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Liora Bresler

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, U.S.A.

Margaret Macintyre Latta

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, U.S.A.

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The Heart of the Matter: Composing Music with an Adolescent with Special Needs

Adam Patrick Bell
Toronto, Canada

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Abstract

As a support worker for adolescents with special needs, I have found that they have few opportunities to play music. While previous research emphasizes that students with special needs can enjoy music in multiple capacities, little has been written about their ability to play, improvise, or compose. I employed a qualitative approach for this case study in which a 17-year-old male with Down syndrome attended two 40-minute music sessions a week over the course of three months with me as the researcher and musical accompanist. Video was used to document the teacher-learner experience as the participant explored collaborative improvising and computer-based recording. General suggestions are made for supporting adolescents with special needs in music.

Introduction

When I was fifteen I got my first job as a camp counselor. More importantly for me, I received my first pay cheque and bought the first of many musical instruments: a drum set. I had been exposed to playing instruments from an early age at home and in school, but I could never stay interested in any of them. When I was six my parents enrolled me in piano lessons, but I complained until I was permitted to quit. A few years later in the fourth grade I was excited about the prospect of learning to play the recorder, but I soon grew to loath my squeaky renditions of “Hot Crossed Buns” and “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” Upon entering middle school I knew that I would have the opportunity to learn a band instrument and I chose the alto saxophone, envisioning myself playing solos in school concerts. But I never practiced, and I often forgot my reed, which was just as well because the disinfectant taste on the mouthpieces made me nauseous. I moonlighted in the percussion section for a while in the eighth grade, but I was relegated to the bass drum – a drum that did not spark my creative side. How is it then that just a year later a switch within me was flicked and I was practicing “drums” with my mother’s knitting needles and a paint can at home? There was something about the thump of the bass drum, the crack of the snare drum and the sizzle of the hi-hats that I craved to emulate. I attribute this change in attitude to my discovery of rock music, a genre of music that resonated with me. I became convinced that it was worthwhile to commit practice time to an instrument. I put all of my money towards drum gear, I even sold my ice hockey equipment to buy some cymbal stands – this is a big sacrifice for a rural Canadian boy. My story is not unique; from the many musicians of whom I have crossed paths since, I have found that they too plunged into learning their instrument of choice during their adolescent years despite receiving many opportunities prior.

When I first became a support worker for adolescents with intellectual disabilities I remember being disappointed to hear that none of the teenagers I was working with at the time had ever set foot in a music classroom or received the opportunity to play an instrument elsewhere. This was not for lack of interest on their part, as I found that the adolescents I was working with loved music as much as I did. They were constantly listening to music and wanting to play the instruments I had in my house. Seeing their joy while engaging in musical play made me more appreciative of my own opportunities in music, and equally frustrated that they had perhaps missed out on an enriching aspect of life. It was this conviction that fueled my desire to discover how an adolescent with special needs responded to the opportunity to participate in a music program.

The purpose of this study was to explore and document the process of playing, improvising, composing, and digitally recording music with an adolescent with special needs. In the study the participant attended music sessions facilitated by me and

comprised of structured lessons and times of exploration. The goal of these music sessions was to enable the participant to create his own music. Together the participant and I recorded the resulting compositions.

The following questions guided the research:

1. What are the participant's responses to participation in each aspect of the music program: playing, improvising, composing, and digitally recording?
2. How does the teaching process in the music program develop in response to the participant's needs and desires?
3. What responses to playing, improvising, composing, and digitally recording music have the participant's parents or guardians observed in the participant?

Rationale

In my review of the available literature regarding music in special education I was unable to find any studies dealing with music composition and recording for students with special needs. I pursued this area of research because I believe and have observed that students with special needs are able to compose music and would enjoy the experience but generally do not have the means or opportunities to do so. This study is significant because it provides people who support adolescents with special needs with a better understanding of how a student with a developmental disability can participate in music by playing, improvising, composing, and recording. A more specific categorization of this study would be an *instrumental case study* because "a particular case is examined mainly to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization" (Stake, 2003, p. 445). It provides beneficial insights and information to individuals who wish to support adolescents' musical development, although it focuses on one individual.

Literature Review

I examined a broad selection of research concerned with teaching music to students with any type of intellectual or physical disability. The literature reviewed here was selected because it informed both the design of the study and the interpretation of the data. Up until the mid 1990s, research regarding special education and music was mostly concerned with aptitude, and involved the investigation of students with various needs and their ability to comprehend musical concepts and execute musical exercises, an approach built on the influence of Edwin Gordon. These studies (e.g., Bruscia, 1981; Grant & LeCroy, 1986; McLeish & Higgs, 1982) sought methods to quantify musical aptitude in students with special needs. Little regard was given to the range of special

needs of the test subjects. Until relatively recently, research regarding students with special needs did not provide opportunities for this population to demonstrate any musical abilities they may have had. Issues regarding participation in and enjoyment of music for people with special needs were also neglected. Other studies (Jahns, 2001; Shore, 2002; Stambaugh, 1996) have addressed how music is an area in which students with intellectual and physical disabilities (e.g. hearing impairments, autism, Williams Syndrome) can excel and enjoy. In the context of this study I define *ability* as whether or not Tim could create music.

Creativity in Music

A number of studies have explored creativity in music (Bunting, 1987; Burns, 2002; Hickey & Webster, 2001; Kratus, 1991; Sherman, 1991; Swanwick and Tillman, 1986; Wiggins, 1996). These studies helped to describe both how creativity develops, and what creative growth can be expected from individuals when observing them learn and create music over a substantial period of time. These studies also emphasize the impressive ability of young people to create music and describe a framework of the stages of musical development. Of particular help was Swanwick and Tillman's eight defined stages of musical development: sensory, manipulative, personal expressiveness, vernacular, speculative, idiomatic, symbolic, and systematic. The derived theory from their observations essentially states that children gradually move from exploring sounds to manipulating and mastering them to create something they can reflect upon. Studies by Bunting (1987) and Wiggins (1996) support other literature (King, 2002; Morin, 2002; Sherman, 1991) that musical creativity in a young person can be nurtured and developed.

Reflecting on his time spent at the Pillsbury Institute in Santa Barbara as the musical director, Donald Pond (1981) was surprised by what he observed when children composed music. Music was an alternative method of communication for the children; it allowed them to express feelings and ideas, an observation that has been made by other researchers of how people use music (Balkin, 1991; Gfeller, 1990, Weinberger, 1998; Wiggins, 2002). Pond (1981) drew the following major conclusions from his research:

Young children have an innate apprehension of the function of formal procedures when sounds are being structured. Second: that the practice of improvisation (vocal as well as instrumental) is the heart of the matter in the development of the innate musicality they evidently possess (p. 11).

