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# SONGWRITING: AN EXPLORATION OF COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES

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SONGWRITING: AN EXPLORATION OF COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES

by

Haviland Gilbert

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with Honors in the Music

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Dr. Laurie Croft  
Thesis Mentor

Fall 2017

All requirements for graduation with Honors in the  
Music have been completed.

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Honors Thesis Supervisor

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Haviland B. Gilbert

The University of Iowa

Author Note

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### **Abstract**

This thesis is a review of literature based on current research regarding collaborative songwriting. The review is broken down into sections regarding collaboration, songwriting, and collaborative songwriting. Research in collaborative songwriting is finite, but the studies completed have shown positive result. I examine the two aspects of collaborative songwriting to interpret a better understanding of the topic. To start I will completing a critical examination of collaborative practices and then explore how songwriting has played a role in the life of those in secondary education, post-secondary education, and those incarcerated. Connecting these two topics, the review then discusses possible methodology for future studies, Bennett (2011), as well as in depth analysis of songwriting in classrooms. The analysis of songwriting studies will focus on the positive and negative aspects of songwriting and lead into my statement of purpose and future research questions.

## **Collaboration**

Collaboration is defined as a “coordinated, synchronous activity that is the result of a continued attempt to construct and maintain a shared conception of a problem” (Roschelle & Teasley, 1995, p.70). A broad term, collaboration, occurs on many different levels including time, place, and expertise. Collaboration can occur among any number of people and within multiple disciplines.

## **The Individual in Collaborations**

J. Abra (1994) suggests that personal qualities such as certain skill sets and creative talent come into play during collaboration. Abra uses Rodgers and Hammerstein as an example with Rodger’s skill set in composing music and Hammerstein’s as a librettist. Moran & John-Steiner, (2004) claim that the certain traits of the individual’s identity, such as skills and goals, is the foundation of collaboration. Although participants have different skill sets, each member of the group must share the same level of involvement and must share ownership of their final project (Barrett, 2014). Social Harmony should be thought of as a goal in the collaboration pair, not diversity. Collaborators must share their ideas and thoughts for effective collaborations to occur (Abra, 1994).

## **Advantages of Collaboration**

One often occurring advantage of collaboration is psychological support received through others. Moran and John-Steiner (2004) suggest that collaboration can provide emotional supports such as emphasizing that individuals, are not alone in their struggle to create. Collaboration can serve as a safety net against mental breakdowns for individuals. Therefore, it provides emotional scaffolding as well as intellectual scaffolding, for creative work (Moran & John-Steiner, 2004). Another advantage of collaboration is heightened motivation. Per Moran and John-Steiner

(2004), collaborators can build on each other's excitement and multiply the levels of extrinsic motivation energy associated with the collaboration. Moran and John-Steiner (2004) suggest that collaboration itself generates a different and unique kind of motivation, "connective motivation" (p. 18). Connective motivation is rooted in the bond that collaborators build in completing the project. This motivation focuses on the connection with the other person; it is not limited to the end goal.

### **Disadvantages and Frustrations with Collaboration**

Collaboration can also be a frustrating activity (Abra 1994; Barrett 2014; Moran and John-Steiner 2004). Barrett (2014) suggests that although collaboration is an activity that is positively affirmed by research, it is often fraught with "disagreements, tension, and contradiction" (p.8). Moran & John-Steiner, (2004) indicates that there are four core potential problem areas involved in collaboration; Impatience, Ownership, Conflict, and Unfriendliness (p. 19). While working to solve a problem, collaborators can become impatient with a result if it takes too much time. Moran and John-Steiner suggest that impatience occurs in a collaboration when people see their time as a cost rather than an investment (p. 19). From this research, we can see that collaboration can be beneficial if there is some sort of connective motivation (Moran and Steiner, 2004), and if the individuals in the collaboration are patient, and motivated, and respectful. With these many points of collaborations discussed, we will turn our attention to an activity that can often be recognized as a collaborative activity, songwriting.

### **Songwriting**

Songwriting is defined as "an engaging form of human expression that combines writing lyrics with elements of music such a melodies, rhythms, and expressive components (Wilson, 2013, P. 9). Wilson (2013) also suggests that "songwriting is a flexible enough activity to meet

learners varying physical, emotional, and cognitive needs can enrich the songwriters' lives, create greater depths of understanding to the creative process, social interactions and human relationships (p. 21).

