

CHAPTER ONE In Defense of Creativity

“The things that made you weird as a kid make you great as an adult—but only if you pay attention to them.” – James Victore

First of all, thank you for taking the time to read this. I started this short book after 20+ years of teaching music and running my own community music school, NewSongs, to support and encourage parents and families to successfully help children in their lives become more creative, particularly by being more musical. Ken Robinson's TED Talk on creativity in education, one of the most viewed of all times, proclaims that “Creativity is as important as literacy, and we should treat it with the same status.” I appreciate the fact that you want this too and that we can share this mission together.

Music, along with many other creative disciplines, empowers the user to remember that they have a unique power or voice in the world. There is something you can bring into the world that no one else can. Being creative takes a lot of courage. Elizabeth Gilbert, author of "Eat Pray Love" describes it as "Big Magic". This magic is the true gift we can give our children, hidden into the daily routines of going to music lessons, finishing 15 minutes of daily practice, and victoriously surviving your first piano recital.

In a world where distractions compete for our children's attention at every turn, making music offers something increasingly rare—genuine connection. Instead of just another activity to shuffle between soccer practice and homework, when children complete the full cycle of musical learning, they discover a powerful way to connect with themselves and others that satisfies a fundamental human need to relate and belong.

Music that fails to forge connections often leads nowhere but frustration. I've watched countless students walk away from music lessons because they couldn't see how the notes on the page connected to their lives. But I've also witnessed the magic that happens when those connections click into place.

Music connects us to each other in tangible ways. When my students play in an orchestra, they're not just learning an instrument—they're learning to listen, to adjust, to contribute to something larger than themselves. When they play duets, something remarkable happens in the mirror neurons of the brain as they synchronize and respond to another person in real time. I've seen shy children transform during these collaborative moments, finding their place in a musical conversation.

I have childhood memories involving singing with my grandmother—songs nobody else seems to know anymore. My grandmother lived states away and I did not spend a lot of time with her, but that shared musical experience created bonds that transcended age and time. The same thing happens when families sing together at home or when teenagers belt out lyrics together at karaoke. These aren't just fun activities; they're relationship builders.

There are certainly academic connections as well. My focus will be mostly the social and emotional connections that music makes, but the academic and developmental benefits are significant as well. Amongst many other benefits, musicians recognize patterns and connections in the world around us with a unique ability to spot relationships that others miss. For instance, they might notice how a pop song on the radio borrows chord progressions from a classical piece written centuries ago (yes, Phil Collins' "Groovy Kind of Love" and Clementi's Sonatina in F are connected with a shared melody, just like Bach's Minuet in G and "A Lover's Concerto" by The Toys).

My goal as a teacher is to cultivate wonder in a world that one rushes to explanations before questions are even asked. I love Ted Lasso's wisdom from the television series by the same name: "Be curious, not judgmental." This applies perfectly to raising musical children. Unlike passive media consumption, making music invites continuous exploration. Each time we sit down to play a piece, we can discover something new—a different interpretation, a deeper feeling, a technical breakthrough. The recording always sounds the same, but our musical experiences evolve constantly, fostering a growth mindset that serves children in every area of life.

Perhaps most importantly, music brings joy. As we navigate the mental health challenges facing children growing up in this digital age, making music offers a powerful antidote to isolation and comparison. When we create environments where "sharing" music replaces "winning" or even "succeeding" at music, I've seen genuine smiles light up not just the performers' faces but everyone around them.

I've written this book to help you create spaces where children feel free to sing, free to dance, free to participate in music without fear of judgment. That is when true learning and creative development can occur. It is not because they'll all become professional musicians (though some might), but because the connections they make through music will enrich their lives immeasurably.

The garden of creativity in a child needs cultivation. Let's tend it together.

Good, But Not Good Enough (Why We Give Up)

Most people will not argue to me that music education lacks value. Many people, however, will conveniently forget to put the time and energy into making music education happen. It is time to figure out a pathway forward and turn our good intentions into real, tangible growth for the children in our lives. How do we overcome these very real issues we face?

- **There is not enough time** (or resources) in the school day for it
- **There is not enough time after school** for lessons between all of the other sports and recreational activities
- **There is not enough time at home** for a parent to encourage practice and learning at home
- **Adults are intimidated** by their own lack of music experience, and
- **“The child is just not interested at this time”**

When I was 20 years old, I started a school. I started NewSongs because I knew my life calling was to teach and cultivate creativity and there was no place for me to work and do that job the way I envisioned it. I started with 50 business cards I printed on Avery cardstock and some neon colored flyers that I put on the bulletin board at the local library (more about my love of libraries later). I offered a “summer camp” in the tiny living room of my shared 800 sq duplex and I taught a few kids about piano basics and listened to the Carnival of the Animals. Even as a budding educator, I wanted to give two things to my students- first an immersive love of music, and second, the skills to actively participate in it.

