

A Word About Words.

I beg your indulgence for this bit of personal history, but it does have to do with our craft.

A little over half a century ago, as my hormones began to flow, I developed acne, facial hair, and a lower voice. As my mother was choir director of the local church, I was immediately recruited into its bass section. Our family had always been musical, but this was something special. For a small church in an even smaller town, the music we made was really rather good and I loved it. There is nothing like forty-five voices ringing out the old hymns, an occasional upbeat gospel tune, and even the old classics to get the juices flowing. In spite of the fact that there were no flatted sevenths (I don't think that either John or Charles Wesley knew what they were) and the chords were straight forward, they were great. Even now, as I think back on it, I get goose bumps.

But I had a problem. Not only had adolescence brought on the acne, facial hair, and bass voice triad, but the raging hormones demanded some sort of teenage-rebellion. Now I am quiet sort of guy and always have been. I like peace in our time, at least peace in my time, but I did love those major chords echoing off the vaulted church ceiling. Besides that, and not just incidentally, all the cutest girls were in the choir as it was the only act in town. So it didn't serve my purpose to refuse to sing, burn the church down, or start a counter-counter-counter reformation. I took the easy way out. I tuned out angels, heaven, heavenly hosts, and all the religious imagery of the songs. I tuned out the words. I sang them but, in my rebellious pagan heart, they were meaningless, it was the notes that were important.

Later in college, I continued in the same mode. Singing Deutsche "Lieder" didn't help much as I damn near flunked German. So I continued to sing the notes, enjoy the harmony, and seldom learned a second verse to anything as I had already enjoyed the harmony the first time through.

The came the "Great Awakening."

I was in the Air Force, saving our country from communism and bored silly, when my wife gave me a guitar as a birthday gift. Now the guitar was making the harmony and I was alone on the vocal. As I struggled through my 1,4, and 5 chord progressions, one of the first songs I learned was "Red River Valley." That was when it hit me. I challenge anyone to sit alone in a darkened room and sing "Come and sit by my side 'ere you leave me, do not hasten to bid me farewell..." I am sure you have heard countless country singers warble this oldie but that doesn't count. You have to do it yourself to feel the lump in the throat and the incipient tear in the eye that comes with the imminent parting of a loved one. Perhaps even a final good-bye. Yes indeed, and much to my amazement, I found that WORDS COUNT.

Now we fast-forward the same half a century, and I am still finding that words count. We can't "sell" the song unless we know the words. I mean KNOW the words. "You smiled when we parted..." She did what? She smiled, she was happy to get rid of me and I thought I was her one true love. Of course it "hurt me somehow", it tore me up completely. "I've hung around you just like a fool." I couldn't talk and when I did it made no sense. I did dumb things just to get her attention and then wondered why in blue blazes I acted like that. Come on guys, we still do it. Climb that ladder, drive a little too fast, lift that too heavy box, etc. The point is WORDS ARE IMPORTANT.

Knowing the words will allow us to sing with confidence. When we sing with confidence, we are relaxed, and can enjoy the song. If we enjoy it, you can bet your sweet bippy that the audience will love it.

And not just incidentally, it also sounds better when every one begins the words at the same time and we don't have the Porky Pig effect, "Th, Th, Th, That's all, folks."

But it's not all. I have one last suggestion. On our new songs (we now have nine from June 2001 to June 2002) take the time to sit down and write out the words. Look at them. Think what they mean. None of our memory banks are as good as they used to be, so if you can't write it out the first time you try it, do it again. The notes will come much easier if you are not worrying about the words.

Now "Th, Th, Th, That's all, folks."

Bernie Martin
VP Music and Programming
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