville, I was offered a record deal. We negotiated it all with the lawyers, and I was assigned a producer to work with. When they gave me the tour schedule, I saw that I would be gone for two to three months at a time. I was ready. But about six months into those negotiations, the company decided to drop me. I felt devastated.

Around that time I met my husband, Eric. He had already been working in the Christian music industry for several years, directing international sales for Warner Alliance, Provident, and Word. Eric had the business experience I didn't and was able to help me navigate those waters.

The closer we got to marriage, the more I began to question God's will for my life. I really wanted to have a family. It felt like the first priority in my heart. I began to question if I would be OK traveling for two to three months and leaving my family at home. When I got really honest with myself, the answer was no.

I made the decision to be an independent artist, writing and singing all my own songs. It gave me the flexibility with family that I

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wanted. It ended up working out well since family quickly followed marriage! We had been married a year and a half when Alex, our oldest, was born. Within twenty-three months, Kaden was born. These two little boys won my heart, and I was so thankful. I wrote songs during little windows like nap time and after I put them to bed. They were good travelers and came with us as I did concerts from Texas to Michigan and everywhere in between. I added some time for the kids in many Sunday services. And they “helped” me sell CDs. It was a sweet time. One Sunday we did two services in the morning, then drove four hours to do a festival that night, boys in tow. After that day I began to feel a season shift. I knew something needed to change.

The next week I found out I was expecting our third child, our daughter, Anthem. It was during that pregnancy that I cowrote “Your Great Name”³ with my home church in mind.

Ultimately it was recorded for our church album. It was the song that taught me to let go. I had never written a song that I didn’t sing. The night we performed the song for the first time, I was in the choir and very pregnant! I heard the Lord tell me, “Sing in the choir this time and watch what happens.” Soon the entire congregation was on their feet.

As the song’s popularity began to grow and Natalie Grant chose to record it on her album, I realized something for the first time: I could write songs and stay home with my kids, and my songs could travel. It had always been an option, a possibility, but I had never seen it.

So I began to settle into this “I’m a songwriter” identity. However, if I’m honest, I have to say I feared I had missed something for years.

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Until one day when the Lord whispered to me, “I can use you in much greater ways if you will write songs for Me.”

Another time, I was driving to Nashville to record a song story video with my cowriters. We would be asked to share about how the song was inspired, how the song took shape, and what it meant to us. I couldn't even remember the song, so I pulled it up on my phone to listen and tried to remember the details before I got there. I heard the studio singer belting out the melody I had crafted, and I thought, *Oh yeah, that sounds like me. I can hear my inflections there.*

Then I heard God's voice say, “Do you know what I hear when I hear your songs?”

I replied, “No.”

He answered, “*Your* voice. I hear *your* voice.”

I burst into tears, thinking about how many times He heard me. That is all that mattered. “Take my voice, and let me sing / Always, only, for my King.”

I had known, ever since those lyrics settled in my heart, that I would be involved in Christian music. But in the early days of my writing, worship as we know it wasn't yet a thing in church culture. I started out writing simple songs about Jesus. But in college that changed to more clever, wordy songs. Then I wrote plenty of songs just to process my own emotions—even songs to release anger (ask me about “Alcatraz”⁴). I wrote about my experiences as a mother, a wife, a daughter. I wrote songs to teach my kids lessons and values I didn't want them to forget.

Then came worship. I didn't understand it at first. In fact, it was pointed out to me that the songs I was recording and singing were not congregational worship because I used the first-person (I) viewpoint.

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It didn't make sense to me that using first-person pronouns could make such a difference. It felt like worship to me. Learning what it meant to write congregational worship took a while.

Some people say Nashville is a seven-year town (meaning it takes seven years to have a breakthrough in your music), but it took fourteen years for me to get my first cut (one of my songs recorded by an artist). I was in town for nineteen years before signing a publishing deal. Most recently I've been a staff songwriter for Integrity Music. Some of my songs have been sung by artists and worship leaders such as Mandisa, Darlene Zschech, Tauren Wells, David and Nicole Binion, and Natalie Grant. I have loved serving both artists and church worship teams as I've helped them write songs for their records and congregations. I'm so thankful.

While I have so much to be grateful for, this journey hasn't always been an easy one. As soon as I got to Nashville, I could tell it was going to be interesting learning to navigate industry, family, and ministry. I began to pray for a mentor. I asked the Lord if He would connect me with a woman who had walked these places before I had, someone who could shepherd me through some of the questions and situations I faced.

I repeatedly encountered the "Nashville No," which is basically when people show support or make promises to you face to face but later won't answer your phone calls or texts (it's a cultural way of saying no or that they are actually not interested). One time I encountered an industry woman who heard my songs and then laughingly called herself the Dream Crusher. I have had cowriting sessions canceled and faced many other challenges simply because I'm female. At one point someone said to me, "Thirty is old in the

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music business. If you were twenty-five, I would sign you to a record deal today.” I almost gave up after that one. Funny enough, I saw no breakthroughs with my music until after I was thirty-five.

I continued to pray for a mentor for fifteen years with no answer. Finally that fifteenth year, the Lord said, “Be what you need.” That’s when I stopped looking to get something and realized just maybe I had something to give.

I chose to start pouring into the generation behind me, and I have been mentoring songwriters for ten years now. I noticed that songwriters needed community, so I started *Girls Write Out*, a gathering for female writers. That eventually became a ministry called *Brave Worship*, which I cofounded with my sister Maribeth Dodd, who is a worship leader. You can check it out at braveworship.com. Through that ministry I saw a need for more hands-on songwriting instruction for women as well as men. That was the beginning of the *Writing Worship Course* and the *Worship Songwriter Mentorship* (for more about these, see pages 167 and 168). Then I saw a need for a book in which I would go into more detail. And that, my friend, is what you now hold in your hands.

I know these twenty-five years of writing in Nashville—the trials, the mistakes, and the joys—were not for me alone. They were also for you. I’ve thought about you in writing rooms, at writers’ nights, at church, and as I’ve prayed. I know your journey as a songwriter will be unique, but I also know there are insights I can share with you that will encourage and equip you in all the ways I once so desperately needed. All I know I freely and joyfully give you!

Let’s begin with why the church needs *you* to write new songs.