

## **How to Perform Music Miracles!**

Hello. My name is Colin Allured, and I've been working for Arts for Life for around 5 years now. This job has evolved greatly for me over this time. I am writing this document to share some insights from my experiences that will hopefully save you time and be helpful in facilitating the miracle of music as a supremely positive and uplifting force in these children's lives.

### **Being Sensitive and Open**

There is Sufi mystic musician named Hazrat Inayat Khan who wrote beautifully about music. His writings were collected in a book called "The Mysticism of Sound and Music" which I would highly suggest for anyone going into Music Therapy or wanting to tune themselves to the healing aspects of music. In his book, Hazrat makes a point that sticks with me when I'm going to teach/play music at the hospital. He tells a story about people who bring music to a hospital because of its healing powers. But Hazrat explains that, "the music was not the right kind of music, so the patients begged the musicians to stop playing and to leave!" Needless to say this was a very humbling story to think about upon entering the 9<sup>th</sup> floor of Brenner's Children's Hospital. Hazrat's point it got me asking myself: "What is the right music?" "How can I harmonize with my environment and make it better with sound?" "How can I bring harmony where there is discord?" "How can I bring soothing where there is pain and worry?" "How can I encourage enthusiasm and upbeat energy?"

I have found the answer to all these questions on the faces of the children. Their body language. Their energy level for that day. All these things tell me whether to play fast, slow or medium tempo. To play the drum or the guitar, which song, which key, to sing or not sing. Walking into the hospital with an attitude of humbleness and helpfulness, I have found that the environment created by the people in it will tell you what it needs. And this will flow naturally from you with a simple desire to be open and helpful.

I don't think of doing this job as being a "guitar teacher" like I do when I teach at the music store or at home. I think of myself as a facilitator. A facilitator of miracles. And the miracles have nothing to do with me, or any magic power. The miracles are when a child smiles for the first time that day after strumming a guitar or hitting a drum, or when a parent smiles as their child starts dancing and singing to a drum beat. The miracle is the life that perseveres in the face of death. And music connects us with the positivity of this force. It connects us with each other. Child, parent, nurse, patient, doctor, receptionist, all are connected by the music.

For instance, one of the ways that this job has evolved for me is that it has become more than just going to rooms to see patients. For me it starts when I turn the corner into the lobby of the 9<sup>th</sup> floor. There are the Arts for Life tables with kids doing arts and crafts in the hallway and then parents and children waiting in the interior lobby of the outpatient clinic. This interior lobby has glass windows and is visually connected with the hallway art tables. There may be children hanging out in either place that have done music with me before or may be completely new to me. If the child recognizes me they may instantly say "music!", "drum!", "guitar!". In that case, I may go back and get my cart full of drums, shakers and guitars and start a jam right there in the lobby. We've had many great jams where several kids have shakers and drums,

some strumming guitars, and Renee the receptionist will dance in her office chair! She says, “I work better when there’s music!” A dull and sorrowful waiting room is turned into a party! The kids at the art table are tapping their feet to the music that they hear and see through the glass. Everyone is connected, smiling and happy! That is the miracle of music. And I’m just thankful to have the opportunity to facilitate it.

The number one danger in playing the “wrong” music in that situation is playing too loud. There were many shakers, tambourines and big bass drums that were donated to Arts for Life, that I eventually had to edit from my cart. I would notice parents cringing in their sensitive state at a sound that was too low and overwhelming, or too shrill and piercing. So it’s important, that if you have a jam in a lobby or hallway, to look around you. Can the receptionist field her phone calls? Can people talk to each other without straining their voices? Does the music feel good on people’s bodies and ears for what their energy level can handle?

