

The Stories Behind Our Favorite Worship Songs

Pentecostals and charismatics have an inseparable bond with worship. Expressive, heartfelt and Spirit-led worship is a cornerstone of the Spirit-led experience. Some songs have come to define who we are over the years. “So exalt, lift up on high the name of Jesus/ Magnify, come glorify Christ Jesus the King.” These lyrics form the chorus of Jack Hayford’s iconic worship song “Majesty.” Hayford’s “Majesty” is just one of those heart-stirring anthems.

Music mixed with the presence of God is a powerful force indeed! Music can move us beyond our pain. It can lift us higher in our praise of God, ignite a larger fire in us for evangelism, take us deeper into worship, increase our faith to press toward a miracle and inspire us to proclaim victory over darkness. Let’s examine the story behind some of our favorite worship songs as we seek to embrace them in the Spirit and, in turn, tap into even more of the life-creating power they produce.

“Loved on, song is life-begetting. It is a natural means of uniting together, a beautiful means of praise and worship, and a powerful means of challenging darkness and declaring the truth,” Jack Hayford wrote in an online article titled “The Power of Song.”

“Song is a powerful instrument because it is so basic to worship. When it is worked out in the experience of our daily life, it becomes a manifestly powerful means of sustenance, triumph, creativity, deliverance and ongoing growth and development in the way of the Lord.”

In his book *Majesty*, Hayford describes a road trip in Great Britain with his late wife, Anna, that prompted him to write

the song "Majesty" in 1977. As they drove northward from the south of Wales through England and up into the northern part of Scotland, they stopped at many castles and saw many royal symbols celebrating the 25th anniversary of Queen Elizabeth's succession to the throne. He sensed that in such regal surroundings, a person would grow up believing they were put on this earth to influence the world in a magnificent way. He also sensed the majesty of Jesus Christ and the royalty that joint heirs with Christ have as sons and daughters of God Almighty.

One day as the couple drove through the beautiful countryside, "Majesty" flowed into Hayford's heart, and he asked Anna to write down the opening lines and melody as God brought them forth. When the two returned to their home in California, he completed the song that became a classic and has inspired worshippers around the world to sing, "Magnify, come glorify, Christ Jesus the King" for nearly 45 years.

Holy Combination

Sometimes a song grows in the songwriter's heart for years before its birth. Such was the case with "Revelation Song" by Jennie Lee Riddle. The Holy Spirit planted the seed for this song in her heart when she heard "I Hear Angels" by Gerrit Gustafson soon after giving her life to Jesus in 1988. Over the next 10 years, she often sang Gustafson's song to her children as a lullaby, multiplying her passion for all creation to see and hear the glory of the Lord.

Eleven years later, while singing those familiar lyrics—"I hear angels singing praises/ I see men from every nation, bowing down before the throne"—to her fourth child, she asked the Holy Spirit to help her write a song, a song that portrayed His glory, an anthem already sung by God's creation. She gently put the baby down to play and strummed the four guitar chords she had taught herself the day before.

As Riddle meditated on Ezekiel 1:26-28 and Revelation 4, the Holy Spirit brought images to her mind. She paired descriptions of those images with what she felt was a heavenly melody, singing the holy combination time and again in the weeks to come.

Now, 25 years later, many worship leaders cast vision for their congregations when they first introduce "Revelation Song" by sharing Riddle's testimony. Week after week, her anthem remains at the top of the charts for songs most downloaded by worship leaders worldwide. Countless voices rise in unified praise every Sunday: "Clothed in rainbows of living color/ Flashes of lightning, rolls of thunder." The song's awe-inspired text, combined with throbbing chords, allows worshippers to envision all creation joining the angelic chorus at the throne.

Powerful Proclamation

Suffering from a degenerative eye condition, Henry Smith had trouble finding work after graduating from seminary in 1978 when he wrote, "Give Thanks (With a Grateful Heart)." He based the song on 2 Corinthians 8:9: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might be rich." Though poor in funds and weak in eyesight, Smith used his song to encourage gratitude and the powerful proclamation of the strength and riches believers have because of Christ's work on the cross.

The story of how this song traveled around the world from Williamsburg, Virginia, to become one of the most popular praise and worship songs of all time affirms the miraculous. A U.S. military officer heard Smith perform "Give Thanks (With a Grateful Heart)" in church. Moved, he shared the lyrics and melody with a congregation in Germany, where he was stationed. From there, the song spread across Europe and became a standard hymn.

Imagine how shocked Smith must have been when his song showed up on Integrity's Hosanna! Music audio cassette and on Don Moen's Give Thanks album nearly a decade later. When he contacted Integrity about his authorship, representatives from the music publishing group told him they had been trying to track him down and offered him a writer agreement.

"Shout to the Lord" becomes even more inspiring and eye-opening when we discover how it flowed out of prayer during an overwhelming time in Darlene Zschech's life. In an interview with St. Augustine Magazine, she said that in 1993 she was feeling crushed by the weight of a heavy tax bill. "There seemed to be no way out of the situation, save for the hand of God."

