



Transform

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**“Songs build little rooms in time”: constructing sustainability
through reciprocity within community music songwriting practice**
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ABSTRACT

There is vulnerability in the act of songwriting, for the participant who engages in a community music context, and for the songwriting community musician (CM) in the facilitatory role. Through repeated acts of sharing creative work in community music settings, the songwriting CM realises that the telling and retelling of ones' story contributes to the creation of a sense of self, thus enabling ongoing opportunities for reflective practice, reacting, and the consciously considered well-being of the practitioner as well as the participant.

It is this idea of artistic exchange, advocacy and reciprocity as a sustainable creative resilience that I will demonstrate in this article. Using both song-based and narrative examples collected and composed through an autoethnographic research process, I will demonstrate a workable paradigm for community musicians to use as a navigational tool when working in a songwriting or music-making capacity. The focus of the research is engagement with young people and musicians, but the paradigm is demonstrated with a focus on malleability and transferability to working with various groups in different aspects of composition and performance.

As a songwriter and a songwriting community musician, I write and facilitate the writing of songs for the same reason I do research. To quote Etherington (2004), "choosing how to do research is a personal decision about what I need to do to discover what I want to know" (p. 72). The act and result of creative music making has been part of my life for over 25 years, allowing me the opportunity to travel the world, meet musical peers, forge collaborative relationships and help create new musical communities.

In later years, my songwriting work has led me into the field of community music. As an active community musician (CM) working in my hometown of Limerick, in the Southwest of Ireland, I have access to and experience in a variety of community music settings in my immediate vicinity, such as youth work, mental health, prisons, healthcare, elderly care, national schools, secondary schools, and 3rd Level or higher education. My CM idiolect includes creating and implementing workshops advocating creative self-expression through songwriting and composition, and focused music skills. As a practitioner with many years of songwriting and performance experience, I relate to Carless (2018) when he explains that he writes songs to bring a "participatory and participant perspective" which reflects "[...]desire to be connected to and to be part of moral community' where the goal is 'compassionate understanding" (p. 1). In addition to this, I believe it is imperative that my work as a songwriter in a CM setting has a degree of creative sustainability and longevity at its core. Whilst facilitating others, it is vital

that I maintain my own creative practice. My method of facilitation in my songwriting workshops has long been guided by Mullen's (2008) Facilitraining Rainbow framework:

which moves the leader through a range of roles from demonstrator- teacher-coach - Socratic director - facilitator - guardian of the process – abdicator [...] a model for community music leadership which allows increasing empowerment and ownership for individuals and the group as a whole. (p. 255)

In 'Artists, presence, and the gift of being unteacherly' Hunter (2018) discusses a documentary about the multi-disciplinary artist, Selena De Carvalho, wherein De Carvalho embarks on an Artist in Residence program in a Tasmanian school. Hunter posits the intention of this artist as "to both bring and derive creativity from the school environment" (p. 31). As I continually strive to share the importance of creative self-expression to the participants in my workshops, Hunter's idea of reciprocity within the facilitation of creativity resonates strongly with me. Perhaps Mullen's (2008) proposed methodology doesn't necessarily have to end in abdication; perhaps it can be a cycle allowing continuing empowerment and ownership for individuals and the group, but also the CM leader as a practitioner, creating a sustainable and workable creative framework.

Speaking broadly as a songwriter, but more specifically as a songwriting CM, I believe that "the work of artistic creation [...] is a corporate activity belonging not to any one human being, but to a community" (Collingwood 1938, p. 324). It is also my belief and experience that "music is a resource for constructing individual and group identities, and the emotions it elicits creates and maintains various performative environments in which people interact" (Duffy 2010, p. 678) and that the writing of songs, or the facilitation of songwriting can be "a means to work through, make sense of, and ultimately manage complex situations, relationships and emotions" (Kinney 2012, p.399), because "relationships are at the heart of what autoethnographers and musicians do. They unlock and reveal the complexities of our work" (Bartleet 2009, p. 729). I have long considered that the result of marrying our music with our words, and the process of writing our lyrics can bring us closer to an understanding of ourselves. As too can the sharing of our songs and songwriting processes bring us closer to an understanding of each other. Or as Cobb (2007) states more directly, "Audacity, one must recognise, is the antithesis of invisibility [...] if one has a story, they must, in fact, exist" (p. 111). Using an autoethnographic approach, I will demonstrate this idea of employing