Twenty-two years later, I am still at it. Lots of things I tried worked, and many more failed. Building a school is a lot like any other artistic endeavor, and the most important tool you have to succeed is showing up every single day, believing in yourself (and having a family or support network that believes in you), and never giving up.

Now, NewSongs runs four locations with weekly lessons for more than 1300 students and serves a dozen other schools and community locations, we have a music bus, and more. When I get up in the morning, though I still basically do the same job I did when I taught my debut camp. Whether it is for 2 kids or 2000, I want every student (adults too, but especially children) to have a place where they can interact with music more deeply, learn to understand and appreciate things that seem unfamiliar or difficult, and develop the confidence to make music themselves.

Music is a good idea, but often it's just not quite good enough to take the time to cultivate.

Cultivate is a carefully chosen word for me.

Throughout this book I will use analogies of a garden and a gardener. I did not use the garden analogy because I am actually good at gardening. I respect my green-thumbed friends very much, but I enjoy the “fruits” of their work more than the work itself.

I may not have the skills to grow, well, anything. But I can only enjoy a garden that SOMEONE has spent time and effort on. I have visited a few great gardens around the world and have marveled at their beauty. In my own yard, I don't have such beauty, but I can't blame the dirt that “it just was not interested in growing.” My own lack of time, knowledge and commitment are definitely at play—but I think the stakes are higher when growing our children, than when growing our yards.

There are some rare musical talents in the world, yes. There are some beautiful wildflowers that grow despite adverse conditions too. But I am not ready to leave all the flowers in the world to grow in a select few places any more than I am ready to leave music only in the hands of a few professionals and prodigies. Anyone can grow a tomato plant if they want fresh vegetables in their life, and anyone can participate in music, if they want it in their life too.

Through this book, I will address some of the obstacles that hold our children back from learning and making music. I will explain what musical aptitude is and when and how to nurture it. Then, I will explore the many valid pathways children can take to engage in music. I am not here to sell you a new or groundbreaking method. There are no secret formulas here that will make you a musical master in half the time. In fact, I hope to dispel the myth that there is one “right” way to approach music education.

**You Can't Win (And That's the Point)
Music is not a “winning” activity.**

Children have grown up seeing reality talent competitions, social media influencers and musicians that sell out massive venues, giving the impression that a select few “win” at the game of music. And by comparison? Most others “lose”. But there are no losers in music. I am happy for my students that have won music scholarships, performed paid gigs, and made other musical accomplishments. I am just as proud of the work I have done with students that never took their guitar further than their bedroom or only completed two levels of piano books but did not go “all the way”. These students have

received just as many social, emotional and cognitive benefits as their counterparts that got more social media likes and fans.

I am not against all forms of competition. Before we judge the proverbial “dance mom” or “helicopter parent” stereotypes, my wife and I took one of our children on the competitive dance circuit for several years (if you have been there with competitive cheerleading, travel soccer, or anything of the sort you know it's like living in an alternative reality...in fact several reality TV series document the phenomenon). You have to go into a competitive world with your eyes wide open to the benefits and the pitfalls. If you bonded with your child in the shared adventure of trying their best in the competitive arena (and provided you made it clear you loved them just as much if they won or lost) then cherish that adventure. I just ask that we all see competitive arts events as a slice, not the whole pie. Playing soccer with your friends has many social and health benefits without dominating in a competitive league. Dancing in your living room can bring as much joy—or more—than taking the big stage at a national competition. It's not all-or-nothing. It is not about winners and losers. Please never say that just because you will not win on “American Idol” that you are “not a singer”.

That brings me to one pet peeve of mine. I have met far too many adults who were told, sometime in their adolescence, that they were not good enough for making music. There are many variations of this statement, but everyone got the message loud and clear. Someone told them to be quieter, find another activity, or to give up hope in their musical journey. I think this kind of elitism has no place in the musical world. Unless you raise your hand to say, “I want to fight to be the best in my musical field and I am willing to be rated and ranked in my effort to rise to the top,” it is nobody's business to be judging those around us. We cannot protect our kids from every judgement that will come along, but we need to work hard to counteract the damage from them. If I had a dollar for every person I met that quit music because they were told that they were not talented enough, I would be a rich man. Let's work to change the narrative everyone. Ok, rant over.