Also, many times I’ll walk through the lobby and I can just tell that it’s not a day for a jam. No one’s interested. No one’s in the mood. No one’s feeling well enough. In that case I just get my cart and guitar and head to the inpatient section of the floor, to get a census and see who I can work with one on one. And often it has happened, that a child will be walking through the inpatient hallway, and upon seeing the drums and guitar they become curious and want to play. So we’ll have a jam right there! This seems to really lift morale of the nursing staff! They are always very encouraging and genuinely thankful for any music that breaks the tension of their environment. I’ve even played songs for just the nurses in both the in-patient and out-patient clinics at their request. They say, “we need some music” or “we need our Friday song.” So I’ll just play an old Sam Cooke tune, or Van Morrison, Stevie Wonder, Bob Marley, something warm and uplifting. I never would have imagined that the job would have evolved in these ways, but it’s just what the environment needed. The more I learned to be sensitive and open to my surroundings, the more ways to be helpful revealed themselves.

## **Practical**

In this chapter I would like to share specific things that have worked for me. I’m sure you will find many of your own things that work and play to your own strengths as a musician and person. So these tips can be used literally or just as inspiration for your own way of working with the children.

Again, my first suggestion is to not be hung up on the idea of “teaching” a child something, so much as facilitating a positive musical experience. I think back to my early fascination with the guitar. At 7 years old, it did not interest me to learn chords and scales, what thrilled me was turning my best friend’s guitar all the way up on distortion, and randomly flailing my fingers about on it for hours on end! I just enjoyed making sounds and the fact that I was playing the guitar! In my mind, I might as well have been Jimi Hendrix on stage at Woodstock! That’s how exalted I felt from just “playing” the guitar. So when I hand a young child a guitar or a drum and they start to do this, I don’t interfere. 5, 10, 15 minutes, however long they want to zone in to the instrument is fine with me. I usually jam along with them on the guitar or drum to create a musical context for their explorations, but some children just want to jam by themselves, or want you to watch them, and that’s fine too. Almost as soon as the child begins to make sound on the

instrument I offer them some verbal encouragement: “Nice!,” “Good Job!,” “Sounds Good!” If they embark on a longer jam I try to interject a compliment every so often, so they know I am present with them and they feel encouraged.

To make the guitar more appealing for a child exploring on it, I tune the small guitar on my cart to an open G tuning. D-G-D-G-B-D, from 6 to 1. That way, just strumming the guitar sounds pretty, sounds like music. I usually don’t even bother with the fret board with younger children, I just try to get them strumming, either with the thumb or a pick.

Sometimes I’ll ask the child how many strings the guitar has, and we’ll play “Simon Says”: “Simon says pluck string 2. Simon says pluck string 5. Simon says pluck strings 2 and 1 together etc.” If they play a string when “Simon didn’t say” then I just smile and go “Wah Wah Wah Waaahh... Simon didn’t say!”...and make a funny face, so they don’t feel at all discouraged. They are just having fun learning where the strings are.

There are also many children’s songs that are great when working with kids. The ones I use a lot are “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star,” “Old MacDonald,” “ABCs,” “This Little Light of Mine,” “When the Saints Go Marchin’ In,” and “You are My Sunshine.” But there are so many others that could be great for this. I try to get the child playing the guitar to strum and sing with me. If I do the song in the key of G, then it’s sounds pretty nice with their strumming, and they will often strum and sing in the same rhythm which is really cute, or just strum in the rhythm of the melody and not sing. If I play the song in a different key or their guitar goes out of tune, “who cares?”... we’re making music! It’s nice if the music sounds pleasing according to the rules or music theory, but this is not a pre-requisite for a kid’s enjoyment of playing an instrument!

Also, don’t feel like you need to work with a child who is old enough to walk, talk or sing. Children understand music way before they can begin to do these things! One of my most enthusiastic students was 22 months old! She would zone into the drum, guitar, and shakers like a natural. She’d bob her head and dance right there in her bed. She’d make everybody happy (the nurses, doctors, her parents, and grandparents) with her love of music. She never sang a song or learned a chord, but she intuitively knew what music was all about! Eventually she learned to walk and she would dance in the hallways for the enjoyment of the nurses!

