



April, 2017

Shooting Our Wounded



Please let me introduce you to my friend, Steve Siler, Director of Music for the Soul

"When a pastor shares that he has a struggle with pornography, instead of getting him help, the first thing a congregation does is take him out back and shoot him."

The unexpected burst of applause from a gathering of three hundred pastors in a Cincinnati area church startled me. I'd hit a nerve.

In that moment I felt like I got a glimpse of something I'd been suspecting for many years. That pastors feel up against it. As congregants, we expect pastors to be paragons of virtue; stalwart moral compasses, gifted orators, theological gurus, and caring chaplains. Any one of these all by itself would be a high bar. When combined, the expectations are Olympian!

Not content with having them be simply an intermediary, we ask them to stand in for God, and in so doing hold them to an unreasonable standard. We count on them to steer us through our deepest pain and in every situation have wise and dependable council. But in so doing, forget that they are human beings, fellow seekers, and sinners, on the faith journey.

When they stumble all too often we fail to show them the very same mercy and grace that we expect them to show us.

When I first got the idea for Music for the Soul one of the reasons was that I believed we expected too much of our pastors. Pastors don't go to seminary to learn about issues like eating disorders, and sexual abuse, and pornography addiction. And yet the truth is that every issue under the sun is represented in the lives of those sitting in the pews on Sunday morning.

I felt like maybe I could provide something that would serve different hurting populations amongst churchgoers and be a support for pastors at the same time.

I envisioned a person coming in to a pastor's office and sharing a personal problem and their pastor being able to swivel around and reach out for a CD on a shelf behind his or her desk, swing back around and say, "listen to this."

God planted that vision in me twenty years ago while I was a staff writer on music row in Nashville, TN. At that time I was writing Christian "hits" that were "safe for the whole family." I felt blessed and grateful to be able to spend my days writing songs to encourage people in their faith. But I increasingly felt like there were people out there drowning in deep water while we were creating songs that stayed close to the surface in the shallow end of the pool.

After reading a book about the alarming rise of self-harm among teenage girls I decided to approach an executive at Word Music. I shared with him my vision for a project that would encourage young women to see themselves as persons created in the image of a loving God—and encourage teenage boys to treat them with respect. "The churches only want Christmas and Easter," he replied.

That was the day I realized I was going to have to start a not-for-profit music ministry if I was going to write the kinds of songs I was feeling called to write.

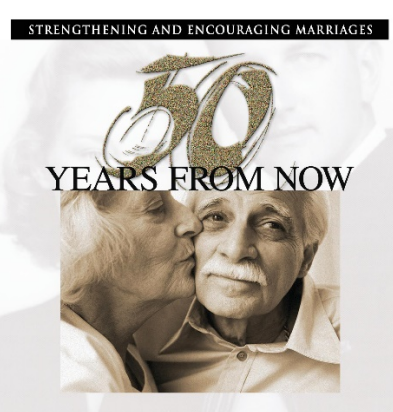
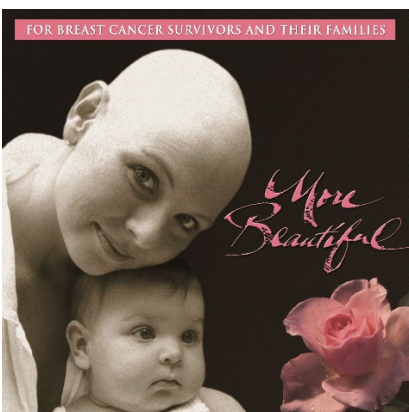
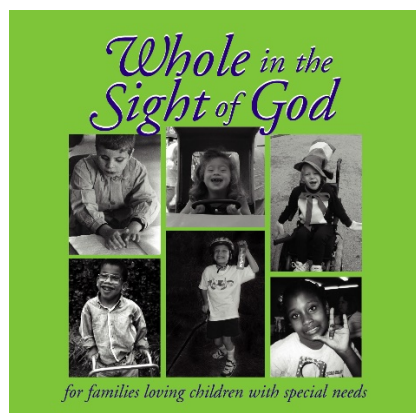
Actually, the seed for that idea had been planted years earlier in Los Angeles. I'd been writing music for television and pursuing a pop songwriting career. Upon hearing my first song on the radio I didn't have the mountain top experience I'd been expecting. Disillusioned, I went into our church in the middle of the night and asked God what I was supposed to be doing with my life.

He answered that prayer by sending me a stage play project intended to help sexually abused girls. The play was based on a book called I Can't Talk about It. I was asked to write four songs for the piece. That assignment changed my life. Eventually I wound up producing a recording of the sound track of the play.