### **Aspects of Songwriting**

While composing a song, the songwriter must create an identifiable unique piece within certain music, and literary parameters (Bennett, 2014). Because songwriting contains so many different components such as writing, music composition, and collaboration, the activity is accessible to those with little or no musical skills.

Melodies and lyrics for a piece may be important, but the songwriting experience extends further beyond the melodies, rhythms; harmonies, form lyrics, and the final product (Cantor 2006; Draves 2008; Hahn 2015; Kratus 2016; Riley 2012). Although songwriting may not just be about the finished product, the final product boosts self-esteem, as well as experience pleasure and joy in having their creativity shared and recognized (Baker, 2016).

Another important aspect of songwriting is risk taking. Without taking risk, songwriters would never break boundaries or create new or different music. Marade, Gibbons, and Brinthaup (2007) completed a case study comparing distinguished songwriters and the manner in which they rose to success. Successful songwriters such as Johnny Cash, Bob Dylan, and The Beatles, the authors of this study suggest that, "Not only did these successful songwriters take risks, they did so with persistence, stubbornness, preparedness, and high self-efficacy concerning their creative abilities" (Marade et al., 2007, p. 142). All of these big name stars have been rejected and The Beatles were even told that their songwriting had no commercial future. Marade et al., 2007 also explain that these rejections foster resiliency and improve creativity in the artist, encouraging them to create their own unique sound. Cohen and Wilson (2017) confirm this



observation with incarcerated men. They reported that one must deal with the risk of pride, rejection, and failure if they aspire to compose a personal meaningful song. Since songwriting is a flexible activity, song can be written by bands, or duos, or trios.

### **Collaborative Songwriting**

Research in collaborative songwriting is limited. Bennett (2011) laid the groundwork for future studies in collaborative songwriting by defining terms associated with collaborative songwriting. Bennett defined and described methods and processes that all songwriters go through while collaborating with another songwriter. He identified seven groups that describe the roles that songwriters could play in their collaborations According to Bennett (2011, p.7) these models are

**Nashville.** Acoustic guitars/piano and minimal technology – a ‘pen and paper’ approach typically featuring two writers, who usually do not have demarcated roles.

**Factory.** A geographical location with staff songwriters; notable examples include Tin Pan Alley (late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> Century), The Hit Factory (1980s), The Brill Building (1950s/60s) and Xenomania (2000s). Like the Nashville model, it is defined in part by a regimented timeframe – songwriters ‘come to work’ in the morning. ‘Factories’ may use parts of the other models, and are currently frequently studio-based (Higgins 2009).

**Svengali.** The artist is one co-writer, although their input may vary from a small contribution such as a title through to a substantial one such as complete lyric. Typically the other co-writers are more experienced than the artist, and may have collaborated with a large number of others. A recent UK example is James Blunt’s breakthrough hit

‘You’re Beautiful’, which was co-written (Hewson, 2009) with two professional songwriters with a prior track record of hits.

**Demarcation.** A lyricist provides a finished lyric for word-setting by a composer (e.g. John/Taupin or Difford/Tilbrook), or the composer provides music for a lyricist to write to (e.g., Mercer/Mancini). This model is unusual because the parties need not meet in order to co-write – in this sense it is only arguably collaborative because it does not usually provide veto or negotiation. The line of demarcation need not be split between music and lyric (although this is historically the most common approach) and could, for example, be split between melody and harmony, or in studio teams, tonal material and drum programming.

**Jamming.** A band creates live ideas in the rehearsal room, forming the song from individual contributions to the arrangement and some degree of veto (e.g., U2). Band members may bring stimuli to the session (titles, riffs etc).

**Top-line writing.** A completed backing track is supplied by a ‘producer’ to a top-line writer who will supply melody and lyric. The backing track acts as harmonic/tempo template but more crucially as inspiration for genre-apposite creative decisions, such as singability of a line.

