

# WE DON'T TEACH WE EXPLORE: ASPECTS OF COMMUNITY MUSIC DELIVERY.

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## Introduction

My reason for writing this paper is in response to the ISME commission on community music activity's recent call for information on new teaching methods and ideas coming from community music activity.

I have been a community musician since 1985 in England and more recently internationally and have always been aware that community music while not anti learning may well be anti teaching and certainly has always had difficulties with the idea of the teacher's role. In fact what has been exciting to many of us is the way that the practice of community music seeks to move away from the expert teacher and willing pupils model of music transmission to a more dynamic and interactive community of participants.

In this paper I would like to look at some of the problems community musicians have with this traditional model of teaching, teacher and taught, outline some of the underlying reasons for community music activity that make teaching an over simplistic and often inappropriate methodology, look instead at the title and role of facilitator as that more appropriate to community music situations and ask briefly if we as community musicians shouldn't be looking for other more flexible models of human musical interaction depending always on the reasons why we are engaging in this interaction. I will also return to the music, particularly the music of the late John Stevens which encouraged so many people to become involved in community music activity and show that the intention of the music was a profound human musical exchange within the moment beyond the mediation of an outside expert, judge or controller.

Throughout this paper my understanding of community music will be as practised in England, Ireland and Wales which runs parallel with the tradition of community arts and is based on the the principles of access, participation and inclusion for all.

I hope that we can find a clearer boundary between the community musician and the music teacher especially for those beginning in the field. Working with students I am frequently asked about "how can we maintain discipline and control in our groups" and find that students and people new to the field often end up "having to become the teacher" and I often receive workshop plans that are lesson plans in community clothes. Usually this boils down to the community musician not knowing sufficiently well why they are there in the first place and also not having thought through the expectations of a group of people in one space with a music expert in front of them. Often they expect teaching and often the community musician colludes unthinkingly with this perceived expectation, filling the empty vessels with instructions and information and maintaining the myth of the omniscient leader. My core reason for writing this paper is to clarify that we have no need to maintain these outdated myths and methodologies and to urge that our musical play is playful, in the moment and leaderless.

## The Teacher

*to teach*

--to impart information or skills

--do this for a living

--put forward as a fact or principle

--cause to adopt by example or experience, deter by punishment etc.

Oxford English Dictionary--1994 ed

Pity the poor teacher; how many times has this been said? These are the people who build their lives on their belief in human potential and development and yet everyone attacks them; the government, the parents, the students and everyone who has an opinion on education.

In my own life I have had every kind of teacher from the drunken brutal stereotype of 1960's Irish religious education to the inspirational figures of John Stevens and Davey Graham who many credit as inventing world music. I have engaged in the outsmart to survive game at a typical Lord of the flies type secondary school and been moved to the point of tears at the wisdom and emotional courage of great

musical leaders in the classroom. I have observed teachers for many years and been awed by their passion, skill and patience. And yet I question the idea that a teacher (or teaching) is primarily what we need to foster musical growth and interaction especially in community music settings.

Perhaps the problem with music education and why community music sprang up in England partly as a reaction to it is best expressed in Edward De Bono's analogy "You can have a street that is muddy and full of puddles. You put a lot of people to work keeping that street clean. But it might have made more sense to fix the drainage instead. A great deal of effort is put into changing education within its own context but this may have no effect whatsoever on changing the context or direction of education"(De Bono-1999)

For me there are 4 definite problems with teaching in community music contexts; 1) teachers are more likely to teach whats than what ifs or why nots 2) the role of a teacher acts as a support to the ideas of supremacy of authority, hierarchy, judgement and the superiority of historical knowledge 3) teachers and teaching are associated with schools and their function as an instrument of social control and despite the work of inspired individuals this association taints the profession and calls for sensitive and humanist students to rebel 4) teachers and teaching are not necessary for creative music making.

