

Example Interview with Stephen Robert Cass

20 minutes



And you hail from ...?

Born May 16, 1958, to Robert C. and Peggy A. Cass. The oldest of four boys. I grew up like many other kids in the Midwest, freezing my toes by walking to school and delivering newspapers in -10 and -20F weather and shucking corn and attending state fairs in the summer. The sound of vocal harmony filled our house as my dad belonged to the Barbershop chorus and many quartets. I joined in with my dad and all the fun when I was about 17. After raising four boys, my mom began a career in politics. She was the Executive Director of the Iowa Women's Political Caucus by the time I was 14.

How long have you been playing in church, and how did that happen?

I grew up Catholic, and I was an altar boy at 12 years old. One Sunday we had a substitute priest. After Mass, we were hanging up our vestments, our church robes, and he asked me, "What do you think about Jesus?" And I told him that I liked the idea of getting to know more about Jesus, and he invited me to a Tuesday night prayer meeting. That's when my love affair with Jesus began.

That same year, I taught myself how to play guitar. I got a book of chords, sat on the side of my bed and practiced every day when I got home from school. And I was playing in church three weeks later and have been ever since that time. The two events are cemented together. I don't think that opening the door to Jesus and me teaching myself how to play in three weeks, good enough for a kid play in public, is a coincidence. 52 years playing in church and counting.

52 years, wow. That's a lifetime. Give me a brief summary of what you've done and where you've played.

A brief summary of 52 years? (chuckles) Ok. During that time, I've played electric and acoustic guitar and bass guitar and sang and traveled to over 100 churches, been the worship leader in my congregation during several of those years. I began playing in Catholic church in 1970. That's

around the time of the Vatican II council where Rome voted to turn the priest toward the people and say the Mass in their local language rather than Latin. Guitars were a new allowance in church, so my church started a Saturday night guitar Mass, and we played the new popular folk music from the St. Louis Jesuits and from others. Songs such as The Prayer of St. Francis, “Make me a channel of Your peace...” and Be Not Afraid, “Be not afraid, I go before you always. Come follow me, and I will give you rest.” So, I was among the first group of guitarists in the world to ever play in a Catholic church.

Where have I played? Other than always playing for my local worship team, when I was 18, I was invited to become a full-time musician and play for the Catholic Diocese of Des Moines, Iowa. I joined a band that traveled to all the Catholic parishes around the state of Iowa. We gave family workshops on Friday night, had a dance on Saturday nights, and played for Mass on Sunday mornings. That band not only travelled around Iowa, but we had dates in a few other locations around the country. Most notably, the band originated in Massachusetts, so we played there and also in St. Louis. I moved to Phoenix, AZ in '93 and began attending non-denominational church. That's when I began worship leading. Since coming to Phoenix, I've been the worship leader or team member for 7 different churches. For a few of those years, I joined the Worship Support Network and played guitar and bass in many different churches around Arizona. One Sunday I'd be playing bass in Wickenburg, which is about 40 miles northwest of Phoenix and the next lead guitar in Tucson, which is about 100 miles southeast of Phoenix.

We could dig in and talk about all those experiences in length, I'm sure. And we might return to some of it. But I'm interested to know what drove you to learn guitar, and then specifically to play in church? You talked about that briefly at the top, meeting that priest, teaching yourself how to play, but what drove you to stick with it for all this time? I'm sure you had other guitar adventures and bands, but you seem to mostly have played in church. Is that true?

Yes. That is true. It's also true that I had other band adventures and even today I play in a classic rock band. We play mostly in the trailer parks for retirees, which is huge, I might add, in Arizona! Very fancy and not-so-fancy places we play.

Anyway. Yes, I have mostly played in church in my life. And I've always been driven because of my love for Jesus. I don't know how to explain it. You know how it is, all kids learn some passion early, they want to become a firefighter or a doctor or a nurse. Me, once I latched on the pure love of Jesus and found this sudden urge to learn to play guitar, the two have become inseparable. As I said, I don't that teaching myself how to play guitar in three weeks and then playing in church right away at the age of 12 any coincidence. I mean, I began playing and singing for countless weddings by the time I was 15. I would never call myself a child prodigy, 'cause I've never been that good, but I was becoming a go-to musician for my community at that young age. Those were my thoughts coming of age. I have been driven to become better at my

craft in the pursuit of being a vessel for Jesus and my friends since I can remember. Those have always been my goals in life. To continue the pursuit of both of those things. I am consumed and know nothing else. Playing and singing in church and helping people celebrate their lives is who I am.