"For twenty-five years I took drugs to go to sleep. Now I listen to your songs," one woman told me, holding up copy of our recording. After a live performance another lady said of one of the songs, "People have been telling me I was an innocent child all my life. But I never believed it until I heard you sing it today."

These experiences resulted in me feeling the need to create a mission statement for my life. I wanted to be more intentional about the way I used the talents God had given me. Accordingly, I came up with a statement which has guided my work ever since. "My music will share the healing and compassion of Jesus Christ."

My Nashville songwriting experience had been a faithful and important step on that journey. But in 2000 it was time for a leap of faith. Music for the Soul was that leap.



Over the past sixteen years, by the grace of God and with the help of countless gifted and generous people of faith, I've been blessed to create music and video projects that use music to bring the healing and compassion of Christ to people who are hurting.

At Music for the Soul, we're able to use songs to communicate at a deep level. When I started the ministry it was because I had seen the power of a song to be transformative in someone's life. Since then, however, I've learned about the brain science behind it; the way God has wired us to respond to a song!

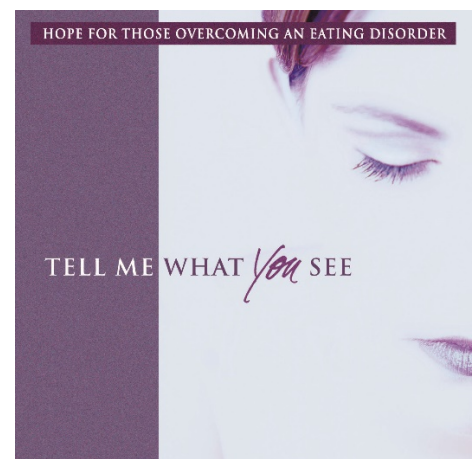
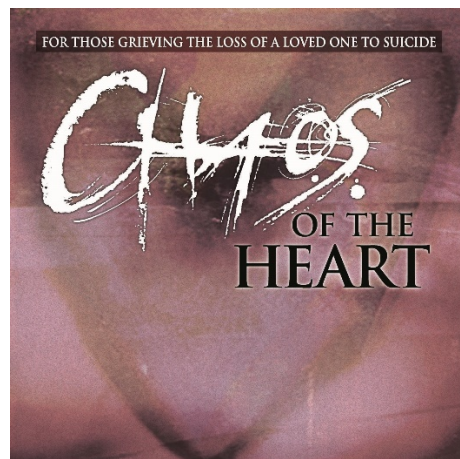
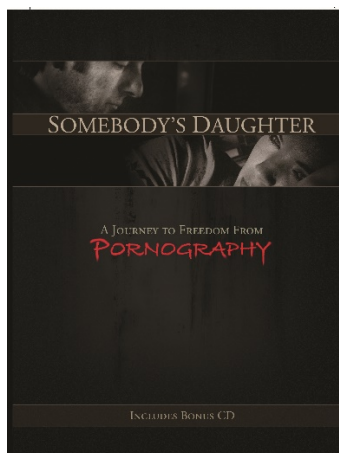
Trauma is stored in the right hemisphere of the brain. Interestingly, that's where our brains process melody. Language, on the other hand, is processed primarily in the left hemisphere of the brain. A song connects the two! Colloquially, we refer to this as mind and heart.

Melody and rhythm are also powerful memory devices. One study I heard about said people remember nine times more of what they hear in music than what they are told. This is probably why I can remember lyrics from songs I haven't heard in thirty years but I can't remember where I put my keys this morning. Pastors might be wise to start singing their sermons!

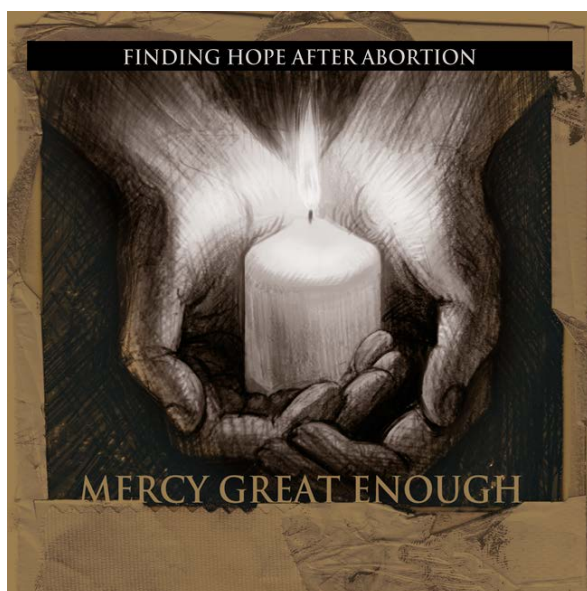


What it comes down to is this. We all build walls to shield ourselves from deep pain, guilt, and shame. Music seeps through the cracks in those walls. It unblocks us.