Pond (1981) leaves us with a message of hope, that everyone has the ability to make music. But not everybody has the opportunity to do so. Learners with disabilities often fall into this category because it can be difficult to accommodate their needs.

Computer-Based Composition

Studies that have focused on student compositions aided by computers (Folkstead, Hargreaves & Lindstrom, 1998; Stauffer, 2001; Wilson & Wales, 1995) have not involved participants with special needs, but their findings do provide useful insights into the nature of how young composers create music using technology. A study by Wilson and Wales (1995) suggests that “children are able to internally represent the formal structures of music” (p. 107). Stauffer (2001) observed that her participant went through a process in her compositional journey, from exploration, through development to conclusion. Stauffer was cautious to make generalizations from this case study, but was adamant that “children need time to compose, including time to explore and become familiar with the medium, time to find their own strategies and gestures, and time to practice them” (p. 18). According to Folkstead and his colleagues (1998), “all the participants succeeded in creating music. This is in no way a trivial finding, as it contradicts a well established conception of composition as being something that can only be done by a few, specially gifted individuals” (p. 95). The researchers cite computer technology as a significant factor in enabling anyone to create music and drive home the point that “there is no such thing as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ with respect to method or strategy by which music should be created” (p. 95). The conclusion of Folkstead et al. (1998) captures the belief that drives my study, my belief that anyone can compose and that there is no single correct way to do so. Their findings also provide a foundation for anticipating that students with special needs can be successful in composing music and enjoying the process.

Music and Down Syndrome

The participant in my study, Tim, has Down syndrome, “a genetically based disorder arising from abnormalities of chromosome 21” (Seung & Chapman, 2004, p. 160). It was important that I understood these disabilities so that I could give Tim optimal support in the music program. Down syndrome “is typically accompanied by mild to moderate delays in the development of nonverbal cognitive skills and additional deficits in short-term memory, with a greater deficit in the short-term memory of auditory than visuospatial information” (Miolo, 2005, p. 173). Additionally, people with Down syndrome typically have weaknesses in expressive language, articulation, and linguistic grammar (Rosner, Hodapp, Fidler, Sagun, & Dykens, 2004).

In addition to intellectual disabilities, people with Down syndrome often have some physical disabilities such as hearing loss, speech problems, poor muscle tone, loose joints, and fine motor control difficulties (Alton, 1998). Hearing loss is generally experienced in the early years and becomes permanent. Others have difficulties with auditory perception and distinguishing between similar-sounding words. Speech can be difficult for people with Down syndrome because they typically have a smaller mouth

cavity and poor muscle tone. Alton points out that “any child with a delay in language acquisition is likely to be cognitively delayed as a result” (p. 169).

From interviewing 18 adolescents (ages 12-18) with Down syndrome about their social lives, Cuckle and Wilson (2002) found that many of the participants entertained themselves at home with solitary activities such as listening to music, creating their own music and dance, and writing plays or words to songs. Little attention has been paid to the musical creative abilities of students with special needs. While previous research emphasizes that students with special needs can enjoy music in multiple capacities, little has been written about their ability to play, improvise, or compose music.

Method

Research Model

The purpose of this study was to explore and document the process of composing, playing, improvising, and digitally recording music with an adolescent with special needs. The study was conducted in a case study format through a series of twelve music sessions that took on an emergent design as the study progressed. An emergent approach to the music sessions was the most effective and suitable because (a) it held the greatest potential for allowing the participant to behave naturally, enabling me to examine the impact playing, improvising, composing, and recording music had on different aspects of the participant’s life; (b) it allowed me to make modifications to the music sessions if appropriate; and (c) it gave the participant the opportunity to offer feedback to improve the quality of the music sessions.

The research model I adopted borrowed strategies previously used by Jahns (2001), Shore (2002), Wiggins (1996), and Stauffer (2001). From these four studies I created a research model that focused on one participant and involved him in structured and non-structured musical activities. I anticipated being heavily involved in the compositional process, but not in a creative sense. I perceived myself as a tool to be used by the participant, a facilitator between the technology and the participant. My role was to help the participant make the music that he wanted. Throughout the period of the study I conversed with the participant and recorded his responses to questions about the process of playing, improvising, composing, and digitally recording music.

The Participant (Tim)

Before the study commenced, I had established a friendship with Tim. I met him through *Community Living Kingston*, an organization that assists people with intellectual disabilities. I offered to volunteer with the organization by teaching guitar or drums to

interested individuals and was paired up with Tim, an 18-year-old male with Down syndrome. At least once a week, Tim and I got together and listened to music, played video games, and watched television over the course of 2-3 hours. Our friendship started in August of 2005 (the study commenced January 17th, 2006) and developed to the point where Tim walked to my house, called me on the telephone, and socialized with my three housemates. Tim loved to relax in my music room where there were many instruments to play (electric and acoustic guitars, bass, ukulele, mandolin, drums, congas, bongos, xylophone, maracas, keyboards, and synthesizers) and many CDs to look through and listen to.

In many ways Tim is a stereotypical teenager. At the time of the study his favourite programs on television were *the OC* and *MuchMusic* (Canada's *MTV* equivalent). He always wanted to watch music videos and made sure that every Friday he was home in time to watch the weekly countdown. Tim was also an avid (video)gamer, and tried his best to teach me how to competently navigate a *Sony PS2* controller. It didn't matter what game it was, he always beat me and loved to taunt me in celebration. Of course this study is about music, and that was our closest connection. Tim spent a considerable amount of time flipping through my CD binders discovering new artists. My musical tastes are diverse, but there is a significant collection of new and old rock and roll that he concentrated on. He would listen to a disc for a few minutes, rock back and forth or lip sync to the music and then find a new disc and the pattern would repeat. If I didn't intervene he could continue this activity for an hour. Tim listened to music on his discman when he walked anywhere, a practice that I had employed throughout my teen years too. The internet was also a source of continual entertainment for Tim. He liked to look up lyrics for his favourite song of the day or go to a band's website and look at their pictures.

