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The “Sing Me a Story” Project: A Study of Songwriting and Its Impact on the Disabled

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A Senior Honors Thesis project submitted to the Honors Program
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Bachelor of Music

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I. Introduction

The “Sing Me a Story” project is an initiative with the purpose to explore the therapeutic effect of songwriting on young adults with disabilities. With sessions taking place over the course of several weeks, the project is inspired by my own experience and incorporates research on the ever-growing field of music therapy. Participants are invited to join me for co-writing sessions where they will help write a song that expresses their original ideas and emotions. As we get to know one another and the songs are written, the goal is for participants to experience greater confidence in conveying and communicating their thoughts to others, with the music acting as a medium of self-expression.

As a child, I had various disabilities and developmental delays: motor skill disabilities, limited mobility, speech impediments, behavioral disabilities, and sensory overload disorders to name just a few examples. Most of my setbacks were thought to be permanent obstacles that would forever impede on my quality of life. Instead, through the love of my family and my parents’ ability to find the doctors and therapists I needed, these setbacks that once seemed to be mountains suddenly became anthills. Creative art therapy stood out among all of my various appointments as a place where I could effectively communicate myself. My communication disabilities proved to be the most difficult of all of my setbacks, and art therapy changed everything. I have seen the healing power of the arts for the disabled firsthand and have a passion for this project well beyond a passing grade or a college degree. From the very beginning of my thesis project journey, I wanted to combine my love for the commercial music industry and songwriting with the therapeutic power of music. By facilitating and channeling participants’ original creativity through music, I wished to explore the idea that music is truly a medium through which people of all abilities can effectively express themselves.

I will begin this thesis by outlining research already completed on songwriting within the field of music therapy that aided in preparation for this project. Then, I will describe the process of the songwriting sessions and completion of the project. Next, I will share the synopses of three of the songs written and give a brief overview of how we arrived at the topic of each song. Finally, I will reflect on the completed project describing how participants responded to the experience as well as what may be done to improve the project in the future.

Please note that I am not a board certified music therapist; rather, my work is a glimpse into the therapeutic value that music and songwriting provide. The overarching goal of this project is to propose this alternative creative outlet, as songwriting may be a way to support the emotional needs of others.

II. Research

“Songwriting: Methods, Techniques and Clinical Applications for Music Therapy Clinicians, Educators and Students” edited by Felicity Baker and Tony Wigram

This book describes the effective use of songwriting in music therapy with a variety of client populations, including young adults with dis-Abilities. Various authors propose methods to consider in order to achieve the best outcomes. All the contributors are experienced music therapy clinicians and researchers. They provide many case examples from clinical practice to illustrate the therapeutic methods being used, together with notated examples of songs produced in therapy. Particular emphasis is placed on how lyrics and music are created, including the theoretical approaches supporting this process.

“Therapeutic Songwriting in Music Therapy Part I: Who are the Therapists, Who are the Clients, and Why is Songwriting Used?” by Felicity Baker, Tony Wigram, David Stott, and Katrina McFerran

Songwriting continues to be increasingly used as a therapeutic practice; however, most research on this practice focuses on clinical outcomes rather than the process. This study describes the most frequently employed goals of therapeutic songwriting across a range of clinical populations and compares these findings with other studies done. Their data was gathered via an online survey which focused on approaches to songwriting within their practice. The survey identified that the most frequently desired goals are: (1) experiencing mastery, developing self-confidence, and/or enhancing self-esteem; (2) improving decision making skills; (3) developing a stronger sense of self; (4) externalizing thoughts, fantasies, and emotions; (5) telling one’s personal story; and (6) gaining insight or clarifying thoughts and feelings.

“Therapeutic Songwriting in Music Therapy, Part II: Comparing the Literature with Practice Across Diverse Clinical Populations” by Felicity Baker, Tony Wigram, David Stott, and Katrina McFerran

A growing body of literature on therapeutic songwriting indicates that clinicians employ a wide range of songwriting methods and approaches. This research establishes trends in the clinical practice of songwriting as implemented across a range of clinical populations. Another online survey focused on approaches to songwriting within their practice. Generally, songs were composed with individual clients in single sessions, with lyrics created prior to the music. Clinicians had a significant role in creating the music with improvised and pre-determined musical structures being equally employed.

“Songs Composed for Use in Music Therapy: A Survey of Original Songwriting Practices of Music Therapists” by Jennifer D. Jones

While researchers have documented the effectiveness of clinical songwriting in music therapy, limited research has been conducted on the actual songs composed by music therapists that address clinical goals. As a response, this research examines the original songwriting practices of music therapists. Professional music therapists received a survey asking each to

identify client populations and clinical goals addressed by original songs, their length of time in clinical practice, and specifics about their acquisition of songwriting skills. The data collected revealed that respondents who used original songs were most likely to work with children and adolescents in schools or the developmental disability field and wrote songs in order to individualize treatment. Music therapists working with persons over 65 years of age in long term care or assisted living programs were the least likely to use original songs in clinical practice, opting for interventions utilizing the client's familiar music.