That's why Music for the Soul intentionally takes on issues that are difficult to talk about. In so doing, we strive to equip pastors and therapists with resources that help them serve those in overwhelming pain. We want the people who hear our songs to have hope that healing and freedom are possible.



Among the dozen issues we've tackled are pornography (Somebody's Daughter - hence my talk to the pastors in Cincinnati), suicide grief (Chaos of the Heart), and eating disorders (Tell Me What You See).



Our latest project *Mercy Great Enough*, is designed to help heal women and men struggling with guilt and shame over an abortion in their past. According to one ministry leader in the abortion healing community this is part of the personal story for one-third of the Christians in the United States.

People ask me all the time, "How do write songs about abortion, pornography, and suicide?" My short answer is that the songs aren't about the issues. The songs are about the lived experience of people and the infinite love of God.

"Abortion can overwhelm us in the aftermath of choice, affecting our minds, hearts, bodies and spirits. Comprehensive healing is required and *Mercy Great Enough* seeks to fill that need. There is something here for every heart broken by abortion--healing, hope, comfort and restoration. I wish everyone who needs this could hear it. **And I hope every pastor will include this resource in their counseling care.**" Kim Ketola

<http://cradlemyheart.org/2017/03/20/music-soothing-hearts-broken-abortion/>

There are two other answers to the question that go a little deeper. The technical answer is that we do a ton of research. We interview pastors, therapists, and people who have found healing and freedom from whatever the issue might happen to be. Then we apply the craft of professional songwriting to telling the story. Once we've written the material we go back to those same people to see if the songs resonate with truth. Once we get a consensus, only then do we record.

But there is the spiritual side to the process as well. The prayers. Committing all of the writing to the Lord. Trusting God to lead us in creating something that will accomplish what He has in mind for each person who hears the song.

Because of this approach we are able to speak with truth into places of deep darkness. I've learned that people won't trust you with their hope until you demonstrate that you understand their pain. And of course no one understands our pain better than the One who created us.

People need to know that they are not alone—that someone else understands. That God understands. Our researched and prayerful approach allows us to show that God knows what the listener is going through and is there in the midst of it with them.

The song 'The Cost' on *Tell Me What You See*, the record about eating disorders, is a good example of what I'm talking about. The singer actually says, "You can't make me eat if I don't want to. Why are they so obsessed with making life a restaurant? They can't deny me control."

A song like this establishes our credibility with the disordered eater who may then take us seriously when we start to talk about healing in a song like 'Beautiful Jesus.'

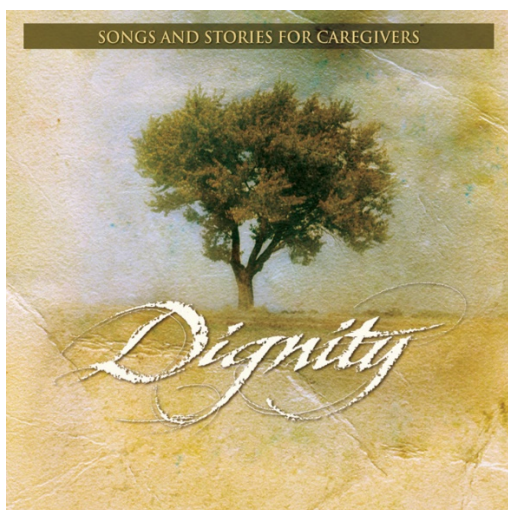
Graciously, God has continually surprised me through the years, pulling back the curtain and allowing me to see how our songs are being used to change people's lives. God is under no obligation to give me evidence but it is certainly appreciated, especially in those times when my faith gets a little wobbly. Invariably it is during the most challenging times that the most incredible stories come.

Amazingly, God even granted me the rare privilege of actually seeing the vision I had all those years ago come to life! A pastor came up to the Music for the Soul booth at a conference I was attending. He started telling me how helpful our resources were in his ministry. Then he said, "When someone comes into my office and they're dealing with a difficult issue, I turn around, get one of your CDs off the shelf, hand it them and say 'listen to this.'"

I couldn't believe my eyes and ears but that really happened!