Tim has a great sense of humour and liked to tease me or play tricks on me. For example, he would hide in my house and try to surprise me when I came looking for him. Many times after he left my house I would hear the doorbell ring and I'd look out to see Tim laughing and running away. He could also be very unpredictable – once he decided to attempt to shave his head in my bathroom because he wanted to look more like his brother. Tim lives with his Mother, *Roberta*, who I got to know very well over the course of the study. The two are very close and spend most of their time together when Tim is not in school or attending a social activity. His older brother attends university in a different city. Roberta has enrolled Tim in many sports activities including bowling, basketball, soccer, and swimming. Tim also attends a few groups that pair up university students with teens with disabilities. Through school and Community Living Tim has made friends with other teens with disabilities, but most of their socialization together occurs at school or at a sports event like the Special Olympics.

Research Setting

The research took place at my residence in my music room for two reasons: (a) all of my music recording equipment was there and it is not portable, and (b) it was a comfortable and familiar environment for Tim. Roberta encouraged Tim's friendship with me and supported the weekly music sessions at my residence. Ethical approval was granted by the General Research Ethics Board of Queen's University before the research component commenced. Each music session was initially intended to consist of 20 minutes of structured activities and 20 minutes of exploration. As planned, the music sessions took on an emergent design to reflect the progress and needs of Tim. I anticipated that the exploration time would reflect the structured time. This means that I thought it was likely that whatever skill was taught during the structured time would carry into the exploration time in a less guided, participant-directed setting. For example, if during a structured time I taught Tim how to use a computer-based composition program for 20 minutes, I expected that for the following 20 minutes he would continue to explore the program by applying some of the skills he had learned without my assistance.

Data Collection

For the period of three months I intended to meet twice a week with Tim for 40-minute sessions. We were to discuss the kinds of instruments he wanted to have in his compositions and the various computer-based programs that were available for him to utilize. When it was established that Tim understood the options available to him, the music sessions took on an emergent design guided by his interests and abilities. I had planned that when Tim attended the music sessions, half of each 40-minute session was to be dedicated to free play time to explore the various instruments and the other half of the time would be dedicated to structured activities aimed at helping him learn how to improve his singing or playing of instruments. A similar design was used in a study by Hooper (2002) which focused on improving the social skills of two adults with special needs. Lantz, Loftin, and Nelson (2004) stressed the importance of having playtime for children with special needs in a learning environment because "through play, children experience cognitive, social, linguistic, motor, and emotional growth" (p. 8). Conversely, Hagedorn (2004) found that some people with special needs depend on structured activities to keep them focused on the task at hand. My intention was to combine both structured and unstructured spheres to allow Tim to explore during appropriate times and concentrate on specific tasks when necessary.

Observation and Videotaping of Music Sessions

In order to address the first research question: *What are the participant's responses to participation in each aspect of the music program: playing, improvising, composing, and digitally recording?*, I used several strategies to collect data. During the music sessions I

was wholly involved with the participant, and as a result it was difficult for me to record ample observations. It was not possible for me to take field notes during the sessions because my priority was ensuring that the participant was receiving the support he required. At the end of each session I recorded field notes about my observations of the participant's responses, which I hereon refer to as *field notes*. I videotaped the sessions to allow for a more in depth review after the sessions took place. I set up a video camera in the room, a strategy used by Robb (2003) in an investigation of blind students participating in musical activities. These strategies were effective in recording what happened during the music sessions.

Video Transcription

Tim would usually leave my house around six o'clock. After he had left I would take a break of about 45 minutes and then commence viewing the day's footage. After I watched the footage I would write notes on what happened during the session. I viewed the video footage to see what happened and was accomplished during the session, how Tim's work changed over time, and how he personally changed over time if at all. I recorded what I thought worked well and what did not, what was accomplished, and how I felt about the progress of the study. These notes were helpful because they reminded me of how I felt on the very day the footage was taped. They helped me to see the process I went through while participating in the music sessions. During the study I decided to transcribe the lyrics of at least one song per session (bearing in my mind that some songs are over ten minutes long). In most cases I transcribed all of the lyrics from each session. Only when it was too difficult to hear Tim's voice did I refrain from transcribing the lyrics. Generally it took about an hour to transcribe the lyrics to one song because the combination of Tim's speech impediment and the general noise level on the tapes made it difficult to decipher what he was saying. During recall sessions Tim and I would occasionally check the accuracy of my transcriptions and I usually got his approval. Often Tim was unable to recall or properly hear what he was singing about in the video footage. At the completion of the study I went through the video footage again and recorded the events without my interpretations. I paid special attention to how long each lesson and exercise took, the length of each song, Tim's actions and decisions, and my actions and decisions.

Meta-analysis of Incidents by Researcher and Participant

The second question, *How does the teaching process in the music program develop in response to the participant's needs and desires?*, addressed the issue of how my teaching process changed to meet the needs and desires of the participant. I wanted to allow Tim to explicitly express his opinions about the music sessions so that they could be modified to enhance his experience. Additionally I wanted to analyze selected sections of video footage with Tim and ask him about his responses and reactions to the activities

occurring in the video. I wanted to get a sense of what he was thinking and feeling when engaging in the various musical activities. To accomplish this, I employed the method of stimulated recall sessions, a process in which the researcher and participant watch a video clip from a previous session. I analyzed selected sections of video footage (key episodes) with Tim and asked him about his responses and reactions to the activities occurring in the video. This data was collected by audio recording which I later transcribed and hereon refer to as *recall sessions*. In accordance with the recommendations of Lyle (2003), I had Tim view and recall key episodes in a comfortable environment (my music room) during the following session after each key episode occurred to attain the most accurate accounts. I collected recall data for sessions 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 11, and 12. Cuckle and Wilson (2002) found personal interviews with adolescents with Down syndrome to be helpful in gaining an understanding of their perceptions of their own social lives. This research approach allowed me as the researcher to be involved with the study and make observations and conduct interviews that took into consideration the context of the participant's everyday life.

In addition to Tim's feedback, I relied on my own perceptions as a gauge of the suitability of the sessions and made changes accordingly. At the end of each session I recorded my reflections of the teaching decisions I had made in response to Tim's needs and desires. I needed to be able to decipher when it was appropriate to praise or make suggestions in response to Tim's work. I anticipated making changes that appropriately paced the progress of the participant. The information gathered from the recall sessions combined with the personal notes I recorded at the end of each session helped to inform my analysis.