Your discography, listed at <https://songs4god.net/discography>, lists 14 albums. Have all of these albums been a part of your ministry?

Almost ready to release number 15. No date yet, but working on it. Yes, in some form or another, all have been a part of this ministry. The first few albums I was a musician/vocalist/studio tech for my childhood friend Pat McManus in Des Moines. Pat is a certified drug and alcohol counselor who began his own company, Rock in Prevention. Pat became wildly successful in writing and recording songs and traveling to give his message to keep young kids away from getting hooked.

Then when I moved to Phoenix, I began my own label, Solid Walnut Music. I had a couple solo albums and combined those with other writers and produced their albums. Our goal was to send our songs to Christian radio stations. We sent our works to Christian radio stations in over 15 countries. Then I have a few albums, including one to be released at a time TBD, in support of learning to write congregational songs. With the songs I've written and recorded then, to the ones I written and co-written and recorded recently, my CCLI, Christian Copyright Licensing, Int'l account displays over 70 songs. Not all the songs I've written and recorded go to CCLI, only the ones I feel might be used in church.

Explain for us who CCLI is and why you find them important to the Christian songwriter?

Christian Copyright Licensing, International was founded in 1985, first as Starpraise Music, by worship leader Howard Rachinski. He did this in response to a church being sued. In 1984, the Archdiocese of Chicago was sued by a publisher for making illegal copies of their songs. The suit was settled for 3.19 million dollars. Howard studied everything there was to know about copyright law and music used in church and then began to help churches protect themselves from lawsuits by selling blanket song licensing. He began by building trust and business relationships with the music industry and became an invaluable protector for churches.

Copyright law, Title 17 U.S. Code section 110, states that performance and display of a copyrighted work *during* a church service IS NOT a violation of copyright law. During services is the key in the law.

Two things: intellectual property holders are not being paid for the use of their songs and the display of their lyrics during a church service. And they deserve to be paid. That is the first solution Howard came up with. His licenses not only paid a portion to the large publishers in the music industry, but to any independent music publisher who signed up with them to be paid when their songs are used in a church service. I get paid by CCLI whenever the songs I have

registered with them are used in a church service. CCLI now has over 160,000 licensed churches in North America alone, but over 250,000 across the world.

Second thing. Churches also need to understand that copyright law only protects them when they're using songs *during* a church service. The Archdiocese of Chicago was sued by a publisher because they made copies of songs *outside* the course of services. All churches do this in preparation for services. And the mega churches of this world are making mega copies of songs. So, CCLI and other church licensing agencies such as CCS, Christian Copyright Solutions, sell licenses to church specifically for uses outside of services: copying, music on hold, church gatherings, coffee shops, etc. So, the vast majority of the monies collected go directly to the holder of rights of the song. CCS pays its money directly to U.S. Performance Rights Agencies, but CCLI pays the rights holder directly to their bank accounts.

Every six months, I get a direct deposit from CCLI for any number of uses of my songs. And this is why it's important for the Christian songwriter. CCLI is a unique set-up for us. Any of us can join CCLI and get paid for our songs. Yet that concept is not widely known. But it's not just about the money. It's the unique concept that CCLI has where you register your songs with them and suddenly, they're available to 250,000 churches worldwide. CCLI has SongSelect, a service for licensed churches for every song available in their databank, currently over 100,000 songs. The church can get audio previews, lyric sheets, chord charts with automatic key chord transpositions, lead sheets, and vocal sheets for every song. Yes, there are distribution requirements for the songwriter to make before CCLI will offer each of these for their songs, but CCLI's distribution and reach is focused to niche and popular with worship leaders worldwide.

It's important for the Christian songwriter, and specifically for congregational songwriters to realize just how amazing this opportunity is for them and for their songs. This is not a tool to be used only by the major music publishers, it's a tool to be used by every congregational songwriter. Let me wrap this up by saying this whole CCLI distribution set-up is an important part of the concept of building a songwriting community in my book, *Fishing in Church*.

Ok. So, CCLI is important for the church songwriter. I want you to tell me more about that and what you say about building a songwriting community. I have a feeling that both are important to your book. Tell me about your book.