songwriting in CM practice as a way of facilitating both a stimulating creative environment for the participants, but also a complex and inspiring creative environment for the songwriting CM.

“A Story”

(A dull and damp Monday, October 2019, 8:45am in a starkly lit classroom that is slightly too small to comfortably contain the number of pupils within. The class teacher introduces me, the visiting Community Musician (CM), and warns the wide-eyed, and slightly distracted 3rd class pupils, roughly all-around age 9-10, to be on their best behaviour, or “he won’t come back next week”. I wait patiently for my nod to proceed. Then mustering up some reserves of energy, I proceed in a manner I hope isn’t too befit of 8:45am on a dull and damp Monday morning in October. I start to address the class of 29 3rd class pupils enthusiastically, but with reserved energy)

Me: Hey guys, how are you all? Thank you to your teacher for her lovely introduction! My name is Steve, and I’ll just write that up high here on the board now, with a little arrow pointing down to my head.

(I turn to the whiteboard, and with a marker, I write “Steve” with a small arrow pointing downward underneath. I stand in front of the board, directly underneath the arrow with ‘Steve’ above it)

Me: So now, if you can all look at me for a moment, and then at the name over my head, and then back at me again, you can all take a little memory photograph with your brains, and store it there, so that whenever you see me, you’ll be like, “It’s Steve!”

(The class giggles, some look confused, and some look tired. I continue)

Me: *(enthusiastically and sincerely)* I’m here today to talk to you guys about songwriting. ‘Cos I’m a songwriter. I loooooove writing songs. It’s kind of all I do, and I’ve been doing it for ages and ages. I’ve been doing it for so long, that now my job is to go around to schools and just tell people how much I love writing songs! Can you believe that?

(some of the class cannot believe that, some can, some still look tired)



Me: Well, I suppose that's not entirely true. I mean, I definitely get to go around and just tell people that I love writing songs, but I also like to talk to them about writing songs, and maybe play some songs, and most importantly, write songs with them! And that's really why I'm here. I'm going to visit you guys almost every week, chat about songs, make some music together, and hopefully, we'll end up writing a song together too. That's what I hope, and we'll make it happen! What do you think?

(Class nods, some smile, some look tired, and some hands are in the air)

Are there questions? Ok, I'll take one question, and then I'll take more at the end, 'cos I've a lot of stuff I want to tell you guys, and not a lot of time! Ok, I'll pick... *(I pick a random pupil who has her hand in the air)* You! How's it goin'? Tell me, what's up?

Pupil 1: *(hesitantly)* ammm, I wrote a song before...

Me: *(enthusiastically)* Oh cool! Go on, tell us...

Pupil 1: *(slowly, as if considering each word)* ...well one time, me and my granny, well... My granny kind of helped me to write a song one time.

Me: *(still enthusiastically)* Oh wow! That's so cool! You're really lucky to have been able to do that. Did you enjoy writing it with your granny?

Pupil 1: *(less hesitantly, speaking faster and slightly louder now, her words spilling into each other as she rushes to get to the end of what it is she has to say)* Yeah, I did, my granny helped me with the words, and then I sang it then at the funeral, 'cos it was for my baby cousin who died, and my granny said it would be lovely.

Me: *(pausing for a beat)* Aw, I'm really sorry to hear that. I bet it was a beautiful song. And I think your granny's right, what a lovely thing you did for your cousin and for everybody when you wrote that song, and you sang it too! I hope you were very proud.