Interviews

The third question, *What responses to playing, improvising, composing, and digitally recording music have the participant's parents or guardians observed from the participant?*, addressed the opinions and observations of the person who has the closest contact with the participant: his mother. This helped to make the analyses more valid as the opinions of an important figure in the participant's life were taken into consideration. At the end of the research period, Roberta was invited to supply any information regarding Tim's responses to playing, improvising, composing, and digitally recording music in an interview. Rosner, Hodapp, Fidler, Sagun, and Dykens (2004) used parent responses to help confirm their findings about the social patterns of adolescents with Down syndrome and found it to be an effective strategy. I asked Roberta for her opinions on how she thought Tim's involvement in the study had impacted him. She was interviewed with focused questions on her observations of how Tim changed, if at all, since the commencement of his involvement in the music sessions. Duffy and Fuller (2000) utilized evaluations by teachers to determine the reliability of their data in

investigating the role of music therapy in social skills development in children with special needs as did Ockelford, Welch, and Zimmermann (2002) in a survey of special needs educators.

Analytical Framework

I utilized the stages of development defined by Kratus (1989), Stauffer (2001), and Swanwick and Tillman (1986) as criteria for identifying change which occurred in the music learning process. Kratus defined early development as *exploration*, a time in which the participant improvises and plays music that is original. The succeeding stage is called *development* in which the participant begins to repeat some parts of the original music he or she has already played. The third phase, called *repetition*, occurs when the participant frequently repeats what he or she has already played. Stauffer's phases are similar to Kratus', including *exploration* and *development*. Stauffer's final phase, *conclusion*, is slightly different from Kratus' *repetition* phase because it dwells more on the refinement process involved in music composition. Swanwick and Tillman's stages of musical development are also helpful criteria to evaluate when change has occurred. They break down the musical learning process into eight stages that follow the learner from exploring sounds to manipulating them to create their own compositions. These stages were particularly helpful when teaching the participant how to play a musical instrument. I was able to use the criteria of both Kratus, and Stauffer to gauge the participant's musical development. I transcribed only the sections of the videotape that were relevant to the research questions, paying attention to and providing descriptions of the participant's responses to the musical activities. I was an integral part of this study and I reflected on my own participation in order to see how my approach to working with the participant changed and how I changed over time.

Findings

Early Emergence of Tim the Singer

*I love to sing
So I would be with Betty
Betty is mine
So sweet and kind
I know I would go
I want to know you better Betty
I was running down the street
Betty, always loves
I would dream now*

I am the one to blame
I like it
I love you Betty
Don't let it be
I love you Betty
I love you Betty
Betty, is my darling
She's my wife
She doesn't care about you
So I used to be
I'm the one of you

These lyrics are excerpted from the first song that Tim sang in the study which occurred during the first session. The first session was the most true to my intentions of a music session described in the Method. After the first session, I decided that the instructional half of the sessions could be shortened to five minutes instead of the allotted twenty because Tim had difficulty focusing for that length of time. It was during the practice period in the first session following the guitar lesson that Tim spontaneously sang his first song. In this first session I tried to teach Tim how to play the acoustic guitar in an open tuning. Tim had expressed interest in learning how to play the guitar and I decided that an open tuning would be the best way to accommodate the restriction of his hand movements. Without having to use his left hand, he could strum with his right hand and produce a D major chord. Together we were practicing strumming this chord when Tim spontaneously sang a song that I will refer to as “Betty” (Appendix A). This was one of Tim’s more melodic songs in the study and I think it may have been because he was accompanied by a tonal instrument, that being the guitar. When Tim was accompanied by the drums he had a tendency to sing the same note for every word, which is similar to talking or rapping. “Betty” demonstrates one of the times when Tim used a bigger melodic range. Tim improvised all of his lyrics and the lyrics to this song are relatively short. It was not uncommon for Tim’s lyrics to fill three pages of text when I transcribed them from the video following a session. I think this is because as he became more comfortable in the study, he became more expressive lyrically. The song “Betty” features Tim’s quiet approach to singing, which is almost like quiet speaking.

Certain lyrical phrases are repeated throughout Tim’s compositions over the course of the study. Many of the songs were at least in part about Betty and “I love you Betty” surfaces in many of Tim’s songs, even if the song is not about her. Kratus’s (1989) first stage of musical development, *exploration*, is described by him as “the music sounds unlike music played earlier by the child and no specific references to music played earlier by the child can be heard” (p. 9). Much of Tim’s music stayed in this stage and the song “Betty” is a

good example of an early composition by Tim. Each consecutive melodic idea was new; he showed no evidence of attempting to develop his melodies through repetition, a defining character of the *exploration* stage. I asked Tim's mother if he had any singing experience and she responded,

He used to sing a lot when he was a little kid. If he was upset about something he would sing it. If there was a little problem about something in the household he'd go around singing "I hate my mom, I hate my brother" and just make up all these words! (Roberta, personal communication, May 5, 2006)

For the first month of the study, Tim's general response to the process of playing, improvising, and composing was very positive and he often exceeded the amount of time I had planned for him to play. He also liked watching the video footage of himself during recall sessions and he would laugh and smile as he watched himself sing and play.

Development of Tim as a Dynamic Vocal Improviser

What happened between sessions 1 and 5 was a shift in Tim's focus from trying to play the guitar to learning to play the drums and a gradual increase in the amount of time spent singing. We had fallen into a pattern of ending sessions by improvising songs together. Tim would sing and I would play drums. By the time session 5 came along, Tim was in his prime at improvising lyrics. His ability to improvise vocals increased with time and often tested my endurance as a drummer.

Kratus's second stage of musical development, *development*, is described as "the music sounds similar to, yet different from, music played earlier by the child and clear references to music played earlier by the child can be heard in the melody, the rhythm or both" (p. 9). Session 5 witnessed somewhat of a transition between the *exploration* and *development* phases in Tim's compositions, but it is not possible to say for certain whether he was ever consciously repeating melodic or lyrical ideas. Session 5 included two distinct songs "Everybody's Crazy" and "Betty 2" (Appendix B), as I will refer to them. "Betty 2" was considerably longer due to the lyrical content. I played the drums while Tim sang for 20 minutes which is a long time to improvise lyrics, an ability that continually impressed me. I mentioned this to Roberta when I interviewed her and she believed that he was able to continually improvise because "we hesitate, realizing that it has to make sense and have a flow of one idea to another and he's not inhibited in that way" (Roberta, personal communication, May 5, 2006). When Tim started into "Betty 2" he instructed me to play the same slow drumbeat that I was playing in "Everybody's Crazy." It was common for Tim to instruct me in the sessions to speed up or slow down, or play quieter or louder, demonstrating his sensitivity to tempo and dynamics.