Yes, they're both integral to the book. This book, *The 5 Steps to Get Your Song Heard* is a complete guide on the philosophy, craft, and business of congregational songwriting. Using custom tools, I'll show the songwriter how to write passionate, compelling, life-changing, and heart of worship songs reflecting how God is moving in their home church. Their best songs are distributed locally, regionally, and nationally using a blueprint to build their own songwriting organization. This book is important for those who feel the call to write songs from God, and for those who would like to hear their songs in church. I have a plan for what they can do next. Great worship songwriting doesn't only happen in large churches and in the mainstream music industry. I'm going to show them how they can master the craft, serve their community, and get their songs heard.

What's unique about this songwriting book? What's your plan for the songwriter?

The 5 Steps to Get Your Songs Heard is a first-of-a-kind book focusing on the connection between theology, music, and the heart of worship to the technical aspects of songwriting. The mastery of this craft includes normal song construction education but goes far beyond. Because of their special audience, the congregational songwriter learns relevant communication skills to write listener-centric songs about the life, death, and promises of Jesus.

I challenge the writer to first embrace the ministry concept of Jesus, who made fishermen fishers of people. He taught his disciples to replace their fear with faith and to use the gifts that God has given them to accomplish life. This model from Jesus showed them how to hook hearts for God, and that's a design songwriters can follow.

The writer says "yes" to God in a well-defined way, deciding to *Make Jesus Famous* and not themselves in each step of development. They flourish as they identify their heart of worship, the higher calling of teaching the gospel, and their call to be a disciple of Jesus. When these matters of the heart are aligned with God's intention for their songwriting; as the writer goes deep in one-on-one journaling time with God; as they focus on creating songs that invite people to the foot of the cross, then the technical details of the craft will produce wonderful Kingdom fruit and memorable songs.

And the technical details are specialized. Not just unique, but different because of our audience. I designed custom tools for the tasks—the *Proverbs 27.17 Lyric Formula*, the *Proverbs 27.17 Melody Shape Tool*, and the *Proverbs 27.17 Song Critique Method*.

What's in it for the reader? They're answering God and placing themselves in community service for which they were designed. They become a highly skilled, sought-after song master who's a magnet to other writers and artists. Worship leaders and people of the church will notice a skilled songwriter.

Ok. So, tell me what the songwriting community is for the songwriter. What does that look like?

Yes, the songwriting and ministry education is only the beginning. I designed a blueprint to scale the experience and to help *Make Jesus Famous* for a community of songwriters. I base this blueprint on Proverbs 27:17—as iron sharpens iron, so we will sharpen each other. The custom Proverbs 27:17 tools mentioned above are designed for the unique advantages of group learning. We rise together in an organization of like-minded people for the sake of making disciples and getting our songs heard.

This dedicated group will write and deliver exciting songs for their communities! The songwriting organization is not designed to be a part of any church but is separate for a reason. First off, only the largest churches have the money and people to begin a songwriting group. And the worship leader, or whoever in the church oversees it in anything but the largest churches is

going to have trouble with goals and outcome for their songwriters. Churches and worship leaders have enough on their plate. I've talked with people that have joined or started church songwriter groups, and I'm all for them. But they talk about not having any specific outcomes for the songs or ways to get the songwriters involved in the church.

The 5 Steps to Get Your Songs Heard is about beginning songwriting groups apart from churches so they can be dedicated to the songs and the songwriters so they can serve their communities with their best songs. It's the songwriting community that is dedicated to open mic nights, workshops, guest speakers, song legal education, lyric and melody crafting exercises, co-songwriting breakouts, and the types of things you'd see with any songwriting association, but this is different. It's a grass-roots meeting place for songwriters of all levels to come together and be dedicated to getting their mission aligned with God's, learning congregational songwriting education, and the types of activities that are made to get their best songs out to their communities. One of the special tools, the *Proverbs 27.17 Song Critique Method* is designed to be a peer song critique forum designed specifically to help create the best congregational songs for the group. Then we'll get those songs demo'd, whether simple or full demos, create lyric sheets and chord charts and promote those songs to local churches in the community.

And the songwriting community can be made up of not only songwriters, but studio recording types and those who want to help administrate the songs: do the paperwork and prepare them for marketing. These songs are marketed to local worship leaders by the songwriting organization, not the songwriter.

The book shows songwriters about copyright registration, the legal rights of songwriters, royalty collections, and then provides a complete church legal guide. Some songwriters will be interested, some won't, but there will be those that are. Especially those non-songwriters that want to help administrate the organization and guide the songwriter. Most importantly, it invites the writer to know the benefits of opening, or being associated with, a publishing account with CCLI, which I mentioned earlier.

You mention “make Jesus famous.” I know that’s not just a nice thing you’re saying, but it actually means something in your book. Can you share what that is?