Pupil 1: *(nods shyly, clearly quite proud)* yeah, everyone said it was lovely.

Me: That's so cool, well done to you. Now that song will be in the minds of all the people who heard it, and they can think about whenever they want. That's seriously cool, well done again.

(I take a moment, as I am slightly thrown by the unexpected emotional depth of this brief exchange. I pace slowly, as if in thought, taking a breath)

Me: *(I stop pacing, I address the class in a low tone)* Can I tell you all about the first song I ever wrote?

(The class look at me, some nod, some still look tired, and some look confused)

Me: *(Louder now, playfully)* Oh! Sorry guys, I must've been speaking really quietly there by accident! I said, can I tell you all about the first song I ever wrote?

(This time the class giggle, and say “Yeeesss” almost in unison)

Me: (pretending to get a shock) oh, there you are! Ok, cool, well, here it goes so.

Way, way back, when I was only 4, which I promise you, was ages and ages ago, I wrote a song.

Do you believe me?

Class: yeeesssss

Me: Good! ‘cos you don’t have to, because *(incredulously)* It was so long ago, that I can’t even remember writing the song; I have no memory of it whatsoever!

(The class laugh, some look even more confused, but everyone is listening now)

Me: *(conspiratorially, as if sharing a secret)* but my mom remembers, and she tells me that when I was 4, I wrote a song, and it was the first song I ever wrote. And I believe my mom, ‘cos she’d never ever tell me a lie! Will I tell you what the song was about?

Class: *(laughing, more enthusiastic now)* Yeeeeesss!

Me: Ok so, *(pause)* well, when I was small, *(pause)* around 4, we had a little dog called Timmy. He was a really small yappy lil’ guy and lived in our house with us. He was so small, that he wasn’t really allowed go outside in case he got lost! I loved Timmy a lot, he was my pal, and we always played together. My mom says we were *Best Pals* in fact!

(Cue many hands in the air with pupils excitedly volunteering information about their own pets and families)

Me: *(faux bemused by the sudden enthusiasm)* Ok ok ok! Hold on! Let me finish! *(I wait for the excitement to die down)* So... one day... my little pal Timmy went missing! I was very, very worried, ‘cos Timmy never left the house! And this time, he was nowhere to be found at all! My best pal had gone missing! *(The class look concerned)* I was so upset; I was crying and everything! Just wandering around the house looking everywhere for him, bawling my eyes out.

(Some of the class look genuinely concerned now. I sense that the unforeseen melodramatic nature of this story is possibly a bit overbearing, so I elaborate)

Me: Now, I should probably tell you at this stage that Timmy was absolutely fine. He had somehow sneaked out the back door *(I attempt to physically imitate a small overconfident dog strutting around the place)*, tunnelled underneath the garden fence, and somehow taken a sock off our neighbours washing line, and tried to eat it! *(I imitate what I think a small dog eating a sock might look like. The class laugh uproariously, in part amusement, part relief)*



Me: BUT!!! I didn't know that at the time you see, so all day, I was wandering around the house crying, and through my tears I was quietly singing:

(I recite this, without melody, appearing slightly bashful)

"Timmy, oh Timmy don't go away, Timmy, Timmy, come back again today"

Class: Awwwww!

Me: I know, right? But the important thing here is that... *(I pause)* I absolutely do not remember any of this happening at all. I mean, I remember Timmy, 'cos he was my little pal and all, and there are some pictures of me with him when I was little. But I have no memory whatsoever of that little song. But my mom does, and she was the only other person there to hear it. So even though I made it up and was singing it over and over, I can't remember it at all. But my mom, who I believe, and who would never tell me a lie, remembers it and will remember it forever. And now, because I've told all you guys about it, you all know about my little dog Timmy and the adventure he had that day! *(there's a gentle agreeable murmur around the class)* Now, Timmy's song will never be on YouTube or Spotify. You won't be able to Google this song for example. It doesn't really exist, except for the fact that my mom remembers it, and now maybe some of you might too. I think that's a pretty cool thing about songs, like, they can tell us things about stuff we never knew. Don't you think that's cool?