The composition of Tim's lyrics appeared to move into the *development* phase around the time of session 5 because he repeated ideas from the first session and from sessions in

between. This song is more disjointed in that the lyrics jump around from subject to subject. The random nature of Tim's lyrics reflects the way he uses language in daily conversation. Roberta explained,

He's always been like that and he'll just pull down phrases and insert them. I think he does it because he feels it's expected of him to say things and he can't always marshal his thoughts in a way that we can to create a sentence that makes sense from beginning to end.

(Roberta, personal communication, May 5, 2006)

There are sections of the lyrics that are somewhat childish, some I cannot make sense of, and others that could be written by an adult such as:

Where are you Betty?

I said I'm sorry

I wasn't strong enough

This love is causing more damage

I find those verses impressive because I would never have heard Tim say something like that in conversation, but music seemed to draw out a profound and eloquent lyricist in him. This song had a melancholy feel to it, whereas the song "Betty" in session 1 seemed to be about an innocent crush. Looking at Tim as a songwriter, I see a more serious side of him. He responded to the opportunity to play music as an opportunity to sing about his feelings without worrying about what I or anyone else present might think about him. When I talked to Tim's mom about this, she was interested that this aspect of his life was coming out in the music he was playing. She explained to me that Tim gets fixated on certain ideas and has difficulty resolving them. She informed me that,

It's quite a very interesting time for him, his fixation on Betty started before Christmas, so the fact that you started the music in January, this has been a terrific outlet for him and I'm sure it's been positive if he's actually able to express his feelings. (Roberta, personal communication, May 5, 2006)

The childlike nature of Tim's singing, combined with the sophisticated content of his lyrics demonstrates how difficult it is to categorize Tim's musical development. In Ross's (cited in Swanwick & Tillman, 1986) stages of aesthetic development in the arts, Tim's process of creating music resembles two distinct stages. The second stage "is characterized by musical doodling, especially vocal doodling, and the progressive master of what Ross calls 'sound structures and patterns'" (p. 316). Tim spent approximately three-quarters of his time in this study in vocal doodling. Ross says this stage is characteristic of 3- to 7-year-olds. Studies by Barrett (2006), de Vries (2005), and Dowling (1984) have also reported that this musical behaviour is characteristic of young children. But Tim is 18 and also aligns with the fourth stage because "here music is seen as taking on greater significance as a form of personal expression" (p. 316). Tim's actions

suggest that he grasps the concept that music is a means by which to express himself about life experiences.

Over the course of the sessions between 1 and 5, Tim became more confident in front of the camera, singing to it as if he were performing to an audience and appearing quite comfortable using a microphone. Tim's mother seemed to think that his comfort with the microphone was a relatively new phenomenon, citing that he has been confident singing at home but "whenever there is a real stage and real people he just didn't want to do that" (Roberta, personal communication, May 5, 2006).

By this session Tim had become comfortable with going back and forth between singing and talking into the microphone, both with great intensity. He always stood up when he sang along to the drums and danced while he sang. He had a tendency to keep time with his body by bending forward at the waist while his legs remained straight and his upper body straight. He also moved his head frequently to the beat in a rooster-like motion. Tim's mother told me that, "when he was little he would rock sitting on a sofa, I think it's only in this later teenage phase where he stands and bends from the waist" (Roberta, personal communication, May 5, 2006).

On the surface, session 5 does not seem like a landmark session, but there was a steady progression up until this session through which Tim developed his singing voice and confidence to get to this point of being able to sing and improvise for 20 minutes. At this point in the study Tim had demonstrated that he could consistently improvise for 10 minutes and longer. Between sessions 5 and 9 Tim continued to participate but with less enthusiasm. It appeared that he was feeling tired in a creative sense, and had decided to play music only once a week and spend the time during the other session downloading music and making CDs. I can only speculate as to whether this was due to a loss of enthusiasm or a change of focus. I believe that the novelty effect of discovering new instruments had worn off by this point and making CDs may have been the newest novelty. It is also possible that Tim was feeling physically tired or had grown tired of being in front of a video camera. Tim's mother did not think that he had lost interest, but rather was more interested in downloading music, she explained,

It's an overriding obsession, it's not that he's losing interest in the other part, it's that he really wants to spend the time downloading more music. (Roberta, personal communication, May 5, 2006)

Introducing Tim to a Computer Composition Program

Tim's total focus with the computer technology was to create and record his own songs, which were predominantly vocal based. In session 9, I introduced Tim to the computer composition program *Acid Pro* (Sony, 2006) and in session 10, he had a burst of

creativity and recorded six original songs. When I asked Tim's mother what her response was when she heard a recording of a song he made called "Techno" (Appendix C) [[Click Here to Play](#)], she answered: "I was amazed. It was just incredible. I just kept thinking about it after. I thought, wow, you know I can't let this go. We gotta go with this. You know this is his strength." (Roberta, personal communication, May 5, 2006)

Initially Tim wanted to form a band called "Kingston Miss." He had written down 10 original song titles that he wanted to play (Appendix D). I suggested he should record his songs on the computer and he was keen on this idea. Tim knew what he wanted the songs to sound like. I facilitated his working the program for the first two songs, but he made all of the creative decisions. When I was helping him he would describe what sound he wanted and he also picked the tempo. He knew that he wanted to sing on every song and was mostly concerned with making sure the vocals were finished. Tim seemed more lyrically prepared than usual. The title of each song was predetermined and that guided the content of his lyrics. I felt that Tim could handle working the program after I had helped him with the first two songs. Occasionally he asked for my help, but most of the time I watched and listened.

Stauffer (2001) used a similar model to that of Kratus to evaluate the computer-based compositions of a student, and since her criteria are more specific to computer-based composition they are more suitable for analyzing this set of Tim's compositions than the criteria I have used to this point. According to Stauffer, the first stage *exploration* "involves getting started with a composition by experimenting with different sounds or listening to previously recorded ideas" (p. 10). This was sometimes true of Tim's approach, he would select a pre-recorded sound and use it one day to accompany his vocals, but then decide later that he didn't like the accompaniment after hearing it a few more times. Tim had a plan for his compositions, in Stauffer's words, "an internal conception" of a sound he wanted (p. 14). Because he was using only one pre-recorded sound as the backing music for each one of his songs, he spent most of his time trying to find the sound that he thought was right. With the computer mouse he would click on different samples until he found the one he wanted to use, and pasted it into his current composition for the desired duration. The act of selecting a sound to keep in the song and then recording the vocals over it falls under Stauffer's second category of *development*, because it is this phase in which the participant commits to a composition by recording his or her ideas until completion. After Tim had sung one of his songs he would play it back and listen to it. He rarely modified his songs, but he did delete the accompanying music track if it continued to play after he had stopped singing. These actions are consistent with the third and final *conclusion* stage because he was content with the end product.