Sure. *Make Jesus Famous* a manifesto I created to help the songwriter in their quest to say “yes” to God and have that actually mean taking action. It's a list of decisions the writer makes for their ministry: 1) Know your calling. Just saying a blanket “yes” to God and “use me however” is not specific. Decide to learn the ways of congregational songwriting, 2) Decide that you're able to write songs better than anyone, and that you dedicate your time and talent towards that goal and write songs for the sake of the Jesus and for the ministry of writing congregational songs, not just writing songs, sending them into cyberspace and then wondering why nobody is listening to them, 3) There is no such thing as stardom. Everyone is called to their own mission. No one is waiting to whisk you away to write songs and make you a star. That just isn't reality. Spend your calories to *Make Jesus Famous*, 4) Seek songwriting education. Further your craft

and write out a dedicated plan to make it happen, and 5) YOU'RE in charge of writing your plans and your next steps for success. Somebody else's ministry is not yours.

The better explanation of this list is in the book in chapter 2, and also available at <https://songs4god.net> in an abbreviated form ready to place as a poster on the wall.

So, the *Make Jesus Famous* list is a part of the decision of the individual songwriter to dedicate themselves and their ministries to creating congregational songs for that purpose. This carries over to the songwriting community, where all songwriters will be on the same page with this philosophy. It is a part of the group DNA.

What else is a part of the songwriting group DNA?

Co-writing and critiquing songs for the express purpose of getting the best of the songs of the group out there. Rewriting is also a part of the group dynamic and is a direct outcome of learning song critique. Songwriters will write songs solo and in groups, and the songs they wish to share with the group are songs that the organization will use to promote itself and the songwriters. And the output for the group is that much stronger, just like the songwriter's individual learning that song critique and re-writing will take their song to the next level.

A part of the group DNA will be a common sense of purpose, that is to write listener-centric songs that will attract local worship leaders, so those songs are included in their services. It's about promoting local song theology: allowing the worship of your local congregation to reflect songs how God is moving in your community. That is, allow local songwriters to capture God moments from people in their congregations and bring those songs forward so the people of congregations can celebrate life.

Your book talks about creating a faith-based record company. What's that all about?

My solution for the songwriter continues with a blueprint with details of how to further scale the experience to the next level and build their own faith-based publishing and record company. The design makes all decisions based upon the heart of worship, not the dollar. Yes, the publishing and record label will be the profit center, while songwriting organization is not-for-profit. But it's your company, so you design it as you see fit. The bottom line is that this is a music company designed to be the champion of the songwriter and to *Make Jesus Famous* so songwriters will see their songs distributed locally, regionally, and around the world.

How? This company doesn't have to look or act like any other type of music publisher on Music Row in Nashville. No, it's driven by the grass roots philosophy of local song theology and the heart of worship. Small record labels and publishers have been designed like this around the globe for years, but few people have heard about them. But one company did grow based on local song theology and the heart of worship and turned out to be one of the largest faith-based publisher and record label of all time: Hillsong Church. There are plenty of naysayers about what Hillsong Church has become, but let's be absolutely clear: they started with the intention of

becoming a faith-based song publisher to distribute their songs to their community. To quote Steve McPherson, current manager of Hillsong Publishing and a guitarist in the band in their early years, their label resulted from people asking if they could get recordings of their songs. The church didn't start with any record company plans, but they believed God paved the way for that to happen.

Steve said “So, it wasn't about selling albums then and it never has been. The priority was writing songs that will inspire the people that God has entrusted us with to worship first—everything else was simply responding to the platform God continued to give to us.”

Dr. Tanya Riches spoke at a Worship Leader Magazine conference I attended in 2013. The conference was hosted by Chuck Fromm, magazine founder and Christian music legend. Ms. Riches has many accomplishments: pastor, songwriter, administrator of Hillsong United, and Master's Program director at Hillsong College, but perhaps none as big as a 15-year-old girl attending Hillsong Church who wrote a song for them during a trying time.

Tanya says, “When I was 15, I wrote a song called Jesus What Beautiful Name which ended up in the top 10 CCLI songs in Australia and New Zealand. And one thing that I'm very passionate about is that song is connected to a very particular story in our church. It was the first song released after our worship pastor stood down following a moral failure. As a 15-year-old, it was quite huge for me to think about because this was the song that encouraged Hillsong Publishing to keep publishing songs ... There are sounds that are particular to places and there are moves of God. And we're trying to recreate them. The Gospel and worship are universal, but sound is particular. Our job as worship songwriters is to find the sounds of your community ... it's really about them. It's about who they are. Worship with the sound from the grass roots.”