(The class unanimously agree that it is, indeed, kind of cool)

Me: So that was first song I ever wrote, and I don't remember writing it at all. However, ... *(I pause dramatically)* ... when I was 10... *(I nod, knowingly)* ... I wrote the first song that I do actually remember, and it was...

(I gather myself, as if in preparation for an announcement of some significant magnitude)

... A... LOVE Song!

(The class erupts in laughter and "oooohs")

Me: Yes. When I was 10, I wrote a Love Song, and I'm not afraid to tell you guys, it was a deep love! *(more laughter, and general confusion)* Because... well, let me ask you something. *(I stop what I'm doing, I look around the room, again, conspiratorially)* Has anyone here ever had a... toasted...cheese... sandwich?

(The class mostly answer in the positive, some look very excited, some very confused, there aren't any looking tired now)

Me: *(nodding excitedly)* Guys, I have to tell you, I... LOVE toasted cheese sandwiches! They are the absolute best! I love them so much, that when I was 10, I wrote a song about them and how much I loved them!

(The class are very excitable now, quite a few can relate to my appreciation of the seemingly incomparable joy of a toasted cheese sandwich)

Me: Hold on though. *(I hold my hand aloft, and bow my head, feigning deference. The class gradually falls quiet)* It wasn't always this way. For some reason, I didn't have my first toasted cheese sandwich until I was 10 years of age. I remember one day during my school summer holidays, my mom called me in for lunch and put a plate in front of me with a toasted cheese sandwich on it. I had never seen one, so I immediately said "Ugh, I don't want that, it looks like a burnt sandwich!" My mom said I should just eat it, that it'd be lovely. So, I picked it up, and I was all like "Uuugh, weird, it's kind of sharp and greasy! I don't like it!" My mom just said to eat it, or she wouldn't make me anything at all anymore! So, I lifted it up my mouth *(I slowly mime each movement as I describe it)*, and I took a bite out of the sandwich ...

(I imitate a slow-motion bite, unsure at first, then my face slowly transforms from disgust to an expression of sheer unbridled joy)

...and it was... DELICIOUS!

(The class laugh and cheer.)

The toasted cheese sandwich won me over! I couldn't stop eating it! It was so nice and crunchy and warm and gooey, and the melty cheeeese... YUM! I LOVED that toasted cheese sandwich! Immediately, I started doing a little dance with my shoulders while I was munching, and with my eyes closed and my mouth full, I sang "toasted cheese sandwich, toasted cheeeese sandwich" over and over again to myself! I couldn't believe how lovely it was!

(The class are laughing, some incredulously. I pause for a moment, and then proceed earnestly)

That was my song. Now, that is a very short song, just 3 words! But it's a song, a LOVE song, about my toasted cheese sandwich and me. Like the Timmy Song from earlier, this song won't be found on Google, or YouTube, or Spotify! It only exists in my mind, and now yours too! But I can tell you this, if I leave this class today, and, say I go to a café for lunch later or something, this might happen:

(I dryly and stiffly re-enact a possible scenario between myself and a waiter in a café, playing both roles)

Waiter: "How may I help you sir?"

Me: "Yes, hello, I would a cup of coffee, and a toasted cheese sandwich please."

Waiter: "No problem, that'll be 5 minutes."

Me: "Thank you" (to class) I wait 5 minutes.

Waiter: (reappearing after 5 minutes) "Here you go, a cup of coffee and a toasted cheese sandwich, enjoy!"

Me: "Thank you, I will"

Then I sit there and eat my sandwich, I drink my coffee, and then I leave.

