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PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES

DAVE WISH
Little Kids Rock

Popular music education and American democracy: Why I coined the term 'modern band' and the road ahead

ABSTRACT

In this article, the author, the founder and CEO of Little Kids Rock, describes how his early work as an elementary school teacher providing an extracurricular guitar club, evolved into him founding a music education non-profit organization. By inventing the term 'modern band' and joining nationwide leading efforts for systemic change in US American music education, the author tries to place popular music conceptually and pedagogically at the core of school music programmes. The author briefly describes the causes of the exclusion of popular music from school music programmes before arguing that modern band can help to democratize school music education by making it culturally relevant, student-centred and inclusive. The article concludes with the author's hopes for the future of music education in the United States.

KEYWORDS

modern band
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> *America's democratic norms, at their core, have always been sound. But for much of our history, they were accompanied – indeed, sustained – by racial exclusion. Now those norms must be made to work in an age of racial equality and unprecedented ethnic diversity.*
>
> (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2017: 231, emphasis added)

> *The simple fact of the matter is that the world has never built a multiethnic democracy in which no particular ethnic group is in the majority and where political equality, social equality and economies that empower all have been achieved.*
>
> (Allen 2017: n.pag., emphasis added)

I was born during 1967's famed 'Summer of Love'. More specifically, I was born during the somewhat-less-famed Tanglewood Symposium. While I was busy opening my eyes to the world for the first time, the American music education establishment was busy opening its eyes to the need for teaching 'popular teenager music' in our schools (Choate 1967: 78). Over a half-century has passed since my ideological forebears boldly declared that American popular music had to be taught in our schools. Nevertheless, popular music instruction remains largely absent from our schools despite its continuing ubiquity in American cultural life. This remains a hot button issue in the field of music education (Byo 2018).

I began my career as an educator in the Ravenswood Public School District in East Palo Alto California in 1992. That was the same year that the city was declared the murder capital of the United States. So began my decade of teaching children from poor communities. The majority of my years were spent as a bilingual first- and second-grade general classroom teacher and my pivot from that world to the world of music education was accidental and unlikely. Frustrated by the lack of music education in the school I was teaching at, I decided to begin offering a single guitar class to my general education students as an enrichment activity. Over the course of the past two decades, this evolved into Little Kids Rock, a leading non-profit in the public school music space.

In brief, Little Kids Rock recruits and trains public school music teachers to run music programming at their schools utilizing our unique pedagogy and curriculum that focuses on the inclusion of popular music repertoire and instrumentation. We also supply musical instruments and other materials needed by our schools. To date we have partnered with over 3000 schools in over 400 school districts and have helped bring music education to nearly 1 million K-12 school children.

I coined the term 'modern band' in 2012 as a means of disrupting the hegemonic structure of music education in our state schools. Modern band is a new category of instrumental, vocal, technological and performative music education that is taking its place alongside existing programmes such as jazz band, marching band and orchestra. It is also an educational reform movement. As this journal's topic would suggest, the term 'modern band' continues to gain currency with a diverse set of stakeholders throughout the music education ecosystem. These include music teachers, school districts, state departments of education, colleges and universities and music education trade associations.

In this article, I will attempt to do three things. First, I will unpack what I see as the root causes of the exclusion of American popular music from school

music programmes. Next I will argue that modern band is a useful tactic that is showing promise in making school music education more democratic, culturally relevant, student-centred and inclusive. Finally, I will offer my perspective and hopes for the future of music education more broadly.

The exclusion of American popular music from our schools

As a child, I experienced the disjuncture between music outside and inside of school in a very personal way. The music that I enjoyed with my peers and family was drawn almost entirely from rock, punk, heavy metal and pop sources. We were enthusiastic and passionate listeners. However, as a public school music student in the 1970s and 1980s, the music that my community and I loved and to which we were meaningfully and authentically connected was nowhere to be found in my school.

Motivated by my love of music, I did short stints in our school chorus, orchestra and jazz band. Like most of my peers, I quit each within a year or two. I had two primary takeaways as a child from these experiences. The first was that the music we were learning in school was 'boring'. The second was that I lacked musical ability. I was told as much by more than one music teacher.