1) Teachers are more likely to teach whats than what ifs or why nots. Imagine a music teaching post advertised at a local school . The candidate arrives for interview and clearly states that they will not teach pieces or styles or techniques or exercises, nor will they work from a curriculum(a what--albeit increasingly liberal whats). Instead they will ask questions, look for opinions, encourage jamming and freeplay without any predetermined idea of outcome. They cant say what kind of questions as this depends on the group and they refuse to offer examples of their work as this would not be in the moment. They offer no example of musical skill as this would be irrelevant but are clear they would "trust the group". While it is possible that the candidate would get the post perhaps it is more likely to go to someone with a worked out year plan, clearly linked to the curriculum with clearly measurable targets and goals.

How in fact can someone become expert enough in a subject area to merit the title teacher and then not transmit their knowledge as their primary function? Carl Rogers says "teaching in my opinion is a vastly overrated function...as soon as we focus on teaching the question arises what shall we teach...what from our superior vantage point does the other person need to know...are we really sure as to what they should know?"(Rogers 1969).

Working in community contexts is a complex process. People come for differing reasons, with differing needs and abilities. If we teach, we can only teach what we know whereas it would make more sense to say "what do you want to know or do?". This will quickly lead to us recognising that many don't want a teacher at all and for those who do we may often have inappropriate skills. As teachers we are starting to make ourselves redundant.

2) the role of teacher acts as support to the ideas of supremacy of authority , hierarchy, judgement and the superiority of historical knowledge.

Perhaps it does come down to mistrust. Carl Rogers says "If I mistrust the human being then I must cram him with information of my own choosing lest he go his own mistaken way"(Rogers 1969). Maybe this is the big difference with community music where we are interested in allowing communities to be created by listening to and honouring contributions including chance and involuntary ones. We are interested in increasing our own awareness of sound possibilities and it is crucial to develop an environment where people feel they can freely express themselves without being negatively judged.

Teachers as experts in their subject areas are invested with the ability to make judgements about people within their field and it is this judgement that can set up power dynamics and feelings of superiority and inferiority within the group destroying any possibility for an expressive free and equal community . Myles Horton speaking about community literacy programs in the southern states of America says "Certainly the first people you want to avoid are certified teachers, because people with teaching experience would likely impose their schooling methodology on the students and be judgemental. We wanted someone who would care for and respect the learners and who would not be threatening."(Horton-1998). Donna Brandes goes even further and indicts the whole student/teacher relationship saying "Obedience, reward and punishment are features of the teacher-pupil relationship, while mistrust, conflict and even fear are often accepted as part and parcel of the system"(Brandes 1994). This doesn't sit easily with the inspirational teachers we know who



88%tried things they hadn't done before  
80%became more confident about what they could do  
77%were happier  
48%felt better or healthier  
and unsurprisingly 85% would like to be involved in more work like this.

A question that occurs is “when working in community settings is it more important to work on the music or on the friendship/confidence/health/happiness outcomes?” If people need their self esteem raised and their ability to be confident will help their overall life situation then shouldn't we focus on this as a priority? This immediately brings the role of the community musician into question. Often I have students who complain that they are expected to be a social worker or therapist not to mention friend confidant and champion. Bruce Cole at York University asks is the community musician an educator, artist or revolutionary and I think to this we must add at least personal development trainer, therapist, shaman.

Even to experienced community musicians this can become very confusing. Perhaps one way forward is to look at the real underlying reasons behind community music projects. I can clearly see 7 reasons why projects happen.

- 1) Artistic;Projects which focus on creative process and produce new works as part of an outcome.
- 2) Educational;yes some projects are indeed educational in their focus as for example where people come to learn samba or african drumming.
- 3) Personal growth;These projects focus on the individuals musical and personal growth,their own journey and choices.
- 4) Community Development;Projects concerned with regeneration or with giving the community a voice over specific issues or raising community awareness.
- 5) Therapeutic;projects that promote a sense of well being or that are linked with healthcare such as music for relaxation. NB There is a very vague boundary between community music projects such as these and music therapy.
- 6) Social/Fun;Projects whose primary purpose is to give people the opportunity to let their hair down and get to know each other, for example many projects in long stay nursing homes.
- 7)Transformation/Celebration/Ritual; Many projects are linked to specific times of the year such as solstices or St Patricks day in Ireland and some are a conscious attempt to recreate a sense of the ritual celebrations of now gone communities.