III. Methodology

Partnering with Belmont University's chapter of United Sound—a student-run organization in which, “peer mentors...[provide musical] training, support, organizational resources, and curriculum that leverage individual strengths to create equitable opportunities and outcomes for all”¹—I began this project by giving a presentation to the student mentors outlining the project and the process. I then asked mentors to propose candidates that they believed would benefit the most from the project; mentors were specifically instructed to nominate their mentees for the project based upon their needs and any potential benefits—specific to their mentee—they believed may come from the project. I will ask mentors to explain their mentee's situation to the best of their ability (so as to not violate HIPPA laws, mentors do not have specific information on their mentees such as specific age, diagnoses, etc.), including any pertinent information such as potential triggers, tips for effective communication, and any special accommodations they may need from me. I will not accept any applications in which the mentors have not first consulted with their candidates—as well as their parents or guardians—and received consent to propose them for the project. Based upon the submitted proposals, I selected my participants.

After selecting my cowriters, I met first with their mentors individually. It was crucial to understand my cowriters' needs before meeting with them first, as I needed to ensure that our songwriting sessions would be a safe space that allowed them to be open to the challenge of songwriting. During these meetings I discussed these matters, as well as answered any questions or concerns they had in regard to the project. I also asked the mentors to attend all three hour-long songwriting sessions in order to help bridge any and all communication gaps with my cowriter, as well as to establish an extra layer of comfort for my cowriter that comes from a familiar face. If for some reason mentors could not attend songwriting sessions—which were scheduled mostly based upon my cowriters' schedules—we were able to find another meeting time that would work for all three parties. Before our songwriting sessions officially began, I also had a group meeting with each of my cowriters and their parents/guardians. Here I was able to introduce myself, get to know them a bit, and to explain the project as well as answer the questions they had.

During each individual cowrite, I guided my cowriters through the actual process of writing a song. To clarify, the goal of the project was not for my cowriters to sit and watch me write a song, but rather it was for them to actively participate in writing each song in any and all capacities including: lyrics, melody, instrumentation, and production (which includes recordings). Our session locations varied in accordance with Belmont University's changing COVID-19 protocols throughout; most sessions were able to take place in person and on campus while only a few had to take place virtually. In these sessions, I began by establishing a relationship with each participant, making it clear that I am a friend and that the songwriting sessions were a safe space. Once these things were established and recognized, the creative process could begin. Since the overall goal was focused on expression, we began each song with a storyline, followed by lyrics, structure, and main melody, and concluded with musical composition and instrumentation.

¹ “Mission & Goals,” United Sound, <http://www.unitedsound.org/mission>.

Finally, once each song was written, I recorded each song as a track. Please note that none of these songs were released, nor will be released, for commercial purposes. So as to maintain the integrity of the project, the songs were recorded solely for their sentimental value, so that my songwriters could walk away from the project with something tangible. Due to the uncertainty of the COVID-19 virus and changing protocols, I recorded each track myself using home recording equipment and DAW technology—primarily: a Blue Snowball Ice mic, a Kurzweil PC2X MIDI keyboard, and Garageband software. After the tracks were recorded, they were sent directly to my participants as well as their parents/guardians. For the purpose of both celebrating and affirming the work of my cowriters, I was able to join United Sound’s end-of-the-semester celebration in which my participants had the opportunity to present to friends and family not only the songs written with me, but also their various musical endeavors throughout the semester with the organization.

IV. Session Synopses

The following synopses are the result of my songwriting sessions with three individual participants. Along with each song description, I have provided a brief synopsis of topics and interests discussed during each participant's sessions, as well as the connection of these topics within the main theme(s) of the final song.

Participant 1

Participant 1 is a self-proclaimed Michael Jackson fanatic. They love his music mostly because it is upbeat and easy to dance to. They are also very active on the social media platform TikTok, where they often do viral impersonations of the late artist. Throughout our sessions, the participant often expressed a love for this platform as it allowed them to connect to others—they even began dating someone after meeting them on the app—through their passions.

With these passions in mind, we decided to write a song about being a part of something that is much bigger than oneself, about connecting with the world and taking an active role in it. The participant wanted to include elements that both pay tribute to the past—including Jackson-style compositional qualities—and live in the present moment. They also asked for the song to be dedicated to their sweetheart, so we made sure to emphasize that fact that the world is at their fingertips now that they have each other; the great big world out there is much smaller now that they are together, and they have more than they ever could have imagined.