I believed those teachers and felt deficient, a feeling that was already familiar to me as a student. I had failed the first grade long before I had 'failed' music class. The sting of flunking first grade was much stronger as it set me apart from all of my classmates. But it was a solace to me that most of my friends 'failed' music education as well. Why? Most of us did not like music class enough to stick with it. The majority of us became music education 'dropouts' and there was no stigma in it.

Today I have a different perspective on my own school music classes. Learning how to play guitar outside of school with my high school friends convinced me that I did indeed have musical ability. The work I do today with many individuals and institutions that are a part of the United States' music education establishment has persuaded me that, as a child I was simply a part of what is commonly referred to as the 'other 80 per cent'. It is an increasingly noted phenomenon that the vast majority of children will leave music education as soon as it becomes an elective or shortly thereafter (Williams 2019).

As such, I no longer think of myself as a music education dropout but, rather, as a music education 'push out'. My peers and I were pushed out by programming that did not value or leverage the cultural capital that we brought to school. The term 'push out' was once suggested to me by a friend when we were discussing the disappointing graduation rates in many of the United States' high schools. She said that she preferred to call children who did not graduate 'push outs' as opposed to dropouts. 'These kids are being pushed out by schools that are hostile to them, their community and their culture'. Her potent words have stayed with me and help frame my thinking.

The cultural chasm that exists between the music of the academy and the music of the general citizenry began to widen in the 1950s. It was then that the United States first heard rock 'n' roll, a new popular musical genre that would profoundly influence the nation's cultural and social landscapes, and whose impact continues to be felt globally. Like ragtime, blues and jazz before them, American musical forms like rock, rap and country have become the musical *lingua franca* of our modern world.

Writing for the Smithsonian, Steven Lewis once noted, '[d]escribing the African-American influence on American music in all of its glory and variety is an intimidating – if not impossible – task. African-American influences are so fundamental to American music that there would be no American music without them' (Lewis 2016: n.pag.). Reading this might lead one to believe that music education in this country would draw more extensively from African American popular music and that more music educators would come from the African American community. Not only is this not the case, but teachers of colour are even more underrepresented in our school music programmes than in the broader world of education. Although 51 per cent of all public-school children are people of colour, only 18 per cent of all K-12 US schoolteachers are people of colour and only 2 per cent are black males (US Department of Education 2016). This lack of representation is even more pronounced in the field of music education. A recent study indicated that just 11 per cent of all K-12 US music education majors are people of colour (Zubrzycki 2015).

Given the seminal role that people of colour have played in the creation of American popular music, this lack of representation in school music programmes is highly troubling. It is also especially problematic due to a mounting body of evidence that suggests that young people who do not see themselves or their culture reflected in their studies may be at an educational disadvantage. Researchers have referred to this as the 'role model effect' (Evans 1992; Paredes 2014).

Consider the following example: A Johns Hopkins and American University longitudinal study showed that black students who are exposed to one black teacher by third grade were 13 per cent more likely to enrol in college. Those who had two black teachers were 32 per cent more likely to enrol in college (Camera 2018). Nicholas Papageorge, one of the lead researchers on the study, offered the following recommendation:

> For the foreseeable future, black kids are going to go to school and face white female teachers: that's the reality. So, the question is what are we going to do about that? While we make efforts to find and train new black teachers, *we also need to educate white teachers about implicit bias, teach them to be culturally competent, and show them how not to exacerbate these existing achievement gaps.*
>
> (Camera 2018, emphasis added)

Ruth Wright has written extensively on the general lack of cultural competence in the field of music education. She voices concern about the impact that this deficiency has upon students who participate in 'traditional' school music programmes as follows:

> Could it be that our previous largely unquestioning acceptance of the superiority of Western art music, its ensembles, canons, and pedagogies, has excluded students who can't recognize themselves, their music, or their ways of learning in these offerings? [If] so, previous models of music education might be seen as structures of oppression and exclusion. In other words, they are institutional causes of harm.
>
> (Wright 2018: n.pag.)

