

KidsAbility Play Who You Are 2009

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In August of 2009 the ICASP project, the Guelph Jazz Festival, and the Guelph chapter of KidsAbility put on the second in a series of “Play Who You Are” workshops at the West End Recreational Centre (WERC). Following the success of last year’s workshops, both ICASP and KidsAbility were excited to enter into the collaborative process for a second time.

These improvisational music workshops took place in four sessions over two weeks and culminated in a final performance as the opening act at the Guelph Jazz Festival’s free jazz tent. This year’s workshops were led and facilitated by world renowned saxophonist Jane Bunnett, her long time musical partner Larry Cramer, and former ICASP post-doctoral fellow Rob Wallace. Heading into the workshops the artists were determined to provide an atmosphere of creative energy and open expression which would welcome the KidsAbility participants to see the world of improvised music as an open and positive environment.

The teens at KidsAbility live with a variety of special needs including cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, and autism. The goal of the “Play Who You Are” workshops has been to introduce these teens to the joys of the creative process through the medium of improvised music. This year’s participants consisted of seven individuals with a wide range of interests and abilities. Four of the participants were returning after an encouraging experience in the first round of the workshops and three were new to the process.

When the young musicians entered the Lion’s Lair at the WERC they were met with a variety of professional instruments including an electric drum set, a keyboard, a xylophone, bongos, congas, a marimba, fruit shakers, and slide whistles. The range of instruments contributed to the energy of the workshops, providing both rhythmic and textural aspects to the group’s sound. After the first workshop, wherein the participants were able to freely explore all of the instruments, each teen was assigned an instrument

that best fit their personality. As a result, each of the teen musicians became increasingly confident and comfortable with their given instrument and the group was able to push forward and take risks.

Each workshop session was structured as a rehearsal for the final performance at the Guelph Jazz Festival. This provided a focus and goal for group as they learned and composed new songs. In addition, the participants themselves provided a key element of this year's improvisational method of music making. Before the workshops, the KidsAbility staff asked each participant to bring in a picture that was meaningful to them. Throughout the workshops, the pictures were enlarged and projected in front of the group thus acting as visual cues for the improvising artists. KidsAbility staff found this practice of highlighting individual identities and abilities within a group context one of the workshops' most encouraging results.

Fitting with the mandate of the KidsAbility organization, the "Play Who You Are" workshops sought to highlight the individual abilities of each participant while introducing them to new life experiences that break down barriers within themselves and the community. Interviews with the artists, participants, staff, and parents were conducted after the workshops. Speaking with these individuals provided insight into the ways in which improvised music can integrate voices that are traditionally left out of the community's dialogue.

For the participants of the "Play Who You Are" workshops, improvised music provided an opportunity to communicate with each other and their community in a way that highlighted their special talents rather than their special needs. In a unique way, improvised music served to include these teens in a of world creative expression that focused on the joy of the creative experience rather than the restrictions and expectations of classical recitals or lessons. Because of the improvisational approach to the workshops, the students were encouraged to play according to the atmosphere of the song rather than specific transcribed notes. In this way, the workshops became a space where the participants could feel confident and prepared for their performance without the anxiety of strictly regulated musical expectations. In these workshops

improvised music became a medium through which the participants could connect, identify, and communicate with their community in a constructive and reciprocal way.