The lyrics for “Love Song” (Appendix D) [[Click Here to Play](#)] reveal the repetitive nature of Tim’s focus on love and Betty. For the backing track he chose an acoustic guitar that complements the pretty but sad tone of his lyrics. There is a sense of longing in this song, which is partly influenced by the minor mode feel to the music, but also by the way Tim sang. He sang very softly and at times almost whispered conveying a feeling of weakness and sadness. Betty is mentioned six times in this song, but it does not stay focused solely on her, for example:

*Betty, I know you love me
And you can do with my baby
Don’t touch my woman
Because I know
Don’t change my love
What are going to do my owner?
My dog is dead
Robin, Michelle
I love you so much in my arms
So I know
Betty, you love me so much*

Tim wanders to talking about how he misses his dog, but then comes back to his original subject. Like “Betty” and “Betty 2,” “Love Song” reiterates some other older themes such as his relationship with Betty falling apart, love, and marriage.

“Love Song” [[Click Here to Play](#)] was one of six original songs he created that day. The songs were titled “American Girls” [[Click Here to Play](#)], “Be My Crime” [[Click Here to Play](#)], “Looking for the Dead” [[Click Here to Play](#)], “Morning Grace” [[Click Here to Play](#)], and “My Family Bigger than Me” [[Click Here to Play](#)]. All of the songs have different lyrical content, which I found to be interesting because usually Tim was fixated on one subject on any given day.

Comparing “Betty” which was performed on the first day to the songs made during sessions 9 and 10, the sense of progress Tim made is immediate. Even though Tim’s compositions became increasingly sophisticated over the course of the study, he remained in the *expression* stage of Swanwick and Tillman’s (1986) spiral of musical development. This stage is typically characteristic of 4- to 9-year-olds. Their description of *personal expressiveness*, a defining trait of the *expression* stage is accurate of Tim,

Direct personal expression appears first and most clearly in song. In instrumental pieces it is mostly evident through the exploitation of changes of speed and dynamic level, climaxes being created by getting faster and louder. Signs of elementary phrases (musical gestures) appear. There tends to be little structural

control and the impression is frequently of spontaneous and uncoordinated musical gestures emanating directly from the immediate feeling experience of the child, without a great deal of reflection and shaping. (p. 332)

Tim became more confident as a singer and in making creative decisions about the music he made. The opportunity to sing to drums became a critical element in Tim's creative music making process because it allowed him to focus solely on singing. He demonstrated that he possessed the ability improvise, compose, and record original songs using his voice as the leading instrument.

Discussion

The Emergence of Tim as an Artist

Midway through the study I observed that often Tim did not appear to make distinctions between playing, improvising, or composing music. When using the computer independently he appeared to make these distinctions, but when we played music together it seemed that he saw all three of these processes as one: making music. I learned that Tim's perception of making music was much different than mine. Whereas I make distinctions between these three processes in any scenario, Tim saw them as part of a fluid creative process. Tim showed a much greater interest in singing than in any of the other options he pursued such as the guitar and drums. It became apparent early in the study that he saw himself first and foremost as a singer. On his own, Tim was unable to be the kind of expressive singer that I saw during the study; he needed accompaniment to be able to sing in this way. For Tim, having the drums to sing along to was like having a canvas to paint on. When he was presented with a suitable medium and materials, Tim's artistic abilities were made manifest. Tim's evident delight in making music demonstrated that exploring music was an enriching experience for him, but he made me see that music to him was more than something one does for fun. Each time Tim sang he invested himself emotionally in the songs; there was meaning attached to each composition. Dissanayake (1992) calls this process of attaching meaning, "making special," stating that "we make something special because doing so gives us a way of expressing its positive emotional valence for us, and the ways in which we accomplish this specialness not only reflect but give unusual or special gratification and pleasure" (p. 54).

Tim continually demonstrated that he was engaging in the act of making special, that he was an artist. Tim was always sensitive to the music being played around him; he was not content to sing to anything I played. He had a rough sketch of what the general feel of each song should be, and acted as a composer in that respect. When he was in a contemplative mood, he would typically ask for a slow drumbeat and he sang in a style

that communicated his feelings. Elliott (1995) refers to this method of composing as *musicizing*, stating that “musicizing reminds us that performing and improvising through singing and playing instruments lies at the heart of music as a diverse human practice” (p. 49). The literature I reviewed on musical creativity would suggest that Tim displayed the musical abilities of someone between the ages of 5 and 10, but he grapples with issues in his lyrics that I would expect of someone of his chronological age. This is the unique dichotomy of Tim; in some respects he is still very much like a child, in others he is an adult. Nothing illustrates this paradox better than a sample of Tim’s lyrics. For example, in session 5 he sang “I kissed you a couple times, so I said I’m sorry, I love the bathroom window” (Field Notes, Jan. 31, 2006). Playing music was like wearing a mask for Tim, when the music commenced and he started singing he had no inhibitions, nothing was too personal or taboo for him to sing about. He could communicate thoughts and feelings in music that he could not in conversation. When I asked Tim how he came up with his lyrics, he didn’t know. It seemed to be a process that came to him almost as naturally as breathing. Having observed this multiple times in Tim, I cannot help but agree with Pond’s belief that children’s “practice of improvisation (vocal as well as instrumental) is the *heart of the matter* [italics added] in the development of the innate musicality they evidently possess” (p. 11).

Over the course of three months, Tim had many praiseworthy accomplishments including learning to play a drumbeat, recording songs on a computer by himself, and creating volumes of lyrics through improvised singing. These, along with the many other achievements that come with learning to play an instrument, are all individually significant, but Tim did much more than execute musical exercises. Tim both perceived himself to be an artist and behaved like an artist.

