

WHY I WRITE SCIENCE SONGS

People keep asking me who my "target audience" is. And I keep getting flummoxed. So I've sat down and thought about it and finally worked it out. But first I need to give you some background.

I have a lifelong love of knowledge. As a kid my favourite magazine was "Look and Learn" which was a magical combination of great-story-telling, both fact and fiction, in words and pictures. The most influential book of my youth was "It's Fun Finding Out" – a compilation of articles from a daily newspaper in which a journalist went on outings with a "Renaissance Man" scientist called Chapman Pincher who rattled on amusingly and chaotically about odd scientific facts in a stream of consciousness stimulated by wherever they found themselves – in a churchyard, at a zoo, walking down the street. As an adult, undoubtedly more of my reading time has been devoted to New Scientist magazine than to anything else – my big treat on Thursday mornings is a long bath reading all the best (ie shortest!) bits of NS. The longer articles form my bedtime reading for the rest of the week.

The word "science" derives from the Latin for knowledge and I firmly believe that the one and only thing that separates humankind from other species is the ability and the drive to accumulate knowledge, to record it, to pass it on to contemporaries and to future generations, to analyse knowledge and to understand the implications of that analysis. All of the other great and valuable human characteristics (and in no way do I wish to diminish their importance) can also be found in the behaviour of other animals: love, loyalty, parental and filial care, self-sacrifice, communication, community, artistic creativity (albeit somewhat limited) – even eccentricity.

I find myself with a particular talent – the talent to write words and melodies that people seem to love and enjoy. With my obsession with knowledge – also known as science – how could I not compose science songs? Just as so many songwriters want to share their joy in a love affair or their despair at its loss, I want to sing from the rooftops (metaphorically!) my joy in the huge burst of knowledge-acquisition currently occurring in our society.

I want to open the eyes of the creationists with their self-limiting view of the world to the awesome wonders of the microscopic and macroscopic universe around them. I want the celebrity-obsessed telly-addicts to turn their faces to the sky and really see for the first time the incredible vastness and beauty of a universe that renders the silly flickerings on their TV screens redundant and meaningless. I want toddlers and infants to sing of deoxyribonucleic acid with no concept of what it means so that a few years hence when they see that phrase written down they won't just skim over it as being "too hard" – they'll recognise it and be intrigued to find out more.

I want people who think it's a crying shame to "waste" all that money on space research or the Large Hadron Collider to hear or sing a song like "Stargazing" or "String", to be moved by the melody and to wonder how songs about such "cold facts" can bring tears to people's eyes (and they do...) and to wonder if it just might be worth looking into those things a little more.

I want MIT string theorists and Harvard microbiologists (actual audience members and performers at the Cambridge performances of my "Powers of Ten" science oratorio) to be moved by the expression in music of their own love for their subject and to be stimulated to communicate with others about it through that experience. I actually witnessed this happening at a performance of

"Powers of Ten" in May 2008 when the string theorist I have in mind, Washington Taylor, engaged in animated conversation with other members of the audience at the interval, just after hearing my song "String".

I want children in an Indian village, or teenagers in a Chinese mega-city to learn my songs as part of their English class, and to pick up concepts and vocabularies that will lead them to seek further education and jobs that will help them be part of the renaissance of the developing world.

I could go on, but I think you get the idea. My songs are not "educational songs" in the narrow sense of helping you learn a few facts. They do that, but only incidentally. Much more importantly they celebrate science, communicate my enthusiasm for the endless vistas of knowledge and discovery that science opens up, bring out the humour in science, the weirdness of it (nine-tenths of the cells in your body are bacterial!), the mystery of it (dark matter and dark energy), the wonder, beauty, excitement, awesomeness of science. I'm trying to do for science what Bach and Handel did for Christianity. Okay, I can't compete with them in the musical stakes, but my music does enthuse, excite and move people of all ages, all backgrounds, all musical tastes and abilities.

So what is my target audience? Everybody. Literally, everyone in the world is my target audience. I'm actually a pretty modest person and I have to steel myself to say it. It sounds grandiose, vainglorious, big-headed, but how can I possibly limit it? And why should I? My target audience is everybody.

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