The song begins by exploring the overwhelming emotions that come from being just one out of billions of people. One wants to actively participate in the world around them, but how does one simply jump in? The song then hones in on how the two sweethearts met: via a TikTok dance battle. The speaker, representing the participant, joins this competition without much expectation; if anything, it would simply be something fun to do on a Friday night. Yet, out of thousands of contestants, they each stuck out to the other; out of thousands of faces and names, they made an impression. From this moment on in the song, the world grows smaller and smaller in the eyes of the speaker. It is no longer this overwhelming sea of people trying to make themselves known; rather, it fits in the palm of their hand whenever they hold their sweetheart's hand.

Compositionally, the song is upbeat and features a prominent bass line. The chords over top alternate between having percussive and legato qualities as the song structure progresses. After hearing the final product, the participant expressed that they would like to create a TikTok dance trend to match the song.

Perhaps the greatest struggle that I faced while working with this participant was keeping their focus. They often wanted to divert away from the songwriting session and share a video they either liked or created. In an effort to get back on track, I found that I often had to connect whatever distraction they were experiencing to the song we were writing. That is another reason why dancing is such a prevalent theme in the final song as this was often their distraction of choice so to speak.

Participant 2

Participant 2 had a very unique way of interacting with the world around them as they were easily over-stimulated. They nearly exclusively spoke in nursery rhymes, particularly the ones they were learning through United Sound. When they did not speak in rhyme they often expressed anxiety or annoyance, as if there was only clarity when there was rhyming. It did not take long to notice that the participant had a fantastic sense of rhythm, as they often would sit at the piano and—despite playing nonsensical notes—play distinct and identifiable rhythms to recognizable children’s songs.

Throughout our sessions we attempted to create a song that would act as an insight to the participant’s ways of coping with the world, acting in a sense as an escape from what is around them. Ultimately, we wanted this song to bring a sense of clarity to what is confusing to them. The song incorporates elements unique to them and their ways of making sense of the world, including a prevalent rhyme scheme. The participant was also a fan of Linkin Park, so we attempted to include rock elements lyrically as well as compositionally

The song begins by exploring the chaos the participant experiences in the world around them. Nothing quite makes sense, and this is conveyed through a lack of rhyme; clear rhythms are still maintained, however, in order to figuratively make the participant’s presence in the chaos known. As the song transitions into the pre-chorus and chorus, a clear rhyme scheme is gradually introduced; lyrically, the speaker (representing the participant) is talking about their escape from the chaos to the quiet of their own world found when they sit at a piano. The song maintains a rhyme scheme that varies from section to section, so as to convey a sense of finding one’s escape in the midst of the chaos. The remaining storyline consists of the main character recognizing where their own personal escape collides with the world, and how this collision might not be a horrible thing; after all, others might need to see a bit of their own world so perhaps they can find their own escape as well, be it through music like the speaker, or something else entirely.

Compositionally, the song features a prominent piano hook throughout and takes advantage of drum loops. Focusing on building a prominent sense of rhythm, the song is rather percussive. As the participant listened to the final product it did not take them long to pick up on the rhythm, and they began clapping along with it excitedly.

Since this participant had more setbacks than many of my other participants, they required the most of my empathy and patience. Many times I had to rephrase questions I asked or take a few steps backward, but most often times I had to simply accept that I would not always receive a response from them. They were so frequently caught up in their own world or overstimulated, making these sessions much slower than the other participants’. I truly had to meet them where they were (wherever that would be in the moment) in order to build rapport with them.

Participant 3

Participant 3 was fairly soft-spoken, yet loved to talk about adventure. A fan of various video games and film franchises, they often spoke about their love of Star Wars and the connection they feel with the character Luke Skywalker: both the participant and the character often seek adventure, their eyes always on the horizon waiting for excitement. Eager to try new things, the participant loved to try new instruments throughout our sessions and play familiar songs that they had been working on outside our meetings—including “Binary Sunset” from Star Wars.

We quickly decided that this song would reflect the participant’s love for adventure, as well as incorporate an essence of bravery—namely, in coming out of one’s shell and pursuing the adventures that the participant longs for. This decision was made in the spirit of taking Master Yoda’s famous advice to focus on the present rather than the horizon.

Inspired by the scene in which “Binary Sunset” from Star Wars is first heard², the participant imagined that the speaker of the song would be Luke Skywalker himself, taking a moment to watch the sunset and dream. The song opens with the speaker—representing the participant—expressing his desire for what lies beyond the horizon: he is convinced that there must be something grand and glorious, something other than the ordinary. As the song progresses, the speaker gradually notices beauty in excitement in the small things around him: in the heat rising off the sand, the bright colors in the sky from the setting sun, the wind blowing through his hair. At the chorus the speaker decides to try to bring the adventure he imagines that lies so far away to him by finding the adventure in these details. By the end of the song the speaker is no longer looking wistfully at the horizon, rather he is taking in all that surrounds him with excitement.