Enabling and Empowering

Part of the reason Tim saw himself as an artist was because I saw him as an artist. I saw him and treated him as a musician. When I look at what Tim accomplished in this study, I realize that it was because he made conscious decisions and conscientious efforts to make music. The most important action I took throughout the study was to try to be sensitive to Tim’s needs. Tim appreciated the times when I respected his decisions not to participate, and also appreciated being treated as an adult and a peer. I was genuine with Tim, provided encouragement when I felt it was appropriate, and tried to play what I thought he wanted me to play. I approached the study with the mindset of trying to teach a friend how to play music. I presented him with options and allowed him to explore them. Tim was always able to communicate to me what he wanted to play and for how long. Every session had a sense of closure because he would indicate to me verbally or with a hand gesture that he was done. Tim’s behaviour indicated that he never felt obliged to play

music, as he refused on multiple occasions. When he did play, it was under his control, he played what he wanted and for how long.

I employed a few different teaching techniques, but predominantly used one method because I found it to be most effective with Tim. I always started with a choice. Once Tim had made a decision on what he wanted to do, I would give him a brief demonstration so that he could see and hear the intended outcome of the lesson. Following a demonstration I would walk Tim through the mechanics of the skill he was trying to learn and then allow him to practice. These lessons generally lasted for about 5 minutes and then a period of exploration would inevitably follow and continue for anywhere between 10-60 minutes more. Another approach I sometimes took was to let Tim start exploring an instrument and interject at a moment when I thought it was opportunistic to teach a new lesson or reinforce a concept that we had already worked on. During Tim's exploration times, I was usually his accompanist in some capacity. These times were intended to be devoid of my interjections and be propelled by Tim's musical energy that carried over from the lessons. It was in this environment that I looked to Tim for direction when accompanying him. He molded the shape the songs took on by dictating how each song should sound. Affording Tim this power helped him to develop the ability to make his own creative decisions when he composed songs. Giving students responsibility is a component of what Paris and Paris (2001) refer to as self-regulated learning and what Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2003) call self-efficacy in engagement and learning. In order for students to accomplish a learning task they must believe that they are in control and have the ability.

Implications for Practice

One of the challenges in supporting a person with special needs is finding activities that are appropriate for that particular individual. Ockelford (2000) stated that "music has found a place in every society, and enhanced the lives of countless millions of people; by common consent, it is there to be enjoyed by all, irrespective of their abilities or needs" (p. 200). The challenge lies in finding ways to effectively support the musical development of adolescents with special needs.

Providing Opportunities

Being sensitive to the needs of the people we support is paramount, we need to take the time to get to know them and find out who they are. If a person with special needs has a desire to play music, then it is our responsibility to make sure that every student has an opportunity to meaningfully explore music enough to decide whether or not they might have a desire to play. The desire grows out of experiences and opportunities as well as

ambitions. Many people with special needs do not have the ability to organize social activities for themselves, and that is where we as supporters can be an asset. At the very least, we can deepen a person's interest in music through listening opportunities. Green (2002), who studied the musical habits of popular musicians, stated that "listening is a fundamental part of the enculturation that is intrinsic to the development of popular musicians, from their earliest attempts at making music right through their professional careers" (p. 24).

Focusing on Abilities

Tim was able to accomplish what he did in music because he believed in his abilities, as did his family and I. There was never any talk of what he could not do. We focused on his abilities and, as a result, his strengths emerged. As supporters we need to believe in the abilities of the people we help and focus on their strengths. We need to look at each individual as a musician so that he or she too will recognize the musician within. Richardson's (2002) observations of children from two diverse musical cultures caused her to conclude that "there are cognitive processes for making sense of musical experience that seem to be universal and innate – unimpeded by either the presence or absence of music" (p. 197). The Special Olympics are an excellent example of how able people with special needs are. This same attitude should be the guiding light for participation in the arts.

Providing Positive Support: Suggestions for Teachers of Music

The participant should be given the opportunity to select his or her path of learning. The supporter's role is to present options to the participant and suggest some goals for each option. I foresee computer-based recording as having the potential to be liberating for other musicians with special needs. Music making programs are becoming more user-friendly and should be perceived as a vital tool. Regardless of the medium being used (drumsticks and a bucket, computer, etc.), providing sufficient exploration time is critical in allowing a musician to develop. Finally, accompaniment is an invaluable asset for emerging musicians. In the absence of live accompaniment, improvising or playing along to a recording is a viable substitute. Careful pacing, maintaining enthusiasm, and respecting the musician within the people we support will increase their chances of success. Having a positive social environment has a great influence on any learner, regardless of special needs which has been voiced by others (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; Paris & Paris, 2001).

Of the endless number of lessons I learned and observations I made in this study, one thing continues to amaze me: There was a quality to Tim's music that I appreciated and enjoyed, in the same way that I admire other songwriters. Despite having little previous musical training and cognitive barriers to learning, Tim was *able* to compose music that

is now engrained in my memory. This is a testament to the universality and power of music. Anyone who knows me knows of my passion for music. I would have never have thought that Tim could teach me to love it more.

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About the Author

Adam Patrick Bell currently lives in Toronto and teaches primary music at a public school in Mississauga, Ontario. He started recording music as a hobby in 2001, but this has gradually become a more serious endeavor, leading to work as freelance composer in advertising for the past two years. This article is based on a thesis project he completed while studying at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario from 2004-06. Prior to undertaking these studies he had been working or volunteering for four years with community-based groups that support adolescents with special needs.

Appendix A

“Betty” by Tim

*I love to sing
So I would be with Betty
Betty is mine
So sweet and kind
I know I would go
I want to know you better Betty
I was running down the street
Betty, always loves
I would dream now
I am the one to blame
I like it
I love you Betty
Don't let it be
I love you Betty
I love you Betty
Betty, is my darling
She's my wife
She doesn't care about you
So I used to be
I'm the one of you*

The musical notation for “Betty” is scored on the following page.

Betty

Tim

Tim

I love to sing — so I would be with Betty

8
Betty is mine so sweet and kind

15
I love you too I know I would go I want to know you better

22
Betty I was running down the street

29
Betty always loves I would dream now I am the one

36
to blame I like it

43
I love you Betty

50
don't let it be I love you Betty I

57
love you Betty Betty is my darling

64
she is my wife

2

71

she does-not care 'bout you so I u - sed to be

77

I'm the one of you.

Appendix B

“Betty 2” by Tim

Yeah

I think about Betty

My wife and my kids

Here it is guys

This is about love with married with Betty

So I'm the one Betty I love you

So want to do

So I know I am not

Because Michelle always not going to fight so I'm not

I swear it's not true

So I don't like you Michelle

You're so mean to Betty

This is what happens, divorced her

My heart to be

So I wasn't tried enough

Where are you Betty?

