Playing Music – That's Not How the Song Goes

Adam Hellyer 20 January 2017



Every now and again, usually when working with a new group of musicians, it happens. We're playing a song, when someone will get a pained or frustrated expression on their face, and before anyone can stop them, they've said it: 'That's not how the song goes'.

When this happens, the answer I give is always the same. It's something that has always made sense to me, and yet I keep meeting people for whom it is a new and revolutionary idea.

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repeated-big-chorus-to-fade, then that's ok. There's no prize for sounding like the recording. The only measure of how well we've done is if the people worship God.

Again I say, 'We don't serve the songs, the songs serve us.'

A song is usually just a vehicle to get the worshippers to worship. It is a means to an end, not an end in itself. If we need to repeat one part or skip another part, that is fine. If we don't use the same drum beat or include the guitar solo, Jesus is still glorified. Occasionally, there may be a real sense that a particular song is important or specially anointed for that moment. Even then, the aim should always be to worship, to use the song to direct people towards God, not to reproduce the song as it was once recorded.

If people leave our meetings saying, 'That song was amazing', that is never as good as if they leave saying, 'Isn't God amazing?'

The Arrangement is Not the Song

Often church bands make the mistake of confusing the arrangement for the song.

The order of verse and chorus, the repeats, the loud and quite moments and the guitar breaks are all The Arrangement. The words, the tune and the chords accompanying them are The Song.

If you've ever listened to an unplugged version of Bryan Adams' Summer of '69, or Phil Wickham's Cannons alongside the full band version, you'll appreciate how even the same artist, recording the same song, can play it in two very different ways. Good recording artists don't stick to one 'performance', yet so many church bands are a slave to the recording.

Change How You Learn a Song

The change begins with how we learn a song.

First learn the song: the words, the tune and the chords. Learn the verse and learn the chorus. Then learn how to get from the verse to the chorus. If there's a bridge, learn to get to that and back again too. Don't start by working out the guitar riff!

Learn to play each section loudly and quietly. Then, when you know it, practice the whole song, flowing from section to section, following the worship leader as they follow the Spirit.

If you want to, listen again to the recording. Listen for parts of the arrangement that make the song unique. The tune and words should be a big part of what makes it unique, but you may also notice a riff or chord sequence that is instantly recognisable – learn this, and see if it fits with the

way you are playing the song. If there isn't anything, or if it doesn't fit, don't worry.

Make the Song Your Own

Don't feel you have to do everything they do on the recording. Interpret the song for the context you are in and the musicians you have. You don't have to play the lead guitar parts on the piano, or replicate the synthesised drum loops on your acoustic guitar! Don't be a slave to the recording.

It could be, after all that, you still sound like the recording. That's OK too. But always remember: first prize is only that the people are worshipping. And however you play it, that's EXACTLY how the song goes!