

# At the heart of worship

Worship can seem as elusive as an exquisite sunset. In an attempt to bring it down to earth the Editor interviewed the well known worship leader and song writer, Phil Lawson-Johnston, and to Philip Roderick, founder of Contemplative Fire. We have also explored worship in a rural parish church and through the music of a Cornish Christian rock band

Photo: Martin Cavender

## WORSHIP IN THE LIFE OF PHILIP LAWSON-JOHNSTON

*Philip Lawson-Johnston, besides being a well known Christian worship leader and song writer, is a distinguished hand engraver of glass. His subject matter ranges from wild life scenes and portraits of people and animals to buildings and heraldry. He has completed numerous commissions for individuals, companies and institutions including members of the Royal Family. His book The Song of the Father's Heart (Terra Nova, £8.99) with a foreword by John Collins, is an excellent book about worship for musicians and non-musicians alike.*

The very first thing that inspired me at the beginning of the whole process of my understanding of worship was based on a passage in 2 Chronicles: 5 and 6 where they are dedicating Solomon's temple and there is the wonderful passage that says the trumpeters and singers joined together 'as with one voice to give praise and thanks to the Lord'. Then the temple was filled with a cloud and the glory of the Lord was so great that they couldn't carry on.

We were created to worship God. We sing songs to Him but what about the song He might want to sing to us, God's song of the universe expressing his heart? Scientists say that there is a note at the centre of the universe, and maybe there is some truth in that and God is the singer.

My aim as a worship leader has been to create a journey to take people from where they are, hot and dusty from the day to a place where it's just us and God together, letting Him speak, letting Him respond and then moving towards intimacy and closeness and ministry, filling and refreshing so that people go out stronger. Draw close to God and He will draw close to you.

### Worship takes in the whole of life

Worship, in its proper, fullest sense takes in the whole of life. Richard Foster's book *A Celebration of Discipline* has a lovely chapter on worship where he describes it as us responding to the overtures of love in the heart of the Father. It's God reaching out to us, wooing us with love and us saying 'yes' and loving Him in return.

I put together my own definition of worship: 'As far as I understand it true worship is the surrendering of our lives to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in response to



interview by Christine Zwart

all that He has done for us, showing His love supremely through dying on the cross, allowing ourselves to be loved by him and returning His love through obedience to His will and expressing it through what we sing and do.'

I was brought up in a family that was churchgoing, believing but quite private in an old fashioned sense. I went through the rebellious stage at school and afterwards because I was looking for something real. Then when I was about 19, I went to hear David MacInnes speak at Chelsea Town Hall. He spoke about Jesus in a way that I was not conscious of ever having heard before and about a relationship with Him. Then he led us in a prayer which I prayed and I regard that as one of the many stepping stones to real faith.

Then I got to the point when there was a big conflict between what at the back of my mind I believed and the way I was living, so I asked a cousin what do I do and he said 'Well the difference in my life is that I prayed to be filled with the Spirit'. So I prayed with him that God would baptise me with His Spirit and that was the turning point. There were no blinding lights, just a

sense of conflict dissolved and heaviness lifted.

### Flood of Christian songs

Until then I had been writing songs rather vaguely about light and truth: I was almost too embarrassed to sing about Jesus. But within a week of that prayer I wrote my first fully blown Christian song and for six months there was a flood of songs. It was like a purging and through that process I just began to be aware of sung worship.

In those days there was an American in London called Chuck Butler, who became a good friend, and he led this worship at a home group in London and I got my guitar and just sat beside him and followed what he did. When he left, everybody looked at me and said 'Now it's you' and suddenly I was thrust into leading. I had learned a lot of songs from him and then started writing my own and sourcing them from wherever, and that process has been going on for 34 years.

Within six months, in 1972, we had formed our group Cloud which lasted nearly 15 years. To begin with it was based in a place called The Kitchen off the Gloucester Road where we met with our friends and soaked up the Christian atmosphere. On a Sunday night we had a service at 8pm and people used to come from their churches. It was really one of the first contemporary worship gatherings, certainly in the Anglican Church.

For many years we just travelled around the country wherever we were asked. Then we got involved with St Paul's, Onslow Square and that joined up with Holy Trinity Brompton and we helped start the evening service in about 1975/6. I led the worship there until we left in 1988. Then in 1988 Cloud came to an end and we moved here to Oxford. From then onwards I have done much more travelling in the States as well as here and was 14 years helping to lead the worship at St Aldate's and then, for the last three, at St Andrew's, North Oxford.

### Worship in the Room

Cloud made seven LPs and I did several solos including 'Value Me' with Shelagh Brown with a book of testimonies from people who had had their self -

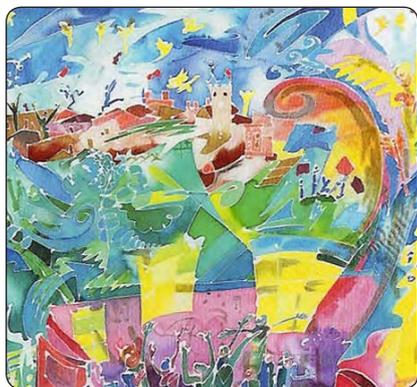
worth broken down. In more recent years I have had a sense of wanting to put together something which would enable small groups to worship and sing when they didn't have a musician to accompany them. So we created 'Worship in the Room'. We broke it down just to guitar, piano and voice and tried to make it sound as if we were sitting in the room with them. It was a cottage industry kind of album of familiar and new songs as well as hymns in order to make it very accessible. One of them, 'I Pray', is intended to provide a background and encouragement for prayer. We have had a very good response.