I said I'm sorry

I wasn't strong enough

This love is causing more damage

Help to me so so hell

I said so no some hell

To be from me

So I will say

Nothing is trust a not

Why never say

I will not

Don't take my advice

I take my programs

I making Betty my wife

Are you picking on me

Stop picking on me

So I wasn't nice

To be someone who in love with Betty my wife

I wasn't

I tried to hurt you

It's just a game love

It's just a game love

That's why, I don't like you anymore

So Nora Webster going to die

Webster will die

*Don't worry
I'll be happy to never see Nora again
Nora Webster I don't like you
You're hugging Betty
Because you always do, do it to me
And because Betty always, always hug you, you deserve more
Because Nick too late, he's not my friend anymore
This swearing by my heart
I know, why going to office, go to be
So Betty what are you going to do
Because Betty
I would like to talk with you
Don't touch my wife
She's mine
Up, beat
Yeah love my, hug my wife
Yeah Betty
I love you
I will never see you again
But always with you
Adam is my friend
I love you Adam
So I'm happy
See my friend again
(List of friends)
Go away Nick, too late I don't like you anymore
Because you go to work
Because I'm here forced you, just why no feel
So Betty it's not real
Nick you're taking Nora away from my life*

*Betty
Where are you
Where are you
I said no*

*Yeah
That's it everyone
Goodnight
Yeah*

The musical notation for “Betty 2” is scored on the following page.


Betty 2

Tim


Tim

$\text{♩} = 140 \text{ bpm}$

Drum Kit




Yeah. I think about Betty, my wife and my kids hear this guys




This song goes back in forth between spoken word and melodic singing. The spoken word sections appear beneath the drum notation, and notation is provided whenever melodic singing occurs in the song.

6

Dr.





this is about love with married with Betty.



So I'm the one. Bet - ty I love you.

11

Dr.



So what to do? So I know I am not

16

Dr.




Because Michelle



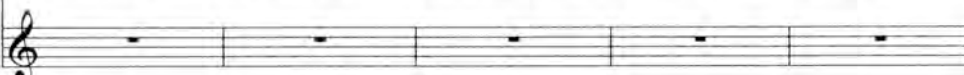
al-ways not go to fight so I'm not. I swear it's not true.

21

Dr.



so I don't like you Mich-elle you're mean to Bet - ty. This is what happens.



2
26

Dr. 

My heart to be. So, I wasn't tried enough. Where are you Bet - ty?

31

Dr. 

This love is causing more damage.
I've said I'm sor - ry I was-n't strong e-nough

35

Dr. 

damage.
I said so said so no some hell to be for me - for our own sake

40

Dr. 

no-thing is trust a not.

47

Dr. 

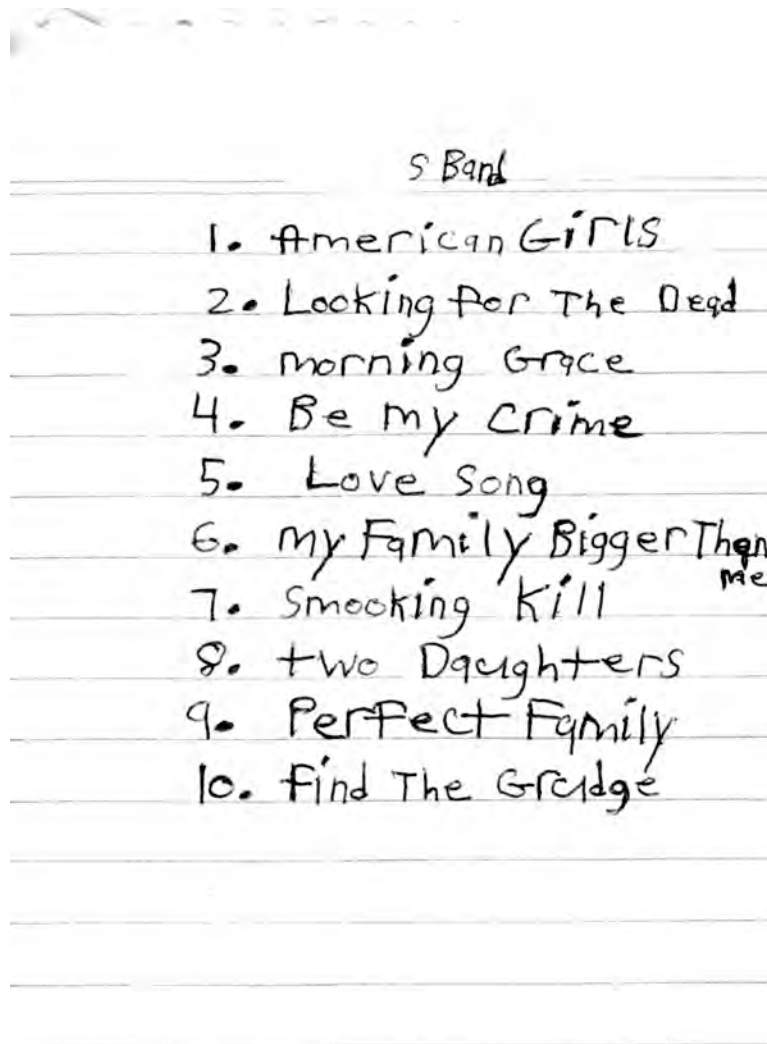
Appendix C

“Techno” by Tim – [[Click Here to Play](#)]

*So I like you
I will be with you
I x 6
Yeah man, it's my birthday, come on
Uh huh x 4
Yeah baby, come on I love you
Yeah, I love the horse ride
I like Green Day
Oh yeah, baby yeah!
So
I'm so happy
Birthday
So happy birthday
I love my friend
Don't put me down
I can hear you from your ears and my eyes
Turn black
Superhero
Yeah man
Techno x 4*

Appendix D

The song list for "Tim's Band"



Appendix E

“Love Song” by Tim – [[Click Here to Play](#)]

*A love song
Here it is guys, here's a love song
I love your bride
So Betty I know you're breaking my heart
And be upsetting me
I will not start all over again
Don't make the tries
I will love you can do
Betty, I know you love me
And you can do with my baby
Don't touch my woman
Because I know
Don't change my love
What are going to do my owner?
My dog is dead
Robin, Michelle
I love you so much in my arms
So I know
Betty, you love me so much
I know, but you at least this record's mine
This is my story
It's good for rock and roll
Betty I'm going to marry you
This record is yours
This studio
Betty, I love you more
Don't break my heart
Always be with you in my dreams*

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