Compositionally, the song features a piano descant with a strong beat underneath. As the song continues it builds dynamically and in intensity, shaping a clear storyline from beginning to end; just as all of the best Hollywood pictures do, the song also features a conflict, a climax, and a resolution. Upon hearing the finished product for the first time, the participant cheered excitedly and asked to hear it again immediately, sharing new ideas for instrumentation as they thought of them upon the second hearing.

Ironically, for working with someone so adventurous, it took a long time for me to bring this participant out of their shell. According to their mentor it was a little odd that they grew so shy when we initially started working together, as they were ordinarily very extroverted and excitable. It became clear very quickly that I was not what made them anxious: rather, it was the very idea of writing an original song. I had to take special care to make these sessions exciting and relaxed so as to encourage them and quell their fears of the project. I did this by making a game of storytelling, prompting them to imagine themselves in the place of their favorite adventurers and share what they saw, heard, and felt. This seemed to make the task less daunting and more natural, as they already had a very active imagination.

² *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* (Lucasfilm Ltd., 1977).

V. Reflection

No part of this project was more rewarding than to witness my participants hearing the finished product for the first time. It was eye-opening and fulfilling to see the impact the project had, even just in the short-term. Some reacted with great joy and excitement; others reacted with new ideas for and critiques of the song. Some could not wait to perform the song themselves for family and friends; others were happy to leave the performing to others. Some were eager to hear the finished project, to hear what they had worked so hard to create; others were a bit frightened to hear it, worried that it would fall flat and fail to meet their expectations. But each participant by the end of the project walked away excited and proud of what they had accomplished. After all, it is no small feat to write a song—especially songs with personal expression and meaning behind them.

I was able to speak with my participants and their families about their experience, and I noticed a few common themes. Many expressed that the experience of songwriting provided a new escape so-to-speak, a new opportunity to connect with their thoughts and emotions and channel them through a dynamic medium. Other still expressed that the project helped them to make sense of their thoughts and emotions, as now they were able to put words and melody together to create a new sense of clarity. Several parents of the participants revealed that they noticed a renewed sense of confidence in their child after our songwriting sessions; some even said that the project ignited newfound creativity and determination both musically and with other activities. I am thrilled with the feedback I received from my participants about the project, as I feel this shows how songwriting challenges and inspires—in a unique and creative way—people of all abilities to individually explore and clearly express personal thoughts, emotions, ambitions, and anxieties.

I would love for this project to continue beyond my time at Belmont University. As I continue to come up with new ideas for this initiative beyond the classroom, I reflect upon the ways in which it can not only continue but improve. First, I would love to incorporate various songwriters in the project rather than relying only upon my experience as a songwriter. Many students wanted to write songs in genres outside my areas of musical expertise, so I could see great benefit in pairing participants with writers of their favorite genres. I would also love to grant participants the opportunity to record themselves performing their original song. Unfortunately due to ever-changing COVID-19 protocols, sharing recording equipment was not an option at this time—as several of my participants were members of at-risk categories. While not all of my participants would want to do this, many did express interest in performing and recording their pieces. Finally, I would like for each participant to have more than three sessions per song. Even my most excitable and extroverted participants needed time to get to know me and open up creatively, leaving less time to actually compose the song. Due to the time constraints of the semester, I could not give each participant as much time as I normally would like for a co-write.

VI. Conclusion

When I reflect upon the personal connection I have to this project, I am overwhelmed with gratitude. In my own small way, I have been able to pay forward what has been gifted to me through this project. While I have not yet had much of an opportunity to actually set plans, I would love for this project to continue to be a part of my life and the lives of others. I have even considered reaching out to other demographics with this project because, truthfully, I believe in the power of music to change lives as it has changed mine. Music and songwriting continue to bring joy, connection, clarity, and adventure to my life as it did in my childhood, and I sincerely hope that my participants can say the same.

My thesis journey has been a long one, but truly a fulfilling one. This project has greatly evolved from my original idea when I first arrived at Belmont, but the central theme has stayed the same: exploring the therapeutic value of songwriting. I am grateful for every friend, family member, classmate, and professor who encouraged me to pursue a project that seemed impossible to complete amidst a pandemic. I would especially like to thank my thesis director Professor Bethany Merritt and my committee member Professor Sandra Dudley for trusting me enough to commit themselves to my project, and for their guidance in my work this semester. I would also like to give a special thanks to Sofia Valle and Caroline Joyce with United Sound, as well as all of my incredible participants for whom I am beyond grateful.

VII. Works Cited

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