Hillsong released Jesus What a Beautiful Name in 1996 on their fifth live album, God is in the House. This was the first album release after Darlene Zschech became their worship leader. With the explosion of Darlene's song in 1993, Shout to the Lord, and a later 1996 distribution deal with Integrity Music for the U.S. market, Hillsong Music Publishing soon became an international phenomenon.

Steve McPherson published the Hillsong Publishing plan at

https://hillsong.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/article_attachments/202713147/Copyright_and_Music_Publishing_in_the_Church.pdf

This is a manifesto, a guide to copyright and music publishing in the church. It's how they go about running their faith-based publishing company. Between Steve's obvious success and my publishing experience and knowledge of music law, combined with the heart of worship values important to the church and to songwriters, I designed my own manifesto. This Hillsong paper doesn't go into details how the church operates their music company, but it does lay out their values. But this document isn't about the many decisions that Hillsong would make under any circumstance, it's more of a document showing the definitions of the things Steve believes any church or faith-based songwriting organization should know. For example, he writes about

registering your publishing name with industry organizations to prepare you to collect royalties for uses of songs. And he writes how it's important to register your publishing name with Performance Rights Agencies and gives a list of who they are in many countries.

There are a few areas that Steve's plan and the plan found in *The 5 Steps to Get Your Songs Heard* have in common. But the largest common area has to do with explaining the responsibilities of a music publisher. A music publisher is responsible to find uses for the song, called exploitations. They're responsible to:

- Publish sheet music, license the task to others
- Seek opportunities for the songs to be recorded and distributed, including record companies, artist, film, digital song services
- Collect fees and royalties for the exploitation of the songs
- Promote the reputation of their writers
- Prepare to protect the work in a court of law
- Take responsibility for all related administration (paper and digital trails. Cross all i's and dot all t's): registration of copyright (US only), registration of works with collection societies, maintaining copyrights and legal contracts

The top line of this, rather than saying the bottom line, is that a music publisher is responsible to the songwriter for finding uses for his or her song. For a publisher that doesn't have faith as a guiding principle, it all becomes a bottom line: a matter of money. For a faith-based music publisher, it all boils down to making enough money to support the heart of worship.

Hillsong's document doesn't go into detail how their income supports the heart of worship, but obviously, they've re-invested their earnings back into the church and their publishing company. It's been said that the songwriters of Hillsong pledge their own author share of royalties to the church, but the reality of that is a private matter. I do make that same suggestion in *Fishing in Church*, something to help support your own faith-based publishing company.

But the entire income and support and re-investment discussion is up to your situation. For the faith-based publishing company promoted in *The 5 Steps to Get Your Songs Heard*, it is simply an extension of the songwriting community, which is an extension of the congregational songwriter. The goals are the same, although all three have their own responsibility to support those goals. The main goals are:

- Educate and nurtures sought-after songwriters
- Write and deliver how songs on how God is moving in your community
- Record and market the best songs to the wider world

So, the songwriters have the goal to:

- become a sought-after and expert congregational songwriter
- Help *Make Jesus Famous*

the songwriting community has the goals to:

- facilitate the education and nurturing of the songwriter, and
- show them how to write songs on how God is moving in their communities and
- getting the best of those songs to their communities, and
- Help *Make Jesus Famous*

and the publishing company has the goals to:

- support the songwriting community and the songwriter in their goals,
- promote the reputation of the songwriter and the songwriting community, and
- make sure that the best songs are recorded and marketed to the wider world,
- all in the effort to *Make Jesus Famous*

I know I've repeated *Make Jesus Famous*, and I don't mean to overuse or to make light of the use of those words. Some take umbrage at the use of the term, saying that God is God, he is great, and he doesn't need to be made famous. My point is that our mission is to make the ways of God through Jesus, the teaching of Jesus, famous. To take his teachings and make them paramount in our lives, to promote that Jesus simply says that God is love and to offer grace and support to those around you, to lean on Jesus and his understanding and not my own selfish interpretation of who I think God is.

My point is that this entire effort in getting the best congregational songs to local communities and the wider world depends on the attitude of everyone to place the good of the kingdom of God first in all we do, and to make every effort to get our egos out of the way. That is why I introduce that *Make Jesus Famous* list early, in chapter two of the book, so the reader gets that this is a part of the DNA, and the message that all songwriter education, community, and publishing company talk are centered on a common goal.