**Asynchronicity.** The co-writers work separately and iteratively, but do not necessarily define clear or exclusive creative roles. An example would be if two songwriter-producers worked separately on a multi-track audio file, passing it backwards and forwards (typically online) and making iterative changes in one or more cycles. The demarcation model is usually implemented asynchronously, but asynchronous writing need not be demarcated (by activity or creative contribution). (p.7)

Along with these established models, Bennett also classifies the six processes of writing a song. These processes are as followed: Stimulus, Approval, Adaption, Negotiation, Veto, and Consensus. The primary process is Stimulus. One writer will provide stimulus material and the other writer will approve, adapt, or veto the material. Songwriters negotiate when an idea is vetoed. Consensus permits an idea to survive and continue on as songwriters receive different ideas. Along with the methods and the processes, Bennett discusses the role of technology in songwriting. The lines of songwriter, arranger, performer and producer have become blurred and most of all the work in the collaboration is done at a computer workstation (Bennett 2011). Although research in collaborative songwriting is finite, another study that fits in with the Bennet 2011 methodology was written by Peter DeVries, a music educator.

In DeVries (2005), two songwriting's found each other because they shared common goals and values in songwriting. One of the partners was a musician and songwriting novice, while the other had been songwriting professionally for years. DeVries points out that both of the songwriters shared the goal of creating original works and they valued similar styles and genres of music. The two songwriters agreed that they wanted anybody to pick up the score and be able to play the song. The songwriters then focused on lyrics, melody, and harmony as the sub-themes of their partnership. After the partnership had developed, the songwriters began to understand the strengths and weaknesses they each possessed. In order to create original songs, the writers found ways to complement each other abilities. "Acknowledgment of these traits allowed the pair to focus on their shared goals and values in songwriting collaboration" (DeVries, 2005, p. 46). DeVries suggests that this collaboration is something that established songwriters such as Madonna and her co-writer, Pat Leonard work with to create Madonna's Music.

The initial work of each song was divided by the writers, with one writer coming up with lyrics and the other writer taking the lyrics and creating melody and harmony to work with them. This description of the work this duo fits in with Bennett's (2011) model of Demarcation. Within this model, Bennett's methods of stimulus, veto, and approval played a role. As well as the Demarcation model, the songwriting pair in DeVries (2005) also used the Jamming model. The Jamming model occurred when the duo wanted to start a song from scratch and flow idea back and forth with one another. While using these two models, the songwriters struggled with originality. One partner would play a riff or a chord sequence and the other would veto the riff citing it as another's song. When a riff or lyrics worked out together, the partners suggested that it was the mystique of the popular music.

This partnership created nine original songs that were considered successful by the writers. The partnership ended due to an age difference and professionalism issues. Through this study, DeVries (2005) suggests that collaboration in songwriting can lead to a superior song that could not have been written without all those parties involved. In this study, we can see that themes that emerged earlier in this review, such as the collaborators playing off each other's strengths and weaknesses (Abra, 1994), the skills and goals of each individual as the foundation of the collaboration, and conflict issues such as ownerships, and professionalism (Moran & John-Steiner, 2004).

Collaboration in songwriting has been theorized, and slightly studied. Moving forward, I will examine researchers looking at songwriting based courses and workshops.

### **Songwriting while incarcerated**

Songwriting has also become a valued activity with some people who are incarcerated. Wilson (2013) aimed to understand emotions expressed by incarcerated songwriters. In her

study, she discovered that symbolic language was a key in the lives of those incarcerated and writing songs helped them use symbolic language express themselves. Wilson reveals that while the incarcerated songwriters wrote for personal reasons, another probable reason was the feedback process provided. This social activity of songwriters and giving feedback motivated the writers to keep coming to workshops and to participate in concerts (Wilson 2013). Wilson explained that group interaction gave the writers an outlet for different emotions, as well as motivation perform their works. Overall, Wilson indicated that songwriting was a successful activity for incarcerated men. The songwriters gained a greater understanding of music, writing, and social skills (Wilson 2013). Through Wilson's study, she suggested that "if facilitated effectively, may provide a positive, personally expressive, safe way of conveying deep and difficult emotions, and help writers deal with of the past, as well as navigating issues within the present" (p. 210)

Cohen and Wilson (2017) completed another study that indicated songwriting as a useful educational, psychological, social, and emotional tool. Cohen and Wilson used two 13-week sessions to examine how songwriting affected a group of incarcerated men. The authors of the study inspected lyrics of original songs, written reflections from instructors, transcriptions of workshops sessions, and narrative data from participants. From these different forms of data, they reported that songwriters were able to work on their self-identity, communication skills, and a sense of self-fulfillment. Cohen and Wilson reported that the incarcerated men in the study were able to laugh, relax, and enjoy themselves during the group activity. The majority of the songwriters were pleased with the feedback received from the large group and enjoyed the type of feedback system, the Liz Lerman Critical Response Method (Cohen, in press). Cohen and

Wilson (2017) conclude their studying by sharing that The Liz Lerman Critical Response Method, could be beneficial as feedback process with K-12 songwriting.