When facilitating a young child on percussion, shakers are a great way to start. Babies, kids of all ages, and even parents love shakers! On my cart we have shakers in the form of bananas and avocados which always bring a smile. I also have a miniature djembe about a foot tall that is great for setting in a child’s bed. The first thing I try to encourage is a steady beat! If I can get a child making a steady beat then it is awesome and people really respond to that. But sometimes a child is too young to keep their concentration on the drum in that way and they enjoy playing it more randomly. No problem! “Sounds Good!” “Great Job, Keep it Up!” I just remember my early days with the guitar.

I can usually teach most older children to make a steady beat and how to make the basic sounds of the drum. A universal rhythm that I often have success teaching a child from the age of 9 and up is the beat for “We Will Rock You”. Everyone knows that song and kids are really excited to get to make the beat for it. While they play it I’ll sing the chorus, and they smile and feel cool! If they are playing a hand drum, I’ll teach them the deep bass sound they get from hitting the middle of the drum, and the higher tone they get from hitting the side. Then just encourage “twice in the middle, once on the side.” “Boom Boom Bop, Boom Boom Bop.” If they have use of both of their hands, I’ll teach it with right and left, but sometimes one hand or arm is hooked up to a machine and is unusable, so I’ll teach them that they can play a

steady beat and “We Will Rock You” with one hand. Some young teenagers will get really into it and learn rudiments and different grooves and patterns from me that we can jam on, but that’s never my first goal. It’s “here’s a drum, wanna play it? Here, just hit it in the middle like this ‘Boom’...etc.”

When I go into a child’s room for the first time and meet them and their families they are sometimes shy and do not want to hit the drums or play the guitar. If I get a real shy response, then I’ll usually say, “Would you like to SEE the instruments.” And I’ll just show and tell the different drums and play them a little bit. This will often open their curiosity or maybe they’ll be in the mood to play next time. But if a child is playing and the family is really into it I will often hand them shakers and we’ll have a family jam! I usually do medium to uptempo African influenced rhythms, encouraging the jam to speed up or slow down for contrast. Always keeping the volume pleasant and making sure the sounds “feel” good to everyone. Nurses will come in and smile or dance. Everyone’s mood is totally changed by the music. The doctors and nurses are trying to get the “white cells” up. Similarly, in my thinking I am trying to increase the “smile cells”! “Smile cells” are sure to energize the immune system and increase the well being of the person.

Now, with teenagers you probably don’t want to break out the “Mary Had a Little Lamb”! Again there are some songs that everybody knows and associates with the infinite “coolness” of the guitar. The first song I usually teach to young teens is “Smoke on the Water” by Deep Purple. I teach it not how it’s played on the recording but on the 6<sup>th</sup> string where they can use one finger. I sing them the frets they need to use and usually write them down: “0-3-5...0-3-6-5...0-3-5...3-0”. I also teach “Sunshine of Your Love” by Cream down in first position; things that they can access easily at first. I’ve taught “Iron Man” by Black Sabbath and “Enter Sandman” by Metallica. Yet you’d be surprised, because the same young man who wanted to learn those more “heavy” songs also learned “Amazing Grace” for his grandmother and “Silent Night” and “Jingle Bells” at Christmas time. It is so important to be able to relate to different age groups from 18 months to 18 years.

If a child does not want to play or participate in the music making I will offer them the option to just listen. Here is where your own personal background with music will come into play. Sometimes I’ll ask the child if they want singing or just guitar, and they’ll choose. But it’s important to realize that singing involves a personal and emotional element that is sometimes not needed in an already very personal and emotional situation. Here you are not “performing” to express your own ego and personal life experience, you are making music to soothe and uplift people. All musicians know that within certain scales and chords are contained certain emotions and effects. I would suggest staying away from minor keys or music that is too emotional. I usually finger pick on a nylon string guitar in a folk style that might make one want to tap their foot, concentrating on the soothing and uplifting effects of the “I, IV and V” chords. The “vi” chord can have a sweet effect when used in the right way in a major key, as in so many Sam Cooke songs. And sometimes I’ll play a finger-picked version of Sam Cooke’s “Cupid” or “Mary Had a Little Lamb”, but often I’ll just improvise around G, C and D. Recently I’ve been inspired by the guitar and kora music of West Africa, and have incorporated some of those influences in my improvisations for patients. There was a child who had actually finished all his rounds of chemotherapy, but was so weakened by the experience that he hadn’t eaten in 8 days. Also, as per doctors’ orders, every time his fever would reach 100 it would automatically extend his hospital stay by 24 hours. I found the young boy with a feeding tube down his throat, depressed on a rainy day in December after 18 days in the hospital. His mother was somewhere