Over the years I have visited many country parishes. You get the big platforms in the big high profile churches and the New Wines and Spring Harvests which are a great encouragement. But I don't think there are many people there who go to rural parishes where they are struggling with small congregations and don't have the resources that some city churches have. I have always wanted to see a way of encouraging them and gently bridging gaps between the old and the new. I know the suspicions that a lot of people still have especially if they see a guitar. I try to tell them it's ok, you don't have to love this but just try and understand why people want to worship this way.

### The power of worship in the midst of pain

When my brother died earlier this year I had extraordinary experience at his funeral which was in the Highlands of Scotland. Everyone was just stunned by his death. Sylvia, his wife really wanted to worship in the service and so we did. As we processed out behind the coffin into the glorious setting of the hills and the heather all around, I had this incredible sense of my brother saying 'Its OK. It's great here and I can't wait for all of you to join me', and I saw him striding across the hills. One or two other people had the same experience. Again in St Paul's Cathedral, when Sandy Millar was being consecrated as a bishop, in the midst of the worship when we were singing 'Beautiful One' at the tops of our voices, I again had this sense of a scene in heaven with Jesus holding the hands of various people including my brother. They were all just dancing with our worship. I felt their joy as well as ours.

I really saw the power of praise and worship in the midst of pain, The two aren't separate, pain on one side and joy on the other. They intermingle. In fact that is the heart of the Gospel.



Philip's *Worship in the Room* series of CD's: *Your Presence*; *Your Faithfulness*; *I Pray*; *You Value Me* (a reissue of his *Value Me* audio tape) are available direct from him (£7.50) The *Value Me* book, written with Shelagh Brown, costs £5.99. For more details email him at: [glassengraver@lawsonjohnston.freeserve.co.uk](mailto:glassengraver@lawsonjohnston.freeserve.co.uk)



**How ReSource Director, Martin Cavender went to a Christian gig and left with a hoodie and a sense of the numinous**

There is a new worship experience travelling around Cornwall, brought together from a band of Christian surfers and musicians called 'Narrowpath'. I went down to be part of their gig at the Guildhall in St Ives at the beginning of May, and found the streets around the venue filled with enthusiastic, mostly young people just waiting for the doors to open. One said, 'This is the best thing that has happened in Cornwall for years', and another, 'This is really exciting – I'm a new Christian, and didn't know it could be like this'. A local newspaper said, 'Liquid church is the new "church without walls" pioneered by a Cornish Christian rock band'.

The Guildhall was filled with about 450 people, and the visual images were powerful long before the band started. There was real quality in the

visual offering right through the evening, for which a lot of the credit must go to Andy Neal, who lectures on graphics at Falmouth College. The gift clearly runs in the family – see some of Kate Neal's paintings in *ReSource* magazine, issue 2.

Then the music, which was brilliant; a fine combination of well-known worship songs and original compositions from a band made up of people who not only obviously like each other but also clearly love the Lord. This wasn't just performance, though the quality of the music was fine; the worship was happening as much at the front as in the main body of the packed hall. The work is supported by all the local churches, and some of their leaders came forward to read passages of Scripture during the evening. It was all held up in prayer, and surrounded by smoke and light. It was great!

Me? I thought it was a great worship experience, with a real sense of the numinous and the greatness of God. Small wonder a significant number of people came forward to commit their lives to Christ – and be linked in to a local church – as the evening was drawing to a close. There was full-blown evangelism at work in 'Liquid', handled with integrity. Oh, and I bought my first 'hoodie' as a souvenir, and have worn it ever since. The words on the front of it, a paraphrase of Matthew 11:29, sum it up for me – 'Learning the unforced rhythms of grace'. More, please.

If you would like to know more, then contact 'Narrowpath' through their website [www.narrowpath.co.uk](http://www.narrowpath.co.uk) and pick up the next date for the series of happenings which is 'Liquid'.



### ANOTHER MYSTERY

Another mystery  
Another question to be answered  
Another why? What for?  
Another heartbreak  
Another sorrow to be comforted  
Another when? How long?

In the fullness of time  
All will be explained  
In the long run we will know

And every tear will be wiped from our eyes  
Every purpose under heaven realised  
Every wound will be healed  
Every mystery revealed  
In the long run we will know

It's a time to trust  
In the light of all eternity  
A time to wait and see  
It's a time to cease  
Trying to find every answer  
A time to say  
'I don't know'

In the fullness of time  
All will be explained  
In the long run we will know

And every tear will be wiped from our eyes  
Every purpose under heaven realised  
Every wound will be healed  
Every mystery revealed  
In the long run we will know

In the meantime teach us how to live  
In the light of the promise You give  
Knowing your thoughts are higher than ours  
Knowing your ways are greater than ours  
But in the long run we will know

And every tear will be wiped from our eyes  
Every purpose under heaven realised  
Every wound will be healed  
Every mystery revealed  
In the long run we will know

Philip Lawson-Johnston ©2006 cloud songs

Philip wrote this song soon after the death of his brother Andrew this year and he has graciously allowed us to publish it here.