The excluded music that Wright refers to includes the five most popular musical genres of today which are, in order of popularity, rap, rock, pop, Latin and

R&B. Each of these musical genres originated primarily in communities of colour. These musical styles account for 76 per cent of the music listened to by the American public overall and stand in stark contrast to the musical canons most represented in school music programming. The styles of music most favoured by school music are classical, jazz, folk, children's music and world music. These five types of music represent approximately 6 per cent of the US market today (Buzz Angle Music 2017).

The over-representation of culturally distant music and the prevalence of western, conservatory-style education in both public schools and at schools of music education create a self-perpetuating cycle. Ruth Wright addresses the consequences of this pattern as follows:

> That we see the same demographic entering higher music education and becoming music teachers, we have been, perhaps, teaching to reproduce ourselves through our unexamined values […] [This] cause[s] harm to young people who are innately musical and who are excluded from a music education that is culturally and personally relevant and speaks to their individual musicality.
>
> (Wright 2018: n.pag.)

Modern band as a tool for democratizing music education

Modern band operates on two levels. On the surface, it is *a new category of music education* in US public schools. On a more foundational level, it is *an educational reform movement* that seeks to break up the logjam of hegemonic and exclusionary music education that our forebears at Tanglewood sought to dispense with over a half-century ago. Modern band is a new instrumental, vocal and music production programme that utilizes contemporary popular music as its central canon. Styles that are studied include rock, rap/hip hop, pop, Latin, R&B and other contemporary styles as they emerge. Modern band also utilizes (but is not limited to) the musical instruments and technologies that are common to these genres: guitar, bass, drums, piano, voice, computers, Internet technology, apps, recording hardware and the like. Modern band also places special emphasis on a number of frequently underemphasized musical skills mandated by the United States' National Core Arts Standards (State Education Agency Directors of Arts Education 2014). These include the arranging, composition, improvisation, music production and the use of technology in music. An argument can be made that modern band is, in some ways, perhaps more suited to focus on these topics than existing music programmes such as marching band or orchestra and this has been the experience of many practitioners.

As a new category of music education in public schools, modern band has made great strides scaling across diverse geographies and with the support of a diverse set of educational stakeholders. The following are examples of how modern band programming has helped to shape the educational landscape over the past eighteen years:

- Modern band programming has been officially adopted by many of the nation's largest school systems in the form of a series of official course codes. Participating districts include the Los Angeles Unified School District, Chicago Public Schools and the Dallas Independent School

District. Various levels of modern band are being offered including regular, honours, non-audition and audition modern band ensembles.
- The Maine Department of Education and the Pennsylvania Department of Education have both implemented state-wide roll-outs of modern band in their school systems.
- Over sixty colleges and universities have incorporated modern band coursework in their music education degree programmes. These run the gamut from stand-alone courses to inclusion in pre-existing methods courses.
- The Modern Band Colloquium is an academic conference dedicated to research on topics related to modern band education in the US public school system.
- NAfME recently introduced modern band as a new ensemble at its All-National Honor Ensembles.

Taken collectively, these developments and achievements highlight how proponents of modern band are impacting the entire ecosystem of music education on multiple levels. As a *new category* of music education, modern band is on a path to become a peer programme alongside the existing band and orchestra programmes.

Modern band: Hopes for the future

As an *educational reform movement*, modern band is attempting to disrupt certain negative aspects of music education. David Elliott has said '[Modern band] is a grassroots movement that is going to make a huge difference: I think it could revolutionize music education as we know it' (personal communication 2018). As Elliot implies, it is too early to know just how far the movement might go. However, it is not too soon for me to envision exactly how I hope that the modern band movement might revolutionize music education. I will describe the five key changes I foresee and hope for, saving the most important for last.

First, participation rates in music education, especially at the middle and high school levels, will become a key measure of a programmatic success. Research shows that participation rates dwindle from 100 per cent in some primary schools to about 20 per cent by high school. The numbers are frequently much lower than that. In the state of California, for instance, a meagre 21 per cent of all middle students who have access to music education elect to participate in it and by high school that number drops to a disappointing 11 per cent (Arts Education Data Project 2020). Access to music education is critical but access without participation is a Pyrrhic victory. We can do more than hope for fewer music education 'push-outs'. Modern band can help engineer for that.

