


Thursday Jan. 22, 2009

The NewsJournal



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January 22, 2009



Finding a voice via song

Musician Boyd Holmes teaches how to write a tune memoir in six words

*By REID CHAMPAGNE
Special to The News Journal*

Teaching music to children with severe disabilities at New Castle's John G. Leach School provided songwriter and musician Boyd Holmes with a new perspective on the meaning of music.

"Some of my students there were so severely disabled they were unable to communicate," Holmes said in an interview. "But I saw how music affected them, relaxed them, communicated with them. The experience changed my whole view of music."

While Holmes said teaching allows him to be a musician ("I see my students as part of my band"), it's the songwriting that links him to his childhood.

"Writing melodies taps memories that take me back to when I would sit and write at my mother's piano."

Recently, Holmes conducted a songwriting workshop at the University of Delaware, the result of an invitation from Suzanne Burton, an associate professor in the department of music. About 25 students and musicians attended the free workshop, and Holmes' proficiency as a teacher and musician were on full display.

Following a discussion of the songwriting process and a few exercises designed to

get the mind free and the imagination flowing, Holmes had his audience break out into smaller work groups and work up a six-word summation of their personal memoir.

Holmes explained that the six-word memoir forces you to think in concise language, and has the ability to pack a lot of imagery into so few words.

"Hemingway did the exercise, and his memoir read, 'For sale. Baby shoes. Never worn.' " Boyd said.

Andres Malkowski, 20, of Dover (right) plays piano while Cera Babb, 18, of Middletown (from left), Alysha Isakoff, 19, of Kennett Square, Pa., and Shari Feldman, 20, of Framingham, Mass., work on their six-word exercise during a breakout session.



The simple-enough exercise produced dramatic results as several attendees returned from the breakout session, not only with some compelling six-word memoirs ("Rejected lover. Trusted friend. Walking contradiction," wrote one) but with a melody to accompany it. Some had constructed a complete song during the 20 or 30 minutes of the session.

Casey Hames, who said she'd been writing songs for about two years, learned a lot from the workshop.

"I usually just listen to [Grateful] Dead albums because of their jamming, but now I understand how these exercises can help me get a song down faster."



Holmes accompanies Robert Thompson, 18, of Newark, a computer science major at UD.

Eva Young, who teaches music at Lincoln University near Oxford, Pa., tuned into Holmes' tip for songwriter's block.

"I liked his idea of writing in a foreign language to get the imagination flowing, so I actually wrote my six-word memoir in French," said Young, who was one of the several student to have finished a complete song with both lyrics and melody.

Holmes was impressed. "I was blown away by the quality of the work," he said of some of the songs he was able to induce those writers to perform before the entire group.

John Gardner, 19, of Lewes (left), listens as Thompson works on a song during the workshop.



Holmes, who now teaches in the Castle Hills Elementary School in the Colonial School District, is also a board member of the Philadelphia Songwriters Project, and

served as moderator for one of the group's mentoring session. A recipient of the 2007 Jessie Ball DuPont Award, given by the Delaware Symphony Orchestra to an educator who's made a "significant impact in the field of music education," Holmes' compositions have been heard on radio and network and cable programs including Nickelodeon, the Discovery Channel and PBS. His credits also include numerous musical scores for corporate and charitable radio and television commercials. Perhaps his most ambitious efforts was producing the score for the 42-part internationally televised series, "Art Under Foot." (Read more and hear examples on [www. boydholmes.com](http://www.boydholmes.com).)

"I've learned how to be an editor," Holmes said. "How to write and then edit lyrics to get to the point about the self, but at the same time maintain an openness to broader interpretations of those lyrics than just the self."

Holmes, whose method begins with a rhythm, before constructing a melody and then adding the words, said the main principle to good songwriting is to keep it simple.

"You can do as much with four chords as you can do with 12," he said.

While Holmes says his songwriting roots tend to be with those musicians "who buck the system," his one constant inspiration is the memory of a student who suffered and eventually died from a rare genetic disorder known as WAGR Syndrome. Holmes' song "Every Song I Sing" was inspired by his experience with that mentally disabled student.

Where you go

My voice will follow you

Whether near or far

We're here within this old guitar

No matter how hard we shall play heartstrings

They will never break

And every song I sing

I sing with you.

Those who left the workshop that Saturday having learned something about turning personal communication into the universal received quite an education, and learned it from a musician who learned it from a child who hardly spoke.

Additional Facts
BOYD HOLMES

HOMETOWN: Wilmington

AGE: 56

EDUCATION: University of Delaware, bachelor's degree in music education;
Wilmington College, master's degree in counseling

FAMILY: Single; daughter, Megan

HOBBIES: Book collecting, especially those of typesetter and book designer William
Addison Dwiggins