(The class look confused)

BUT! From the moment I sat down in that café, in my head, the whole time I was quietly singing, "toasted cheese sandwich, toasted cheese sandwich". And when the waiter brought me the sandwich, I could feel my shoulders doing their little dance, and in my mind, I was like "TOASTED CHEESE SANDWICH, TOASTED CHEEEESE SANDWICH" really loud, 'cos I was so excited about my sandwich! (the class erupts in laughter) So now that little song is kind of my own private theme for whenever I get to eat a toasted cheese sandwich. My toasted cheese sandwich eating experience has its own little personal theme song, just a like a tv show!

(The class hustle and bustle in agreement, some hands are up)

Me: *Ok, I'll take a quick question so, 'cos I have to go again soon. (I pick a random pupil from another part of the classroom) Ok, let's hear what you got, tell me!*

Pupil 2: *I do that sometimes too when I'm excited about something, I kind of sing a song, but not really a song, just "LALALALA" when I'm really happy or something*

(The class laugh in agreement, they can relate to the pupils story, the pupil looks delighted)

Me: *That's exactly what I mean! See?! I knew I wasn't a crazy guy going around making up weird little songs all by myself! (The class laughs again, giddy now) Orrr, maybe we're all just a little bit crazy in this class! (the class cheer, still laughing. I laugh too, then hold up my hand, and bow my head, feigning deference once more. The class quieten down)*

Me: *So, we've ran out of time I'm afraid!!!*

Class: *Aawwwwww!*

Me: *(waving them off jokingly) yeah yeah, I know I know... But never fear! I'll be back again next week, and I'll bring something pretty cool with me, and it won't be a Toasted Cheese Sandwich!!!*

(The class laugh and cheer. I thank the teacher, I thank the class, and I say goodbye)

(END)



And so went my first visit of the year to a new school. The session content was planned as always, as was the shape of the workshop. The initial session always takes this shape, no matter what Primary school, Second Level School, 3rd level institute, or anywhere else I visit. I designed this workshop out of necessity when I was beginning to feel the onset of a creative fatigue in my work. I needed to reaffirm to myself why exactly I was doing this. Through an autoethnographic process (Ellis et al. 2011), I isolated two seemingly minor musical events in my early life that may well have set me on the road to where I am today. I feel that articulating these minor events to people I work with will give them more of an insight into who I am and my process rather than (or in addition to) instantly singing them a song I've written recently. Of course, that will come in time, but I would like participants to know that songwriting can be a very simple but profound thing. Take for example the interaction with *Pupil 1* above. This was wholly unexpected, and I admit was thrown for a moment. I had to decide quickly how to react to this disclosure, and I am happy with how I did that. I reacted honestly and with candour (Leavy 2009, p. 134), neither elevating nor playing down the significance of the story. I was devastated to hear what the pupil had to say, but I was also happy that she felt she could tell me that on our first meeting. I didn't wish to delve any further into the lyrical content of her song at that point, or ask for a more extensive sharing, as I felt the disclosure itself was quite a momentous thing. What she had shared was also hugely significant to me, as at that time, I had been striving to finish a piece commemorating the passing of my grandmother in 2017. This pupil's story had struck an emotionally charged and inspirational chord with me, reminding me of Bartleet and Ellis (2009) stating that "at the heart of both music and autoethnography is the desire to communicate engaging and personal tales, inspiring audiences to react, reflect, and in many cases reciprocate" (p. 8). If "researchers are encouraged to consider the symbiotic relationship between the researcher and the researched" (Phelan and Nunan 2018, p. 7), then this interaction was particularly meaningful as it presented a key moment of learning in terms of the vulnerability of artistic exchange, and a valuable example of reciprocity within both my facilitatory and creative practice. In this interaction, I was in the role of participant, listening and reacting to what the pupil chose to share with me, before reverting to my facilitatory role once again. The creative sustainability in



songwriting CM practice is built on a foundation of symbiotic exchanges, autoethnographic reciprocities, and reflection, where the song can exist and preserve the voice of the writer, whoever they may be

“Songs build little rooms in time
And housed within the song’s design
Is the ghost the host has left behind
To greet and sweep the guest inside
Stoke the fire and sing his lines”

(Berman, 2017)

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