### **Songwriting and Students**

Some educators promote songwriting because it can provide more culturally relevant experience to students' music education, something traditional ensembles such as band, orchestra, and choir, cannot (Cantor, 2006; Draves, 2008; Kratus, 2016). Cantor (2006), a non-music educator, speculates that songwriting has the ability to combine skills of reading and writing within a K-12 music education. John Kratus (2016) also promotes songwriting in education as it connects directly with teens and young adults' culture. Kratus and Cantor concur that adolescence is an emotionally tough period where students relieve tension and cope with pressures by listening to recorded music. Students feel empathy for the characters they listen to in these songs. When listening, students place themselves in the role of the protagonist. This process called narrative songwriting gives students a chance to share their musical identify with their culturally relevant world. By creating an original song students are fitting their own stories into this framework and empowering themselves and their learning (Baker 2016; Cantor 2006 ). Kratus (2016) suggests that the largest number of starting musicians and songwriters are underserved in the schools as there are few songwriting high school courses.

Patricia Riley (2012), David Mark Hahn (2015), and Tami Draves (2008) all taught separate undergraduate songwriting course and found comparable results. Riley (2012) required her students to write five original songs and also to offer advice to other classmates songs. The course focused not only on songwriting, but fundamental music making skills. Another important aspect of the course was collaboration with other students and local songwriters. Each week students were given a chance to workshop and mentor each other's works. Through this course

Riley discovered themes from assigned prompts and journaling: emotional stability, therapy, self-expression, self-discovery, and overcoming challenges. Riley (2012) suggests that future studies be completed with songwriting in high school, middle school and/or elementary school.

Hahn (2015), like Riley, worked with a small group of undergraduate students. Hahn collected data through the students weekly journaling, informal conversations and interviews with students, and observational video recording of the classroom. Through these sources, he aimed to find out how the participants' background impacted their perception of songwriting, what the students found challenging about songwriting, what meaning emerged from songwriting, and what strategies developed through the songwriting process. Hahn reported that the siblings and parents of participants in the study had encouraged them to compose and perform music, especially songwriting. Hahn's students found value in learning about themselves and faced their fears developed higher levels of self-knowledge and self-confidence. Hahn noted that he also believes songwriting should be used and further studied in K-12 education.

Draves (2008) worked to discover the music aptitude level of students who were not participating in a college music ensemble. She wanted to understand how songwriting might influence the relationship between musical achievement and self-esteem. The songwriting course taught basic songwriting techniques to 20 non-music majors and they created seven original songs. Draves required the students to journal about experiences during the songwriting process. In their journals, students reflected on the social aspect of music making. The students perceived musical abilities relied on the support of their classmates and the encouragement they received from the course (Draves 2008). Students also wrote about how the course increased their

appreciation of music. Some students noted that they were unable to put guitars down or wished they could make a living by writing songs and performing them (Draves, 2008).

In all three of these academic studies, the instructors not only built a foundation of songwriting for students, but also created a learning environment where students could feel safe sharing their songs. The facilitator of each class called this space a “workshop” as it provided affirmations, criticism, and chances to collaborate with others (Draves 2008; Hahn 2015; Riley 2012). Draves (2008) wrote that social music making would not only increase enrollment, but also connect students with their passions.

### **Purpose for Research**

My purpose for this literature review is to gain a better understand of how collaborative songwriting could be used in K-12 music education. In addition to understanding how collaborative songwriting could be used in a K-12 classroom, I also aim to better understand how collaborators of different levels can work together, and how Bennett’s (2011) methodology can be used while studying collaborative songwriting, and in future research studies on the topic of collaborative songwriting.

### **Research Questions**

With the information reviewed in this paper, I pose these questions for future studies: To what extend can collaborative songwriting be used in K-12 education? Will collaborative songwriting satisfy student musical interest, as opposed to a band, orchestra or choir? How will K-12 students value collaborative songwriting as opposed to individual songwriting? How can songwriters of different skills and abilities work together to create a product? Will songwriters of different skills and abilities meet more difficulties than those that are on a more similar songwriting ability?



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