Desperately seeking peace from on high, she turned to Psalm 96 while plucking the keys of the piano her parents gave her as a child. Zschech remained focused on the Scriptures but now sang along. As she repeated the words, she noticed her depression disappeared, and her joy returned. She realized an incredible truth: God had given her a worship song.

As she sought comfort and shelter, Zschech received the lyrics, "My comfort, my shelter, tower of refuge and strength/ Let every breath, all that I am, never cease to worship you." Her song inspires us to praise God through our own struggles and "Shout to the Lord, all the Earth, let us sing."

Personal Revelation

Current praise and worship hit "Way Maker" also came to life during its songwriter's time of struggle. Longtime Nigerian gospel singer/songwriter Osinachi Kalu Okoro Egbu, known as Sinach, found herself in a season of change when she wrote it, concerned about the doors God had closed. In an interview with CNN Africa, she describes the season before He gave her the song as a time of transition when "I had to latch on to His presence and seek His face."

Sinach also says as she was writing “Way Maker,” a friend called her with a prophetic word: “You are going to write a song that will change the world.”

“Which one?” she inquired.

“This one!”

After giving her the song, Holy Spirit also brought her a personal revelation that would call her to action. “God said to me, ‘You see, I am Your way maker and that promise keeper,’” she explains. “And He said, ‘My Word will bring light to every situation.’”

Sinach and her team responded quickly to that promise, uploading to YouTube a recording of her singing “Way Maker.” Released from Lagos in 2015, the song snowballed around the world and had approached the level of a cross-denominational worship standard when Michael W. Smith’s daughter introduced him to it in 2017. When Smith released his version in 2019, the song, already known as a global anthem of hope, became the go-to comfort song for the American church during the pandemic.

Sinach says she takes great delight in the way other artists have extended and expanded the song’s reach. “The joy of a writer is that when you write a song, the whole world will sing it, because the song is really not about you,” she says. “If the song goes ahead of you to announce you before you even show up, that means the song is successful.”

Inward Connection

But not all songs are born during an author’s time of personal struggle. When Paul Baloche wrote “Open the Eyes of My Heart,” he was seeking God for a richer personal worship experience. As he taught at worship conferences, he noticed that the bulk of the teaching focused on external forms of praise and worship such as singing, shouting, clapping and kneeling.

God showed him the missing piece: an emphasis on inward connection with outward expression. "You can teach externals, but unless something is happening from the inside out, it's really just a form. It's like a cloud without rain," Baloché said in a 2011 interview for .

God also used a favorite pastor's prayer to impact the songwriter. "Lord, just open up the eyes of our hearts as we open up Your Word," the pastor told God before he preached. That prayer took Baloché to Ephesians 1:18a, "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened."

The external expression of his heart-cry came forth one morning during ministry time at his church, when he sang these repeated words: "Open the eyes of my heart, Lord. Open the eyes of my heart." That simple, sincere prayer became the lyrics to the song originally released in 2000 on Baloché's album *Open the Eyes of My Heart*.

In a similar way, fiery evangelist and songwriter Keith Green was asking God to tenderize his heart when he wrote, "Oh Lord, You're Beautiful." At a live recording of the song prior to his 1982 death in a plane crash at the early age of 28, Green told the audience the story behind the song:

"On Monday night this week, about midnight, I wrote a letter to the Lord. I didn't know where to mail it, so I put it in my Bible. And I asked him, 'Lord, You've got to do something about my heart. You know, a lot of time's gone by since I met you. And it's starting to harden up, You know.

"'It's kind of natural. I want to have baby skin, Lord. I want to have skin like a baby on my heart. It's starting to get old and wrinkled and callous. It's not because of anything I'm doing; it's because of a lot of things I'm not doing.'

"And I stayed up till about 2 in the morning writing this song."

Countless believers blessed by “Oh Lord, You’re Beautiful” in the late ’70s and early ’80s consider it—and Green himself—an unforgettable exclamation mark in their ongoing journey with the Lord.

Songwriters often search the Scriptures until the Holy Spirit highlights a verse or passage. In other cases, they set aside sabbatical times to collaborate on songwriting. Learning what passages of Scriptures or times of fellowship helped birth a particular song informs us in a way that moves us to further embrace it and expands its holy reach into our hearts.

Stories of praise and worship songs multiply when they become a part of our own personal stories. The rhema word God brought to us. The presence of God that captivated us. The pain He healed in us. The conqueror He revealed through us.

These stories also multiply through the stories of our corporate breakthrough. We embrace these songs and their stories as we embrace our stories of forgiving one another. These songs spur us on to unite with one another in unity and love. They allow us to share precious moments in His presence and deepen our faith that in Him, all things are possible.

True worship lifts our spirits and imaginations into heavenly spaces. Hayford is correct. Let us come and magnify Him!

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