Second, the genres covered in music education will become as diverse as the music of our citizenry and cultural competence will become a hallmark of music programming nationally. This competence will be built on a foundation of respect for, and study of, the seminal contributions that African Americans and other communities of colour have made (and continue to make) to American popular music. This competence will be built in music education degree programmes at the college level and thus spread out to public schools across the country.

Third, the people who pursue careers in music education will look more like a representative cross-section of the US population. The enormous discrepancy between the 51 per cent of public schoolchildren who are people of colour and the 11 per cent of music education majors who are likewise people of colour will narrow dramatically. This will be facilitated by the increased focus on cultural competence required by modern band mentioned above, by the fact that students who see themselves and their music reflected in music education may be more likely to pursue careers in music education and by the purposeful recruitment, support and retention of music teachers of colour by school districts as well as colleges and universities offering degrees in music education.

Fourth, music education will move at the speed of music. Digital technology has changed the landscape of our world in ways that would have been unimaginable less than half a century ago. The music industry has not escaped this radical transformation; in many ways it has been a leader. And the pace of change is only accelerating. Many of the jobs that children entering elementary school today will fill when they graduate have yet to be invented. It has been said that there is no such thing as a low-tech industry; there are only low-tech companies – that is, companies that fail to use best-in-class, industry-related technologies and practices (Porter 1998). Music education could be looked at as a low-tech 'company' at this juncture. It is no accident then that modern band leans heavily upon technology and this will only continue to increase over time. This will better prepare a greater overall number of children for careers in the broader world of music. It will also positively impact the nurturing of twenty-first-century skills such as initiation, social skills, leadership as well as technology, media and information literacy.

Finally, diversity and cultural competence in music education will be recognized as something that benefits all children and teachers, not only children and teachers of colour. Modern band will help facilitate this. American music is something that, for decades, has helped bring us together as citizens in ways that little else has. Senator John Lewis said that without music, the civil rights movement would have been like a bird without wings.

American popular music has made profound contributions to the health of our democracy in the past. In the early days of rock 'n' roll, the days of Chuck Berry, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Little Richard and Fats Domino, a curious thing started to happen at their concerts. They became so boisterously biracial that it was sometimes impossible for officials to fully segregate them. Some recall the cops simply throwing up their hands. 'A lot of places had the line when we first walked in, and after we started playing, they let them cross the line', the Coasters' Hughes says. 'It was beautiful' (Knopper 2017: n.pag.).

At the height of Jim Crow, young whites and blacks found ways to breach their anti-democratic, unjust yet legally enforced separation. In his authorized 1985 biography, Little Richard explains how his performances brought segregated audiences together. 'We were breaking through the racial barrier', he wrote. Richard's producer recalls, '[w]hen I first went on the road there were many segregated audiences […] and most times, before the end of the night, they would all be mixed together' (Knopper 2017: n.pag.).

It is no secret that the American experiment in a representative democracy is struggling at the present moment. Experiments can fail. This piece opens with two quotes about the relative health of our democracy. Our nation was founded on the basis of profoundly unjust practices such as slavery and the genocide of indigenous people, which is a painful truth. At the same

time, certain compelling democratic norms that have also helped to define our country and are a point of pride. The time has come to fully embrace our democratic roots and allow them to fully develop. We are living in an age of unprecedented ethnic diversity where racial equality is of paramount importance.

As I mentioned above, Danielle Allen cautions that the world has never successfully built a multiethnic democracy in which no particular ethnic group is in the majority and where social, political and economic equality have been achieved. Will the American experiment be the first to successfully solve this problem? Music education is a microcosm of the broader American experience. It is my hope that the practices we embrace as music educators will serve as an example of what representative democracy is all about. In this way, we can contribute to the overall health and well-being of our American democracy and empower our young people to continue to uphold and work for its values.

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