More gratifying still are the 'rubber meets the road' experiences. The woman caring alone for her severely disabled husband who wrote to us that having our music was like having a support group in her living room; the man who told us his marriage was saved when his sons made him sit down and watch our Somebody's Daughter video because they knew he had a problem with pornography; the aid worker struggling with depression who wrote to tell us that at the last minute our music prevented her from committing suicide.

And of course it is such a blessing when the pastors use our resources creatively to shed light on these areas of unspoken pain. One pastor in California bought one thousand copies of Somebody's Daughter and had them passed out at the door to every man in the church as they came in for worship on Sunday morning. A pastor in Tennessee had us come and perform the entire Dignity project for caregivers in their congregation. Still another pastor planned a healing Broken to Bless themed weekend where we came in and performed a private in-home concert for church leaders on a Friday evening, a public concert in the sanctuary on Saturday evening, and then music in worship on Sunday morning. On Saturday evening a young man gave his heart to Christ at the conclusion of our time of sharing.



Heartrending stories emerge every time we intersect with a congregation in these ways. At a church in Oklahoma City after I performed the song 'The Apology,' a woman came up to me with tears streaming down her face, grasped both my hands, and exclaimed, "No man has ever said that to me before!" In the song someone recognized her story and spoke her truth. She felt heard.

You know we say in the church that the truth will set you free. I think from an evangelical standpoint it is critically important to tell the truth about abuse, addictions, disease, grief, etc. If we don't tell the truth about what people are going through in their lives they will have a harder time believing what we say about Jesus. I hear this especially when I talk to young people. I think this is vital for keeping the church pertinent and engaging with our youth.

While I started this ministry with the goal of sharing the compassion of Christ, I have found that every once in a while we have to bring a little bit of Old Testament Prophet energy to the process. It isn't possible to confront issues like these without examining where our own complacency as Christians may be a part of the problem.

As followers of Christ, if we shine the light of truth in the church then we can hold each other accountable and support one another in our own healing. Once we do that, we can better mentor, lead, and heal our own families. And once we do that, we can take the good news to the larger community without looking like hypocrites. (Matthew 7:3)

On the gentler side of the equation, by shining the light of truth on these difficult life situations we open ourselves up to a more large-hearted compassion. So many people have said to me over the years, "(Fill in the blank) isn't a personal issue for me. But I feel like I understand the issue so much better now." That understanding can lead to genuine concern and compassion. It isn't that we don't care. Sometimes, it's just that we've never really thought about it.

Another response I hear a lot is, "Until I found your ministry I didn't realize how many of these issues have touched my life."

Then the person will invariably recount a sister who had breast cancer, a cousin whose wife committed suicide, a co-worker who was caught looking at pornography, a best friend whose daughter is struggling with an eating disorder, and so on. These are not niche issues. These stories are all around us in the body of Christ. They are as close as the person sitting next to us on Sunday morning. And of course sometimes they are us.

I once saw a sign out in front of a Christian bookstore that said "Be kind. Everybody is having a hard life." I think that is true. Everyone, no matter how 'together' they look on the outside has struggled, or perhaps is struggling, with something painful.

Music can move our minds and hearts to be opened and connect us to our deep, shared humanity as sons and daughters of a loving God. It can move us from a place of comfortable detachment to a place of engagement and sensitivity. From that place we can love as we have been loved and forgive as we have been forgiven. (John 15:12)

We all know the power of music to comfort and inspire. That's why we have hymns and worship music. But in closing I would like to suggest something. Our approach to music in the church has historically, in my view, been too limiting.

In traditional mainline churches we have the hymnody and we stand up at four pre-designated times during the service and sing from the hymnal. If there is a choir they do a special song. Over the last twenty-five years many churches have turned to worship choruses, usually shared in a twenty to thirty minute block at the beginning of the service.

I have no objection to either of these approaches. They are fine insofar as they go. My problem is they tend to be mostly vertical in nature. They do a fine job of highlighting the first part of the great commandment—"love God"—but they pretty much ignore the "love your neighbor as yourself" part.

I see the perfect model of music in worship as being a triangle. God's love coming down to us and to the person beside us. Love, from both us, going back up to God. And our agape love reaching out to one another. Vertical worship and horizontal worship.



I talk more about this at length in my book Music for the Soul Healing for the Heart. In short, let me just say I believe the power of music is being under-utilized in the majority of churches. I believe it is a power that can help us experience the healing, compassionate love of Christ in a deep and profound way. And can also help us respond to the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

After all, Jesus is the Music for the Soul.

- Steve Siler

www.musicforthesoul.org



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