All community music projects involve more than one of these reasons in greater or lesser degrees. For me the key is to recognise the reasons (not always stated) and to try to prioritise them as fairly as possible. Then rather than try to be all things to all people it is usually possible to take on the role of facilitator to allow the group to work towards the achievement of their need in the most democratic way possible.

### **The facilitator**

Perhaps the most effective role for the community musician is as a bounded facilitator, convening the group, clarifying, acting as guardian of the process, not using their position to impose or to teach but to inquire, to echo and to affirm. Sometimes the role of reason is not enough, people may come to music seeking an inner transformation and the community musician may find themselves having to take on the role of the neo-shaman , “not a transmitter of ideas but a transformer of doings’(Schechner 1994). Where the community group collectively acknowledge the need to as it were take the lid off, trip the switch and cross the rainbow bridge the community musician may find themselves in a situation where they become the “vessel through which all that is powerful chooses to express itself. And these powers are inherent in the community itself,are the community.”(Schechner 1994). I have heard stories of the work of John Stevens where participants began speaking in tongues and am not surprised by this. Part of John's aim in writing the pieces was to unleash what he believed were inner spiritual powers held in the collective.

This being said most community music events while being powerful and often transformative stay within a zone where the role of community musician as facilitator rather than neo shaman is more appropriate.

What exactly is this role of facilitator?

Facilitate

--verb—

to make easy

--Oxford english dictionary--1994 ed

“Facilitation is a way of working with people(that)enables and empowers people to carry out a task or perform an action (and) encourages people to share ideas, resources,opinions and to think critically in order to identify needs and to find ways of satisfying those needs.” (Prendiville 1995).

Now the community musician need not worry about being a teacher, social worker or revolutionary as the responsibility within a facilitated setting rests clearly with the empowered members of the group to identify and satisfy their own needs.” The person is in charge of herself,is fully responsible for her own behaviour,can participate or not as she chooses”(Brandes 1994).

What makes the facilitational relationship work? A set of qualities attitudes and activities that stem from a belief that the members of the group are best placed to take responsibility for their own development. Rogers clearly lays these out as follows;

Qualities--realness in the facilitator

trust

empathic understanding

Attitudes--puzzlement

trust in the human organism

living the uncertainty of discovery

Activities/roles--set mood or climate

clarify purpose of group and individuals in groups

organise resources

become a flexible resource

accept intellectual and emotional attitudes within group

become participant learner

take initiative in sharing feelings or thought

remain alert to expressions indicative of deep or strong feelings

endeavour to recognise own limitations (Rogers 1969)

David Jacques talks about group building and maintaining roles and also group task roles, roles that allow the group to do its work.

Group building functions – encouraging / mediating / gate-keeping(democratising contributions) / standard setting / following / relieving tension

Group task functions – initiating / information seeking and giving / opinion giving / clarifying / elaborating / coordinating / orienting / testing and checking / summarising.(Jacques 1991).

In adopting this kind of role the musician may become more neutral but certainly not neutered. Instead of relying for inspiration on their own historical knowledge however strong, they have an almost infinite source of interplay, the personalities, creativity and interaction of the group working committedly and democratically, utilising many methodologies to achieve goals beyond the control or scope of one individual.

This system of musical creation is so powerful it begs the question; do we really need the single community musician at all? Can we not devise other flexible models that don't rely on the workshop “leader “ but that truly harness the power within the community?

### **Other Models**

“Anarchy in the UK--Coming someday maybe”

Sex Pistols 1977

Someone stands in front of a group of people and facilitates a music workshop. They work hard to maintain democratisation and an atmosphere of empowerment and the group take the key role in the creation and performance of the music. And yet.

I believe when it comes to a crisis or development issue the group will turn first to the facilitator for a solution and it is difficult to maintain boundaries in such circumstances. Why does this happen? Perhaps we are so used to the role of the leader in society that it is hard to do without them. The facilitator is not a priest / teacher/ shaman/ conductor/ general -far from it , they stand for empowerment rather than authority. Yet

they are an expert in their field and have taken the role of guardian of the process. They are articulate and learned. Perhaps if you walk like a duck and talk like a duck then duck like powers become ascribed to you.