else this day, but his father told me of the situation with much frustration. The boy wouldn't talk to me like he usually did, but he accepted an offer to hear some music. I had gotten to know him and his family pretty well over the last few months so I felt comfortable to go deep into some of the music that had been inspiring me recently and try to share it with him. After I played for about 20 minutes I asked if he wanted some more music, he nodded yes. After I played for another 20 minutes his father said, "That's the best thing we've heard all week." Then the boy finally spoke: "The music you played calmed me and took my mind off the tube. You made me feel better, you made me happy again." The next time I saw him he was up out of bed, feeding tube gone, and getting ready to leave the hospital. His mother had returned and we all sang a bunch of Christmas carols in a mood of celebration!

As a musician all you are doing is pressing down notes on a fret board and plucking strings, but there is a transformative power in it. That is the miracle of music! So don't hesitate to give the gift of your musicianship where it is needed. Stay inspired in your musical journey so you can inspire others! I personally view music as something greater than myself that I am lucky to be a part of. So when someone compliments me or my music, I smile and say thank you, but give the praise back to music! What makes me happy is having the opportunity to help. And Arts for Life gives us the opportunity to do what we love where it is needed most!

## **Emotional**

Probably the most challenging part of this job is what you see and experience vicariously through your students. You will have some students that will pass away, some students that will recover completely, some students that will recover and then relapse. If you work long enough for Arts for Life you will see all possible outcomes from these treatments. And the treatments themselves are a long arduous process for the patients and parents. In some of my early days working for Arts for Life, I used to go home and cry for my students. I couldn't fathom the weight of what they were going through. For any sensitive and sympathetic person this is an honest response. But the questions came to me: "What good am I to them in this state?" "How is taking inside myself their sadness and pain useful and beneficial to them?" The answer became very clear to me: Allowing myself this reaction simply increased the sadness and pain. Are you employed by Arts for Life to increase the sadness and pain? No! You are the ANTIDOTE! Go there, be happy! Be healthy! Spread joy and love! Increase the smile cells in all those around you!

It's not that you become numb or insensitive to the great difficulties that these children and their parents are facing, but it is not your job to take these difficulties upon yourself. And more importantly, it is not useful to them! What is useful to them is your happiness upon seeing them, your joy in making music with them, your warm smile and comfortable presence. When I started to realize these things, it changed everything about going to the 9<sup>th</sup> floor for me! I realized Life is going on here. And music and art make life rich and fulfilling no matter what obstacles and hardships stand in the way!

Just being there and being happy is a great gift to all you come in contact with: patients, parents, nurses and doctors. Don't be in a hurry with your students. Spend time with them.

Even beyond making music or art, you are “hanging out”. Some of my teenage students make music with me only sometimes. Other times, I just sit in their rooms playing on the guitar while we talk for half an hour or forty five minutes. Make a relationship, a friendship. Be a relaxed, fun and happy part of their day. Compared to the doctors and nurses who are working 12-hour shifts, having to inflict grave unpleasantries on these children to try and save their lives, your job is very easy! Make the doctors and nurses happy. Make up songs about them when they come in your patient’s room to make them smile. Make up songs about the stuffed animals on your patient’s bed, the characters on their shirt, or the toys they’re playing with. Be spontaneous, creative, sensitive and open to your surroundings, humble, helpful and happy! In this way miracles will occur naturally every time!