Parents, this includes judging your child that “just won't practice.” I promise you every child will go through a season where practicing is a struggle. Please do not communicate during hard times that your child is not musical, lazy, bad, untalented or any variation thereof. Don't give away their guitar because they haven't played in the last six months.

Don't pull them out of choir and never look back because “we tried that once and it did not work”. It is not all-or-nothing, win or lose.

How Did I Get Here? (And Where Do We Go Next?)

Now you know what “ruffles my feathers” so to speak. Let me share just a little bit of where I come from. I am something of a folksy-nerd. I got a degree in classical piano at the age of 18. I was never “cool.” Never even tried. I grew up in the 80s with older and more conservative parents so I can hardly name most of the music from the 80s and 90s. I can name thousands of pieces from the 1880s though. I love to name the classical music in the background of commercials, and yet none of my three kids are ever impressed.

I am a middle child. I am a highly visual learner and academically talented—I love the library (I was a teenage volunteer to reshelve books during summer vacation...I told you I was a nerd), I am a good test-taker, and actually have fun writing essays. I mean—I am writing this book now for you, and having a great time doing it. This also meant I was well equipped to succeed in traditional school environments.

I am not anti-technology, but I am also not a gamer, and grew up with a desktop computer in the family room but never my own video game console. I have always loved the arts and I have never been good at sports. I got married young, and my wife would laugh at my attempts to play basketball in my 20s after a lifetime of...well, not playing basketball. We started a family at a young age, which I loved.

We were both born to be parents, and the imaginative world of early childhood is very comfortable for me. Mr. Rogers is my lifelong hero (more in the next chapter). I love going to Disneyland (never went as a child so my mind was blown as a young parent going for the first time). I am hopelessly optimistic.

I share these things because we all have a viewpoint. We all have a life experience. Many parents I talk to never had a parent or grandparent that sang to them. I remember songs that no one else seems to know anymore. That became part of the background that cultivated my own musical development. But if you grew up listening to ACDC or country western with someone in your life, that is no better or no worse. My hope is to encourage you to recognize your own musical history, as much or as little as it was, and authentically use that. It's OK to drum along to “Smoke on the Water” with your toddler just as much as it is to play Mozart next to their crib.

A fellow parent that I work with recounts her experience this way: "Growing up, at the dinner table with six children we would love to talk until inevitably someone would burst out singing and make us all want to join in. It would usually be Cher, Neil Diamond, Tina Turner, Eric Clapton, Rod Stewart... many amazing artists. I consider that the

soundtrack to my life. One of the last memories I have of my mother was when she ordered my siblings and I to get into her new car... Cher started playing on the car radio and we were instructed to sing "it's in his kiss" as loud as we possibly could. She passed away two weeks later at the young age of 39. Throughout the years, music was my therapy. As a mom, music is my kid's therapy. We dance on a bad day off and celebrate a good day with dance! None of us ever became professional musicians, but we were certainly actively engaged with music. None of us were ever too shy or scared to sing at school and take a singing class or dance all of a sudden to our favorite song in the mall! Music provided us with confidence, with a way to process our feelings, and connect with others. Music is surely magical!"

When we give up on making music "in real life", we miss out on helping our kids connect with themselves, connect with others, develop their growing brains and most of all miss out on the joy of making music. Despite the challenges though, making music is attainable and accessible for all of us. Let's get started together.

Key Takeaways

- Music and creative education aren't easy, but they are vital. The challenge is part of the magic.
- Just like a garden, music grows through both natural talent and careful tending. When we recognize and nurture these traits in our children, we give them room to bloom.
- There is no singular "right way" to approach music education. The journey matters more than the destination.

What's Next

Creativity isn't just a nice-to-have—it's essential. It's what gives kids the confidence to explore, to make mistakes, and to find their own voice in the world. In the first chapter, we looked at why creativity matters, especially in music, and how easily it gets lost when we focus too much on perfection. But creativity doesn't grow in a vacuum—it needs a place to take root. That's where the next chapter comes in. Just like Mr. Rogers' "Neighborhood of Make-Believe" gave kids a safe space to explore big ideas, we need to create environments where kids feel free to make and believe. Because when children know they can create without judgment, they don't just learn music—they learn resilience, curiosity, and joy.