Is this a problem? Not if your focus is educational or the creation of new music. But if you believe that a significant part of the purpose of community music is the empowerment and self actualisation of the individual and the recreation of a true sense of community then even a perception of a leader/followers power dynamic can defeat the purpose. "If access to reality is always controlled by a therapist and if the learner accepts this control as natural his entire world view becomes hygienic and neutral; he becomes politically impotent."(Illich 1973).

So we must find a model where no one is in charge. And of course this can lead to Anarchy. I believe one of the great contributions that community music has made in England has been to restore creative anarchy to the classroom ( some people call it ordered chaos). Murray Schafer the Canadian composer and educator describes a headteacher confronted with the debris and chaos of a modern creative music class and asking where is it all leading to be told "Anarchy,anarchy". What Sean O Casey called this "state of chassis" will be familiar and fondly remembered by all community musicians as a time when individuals were fiercely engaged and on the cusp of new and startling creativities. And why not this anarchy by stealth if that is to create this new individual and collective empowerment. To quote from the first anarchist manifesto-"Who says anarchy says negation of government

who says negation of government says affirmation of the people  
who says affirmation of the people says individual liberty  
who says individual liberty says sovereignty  
who says sovereignty of each says equality  
who says equality says solidarity or fraternity  
who says fraternity says social order"  
( Bellarigue 1850).

Rogers touches on an interesting and related point when he says that "research may indicate that all personal growth is marked by a certain degree of disorganisation followed by reorganisation"(Rogers 1969).

They are other leaderless models of music activity that don't rely on creation from chaos but that may give us pointers for community music development. Within a traditional Irish music session there is often no leader or a change of leaders often unknown to the outsider and yet people at different levels can join in and play all night with strangers and with few words exchanged. Drumming circles seem to this outsider to be a genuine democratic form of music participation based on an improvised and in the moment approach. In New Zealand last year I was Maori musicians were concerned to involve non performers as part of the process seeming in this observers eyes to be seeking a community mandate for their actions. I hope that in time the community musicians from Western Europe will engage in dialogue with musicians from these and other backgrounds to evolve ways of music making appropriate to changing local needs and contexts instead of simply accepting their role as facilitator and keeping themselves in a job.

## **The Music**

Can forms of music making be evolved that lead individuals to self actualisation and the group to becoming a real community? Can we, indeed should we develop music programs that can encourage people to realise the behaviours that Maslow identifies as characteristic of self actualised adults; emotional openness, spontaneous, natural, accepting of self and others, humorous, creative, appreciative of life, having an ethical and democratic framework, consistent and capable of loving relationships (Maslow 1987)? Would these programs be crude attempts at social engineering or would they be beneficial to young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties, people with mental health problems, offenders and others?

For me the music of the late John Stevens is a good pointer on the way. John's improvisational pieces (part of his search and reflect methodology) were designed to promote a "deep structure sonic dialogue" in a space where the accumulated tricks and techniques, the playing of past ciphers of a musical life would be bypassed by a disciplined approach to listening and interaction.

Pieces that come to mind include 'Free Space' where the group collectively imitate and reflect the environmental sounds around them always staying at a lower volume level than natures noises, 'Triangle'

where three people go through stages of intense listening and random musical scribbling to find a deep democratic musical equilibrium before allowing a dynamic free group improvisation to occur and 'Ghost' where everybody solos in turn without any constraints and are simultaneously ghosted or copied by the whole group at an ensemble level lower than the soloist. These pieces challenged mine and many community musicians perception of what music is, its function and our role within it and led directly to many people becoming involved in community music activity. Search and Reflect also inspired Christopher Small to ask a question that summarises my concerns and hopes within this paper;" Once people become aware that music is in themselves and not only in those who have been selected to become musicians, once they take back to themselves the musical act in a spirit of delight and self affirmation, who knows what else they might insist on reclaiming and enjoying, of what has been taken from them?"(Small 1985).

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