# **I’m Me – Asking Questions Through Music**

Kelsie:

Hello, and welcome to Conversations in Social Justice, the podcast series for the Institute for Social Justice. Today we are chatting about I’m Me an AHRC- funded collaboration between the Institute for Social Justice, and Mind the Gap, one of England's leading companies in learning disability performance, and live arts. I'm Me uses creative methods to explore artists with learning disabilities and autism's understandings of identity representation and voice. In this project, artists Mind the Gap, develop a Doodle Book, a pack of creative prompts which is then shared with a network of six other learning disability performance companies across the UK these companies then generate their own creative responses to these prompts on identity, representation, and voice. This podcast series consists of conversations about topics arising from the project. I'm Kelsie Acton, postdoctoral researcher with I'm Me. In this podcast Daniel from Mind the Gap talks to Liz and Jack from Under the Stars about using music with the Doodle Books.

Daniel:

Before we begin by asking you to introduce yourselves. Please. Your name, pronoun and what you're doing on the projects.

Liz:

Okay, so my name is Liz Nicholas. I use she/her pronouns and I'm a music tutor here at Under the Stars.

Jack:

Hi, I'm Jack Maher. My pronouns are he/him and I am the lead artist for Under the Stars.

Daniel:

Oh, and for listeners, I’m Daniel Foulds and I'm from Mind the Gap. And co-researcher with the I’m Me project. Today, we're talking about practice with musicians on the I’m Me project. Can you start by telling us how a typical session might be and what happens?

Liz:

And what happens we've used these. I'm me prompting different ways. We've taken the physical book and we've worked very much with the whole group. We had lots of support in terms of all the tutors and the volunteer being there, so that everybody could have their own individual book and they could either, write or they could talk to somebody one to one. We found that this gave people an individual space where they weren't being influenced by what other people were saying they were saying. And we found this gave us the most interesting answers. Other times, we would work with the smaller group and sometimes we would take a prompt, we might do something like word association, get a beat going and get people to improvise some lyrics on that theme over a beat. So we took things like safe and unsafe and then we kind of looked at ways in which people have created those moods with music. So with that one, we took the theme from Jaws and some of the music from Psycho and we tried reproducing those with our own instruments, trying to make things sound a little bit scary. Sometimes it's been thinking about the music and sometimes it's being very word led, which I'm obviously we do anyway because we do a lot of songwriting. Which sorts of sessions did you kind of get into the most?

Jack:

That one where we are doing them three things where one minute, you put your fingers in your ears.

Liz:

Oh yeah.

Jack:

And then second time around, you try to talk over the person.

Liz:

Yeah.

Jack:

And then third time around you'd listen to them and everyone had to a point about something or the other.

Liz:

Yes, that was a good one, wasn't it? Yeah. So that was just an exercise taken straight from the book but it worked really well with our group. And it really gave people a kind of three different experiences that we could then go into and pick up ideas that then turned into a song.

Daniel:

Can you explain a bit about how you approach complicated concepts like identity and representation for music.

Liz:

Something that's more abstract. I think it's more difficult. You do have to have some words to start hanging things on. Well, for instance, during voice, we were looking at things that made us angry, things that we wanted to shout about or that we were, you know. You can do some music that expresses frustration and anger but it doesn't help you to kind of say what it is or to share with somebody else exactly what it is that you're feeling. When we're just at the very beginning and we're starting to explore ideas, I'll deliberate use different sorts of accompaniment. So sometimes people will be singing and I'll be playing the guitar live and sometimes we put something on the iPad and we'll have like a hip-hop backing track. And sometimes we might do something that's got a different kind of vibe to it. You know, we might try and do something that maybe sounds like a country song. You know sounds like 90s rock or something, but we use those as different frameworks because that when you're writing a song it's like what I want it to sound like what do I want people to get out of this as far as mood goes, as well, as the words that I'm using. Do I want them to feel as angry as me? Or do I want them to feel hopeful and like it's all going to work out? Or do want them to feel just a bit sad and reflective?

Daniel:

As we know, throughout the creative Doodle Book some concepts or prompts, can be more complicated and difficult than others. Can you talk tell us about prompts that was very easy to work, with respect with music in mind?

Liz:

I think in the first book when we were working with very kind of concrete ideas, like when we were talking about our shoes, you know. It seemed like quite natural to start that with the little exercise where everybody had a drum and we all kind of played a little pattern but our shoes might play. And then from there, we could say something about our shoes and then we could build a song out of those elements. That, that one had a very kind of concrete thing that would tie to a rhythm very easily. Yeah, and as I said, there were a couple like the safe and unsafe and in fact, visible and invisible. We got some really nice music for that one as well. Just about how that feels when you're hiding away and trying to get people not to notice you. And then when you feel big and strong and you can come out, you know, so those again were prompts from the first book from the identity book. There were ideas where I felt we could go into those using music.

Daniel:

As I ask the question about as something that was easy, can you tell us a little bit about something that’s a bit more difficult out of prompts and concepts?

Liz:

What do you think Jack? Because my feeling was that the middle book representation was the most difficult?

Jack:

Yeah.

Liz:

Because those, those ideas, a lot of them were not things that any of us had an immediate kind of response to. Where do I see representations of people with a learning disability or autism and what do I think about that? And that is, is that a good thing and do I think that makes the world better for me? Or do I think it makes the world better for anybody else or, you know? And then somebody else might say, well this is all very well. If we've got somebody with Down syndrome on the cover of Vogue, but why did the Torre scrap the Minister for Disabilities. You know, it's like, yeah, so I think those were probably the ones that we found the hardest.

Daniel:

Jack, what's your role been on I’m Me?

Jack:

My role has been it's been helping your students out with their ideas. And I'd look in their book. See what their ideas are in.

Liz:

And you've chosen which topics we've explored?

Jack:

Yes.

Liz:

And sometimes how we've done it, we've talked about whether we're going to do it as a improvising lyrics or whether it’s -

Jack:

Drawing, writing.

Liz:

And acting you know, you come up with some ideas that, although this is a music group.

Jack:

Yeah

Liz:

You thought about using our bodies, moving around a bit more. Or it’s, I mean, even like yesterday when we were doing that thing for the video and you acting out a scene with you, not listening to somebody. So we've got a song called Listen to Me.

Jack:

It’s a rap song.

Liz:

It’s a rap song. So I guess so that was the one that we came out with. I said we didn't go down the piano ballad root or the punk song root. So we started putting a rap song together. And so we've done a recording of that and we're just working on the video now. And Jack had this idea that he wanted to be somebody who wasn't listening and one of the other students was kind of him and looking very sad and Jack was turning his back and looking at his phone and generally being objectionable. But that was something you really wanted to put in the video, wasn't it?

Jack:

Yes.

Daniel:

So Jack, would you can you give the listeners of how you help people during sessions?

Jack:

Like someone help spell something or to come up with an idea. I'd ask them what what they want help with and help them think about what they want to put down. Like for instance whoever was starting the song were trying to make. Someone kept trying to do happy lyrics, we wanted them to do something more sad. So, I kept telling them, you need to think more sad than happy.

Liz:

Like what you say, just kind of saying, for this song, this, this is the kind of theme that we want to keep to a new. You've got some good contributions from people.

Jack:

Yeah.

Daniel:

So lead artists roles have been very different for each company on the project, can you tell us what you might do for each Doodle Book as lead artist as well as assist?

Jack:

So we get a small group of people who like really interested in I’m Me and then we'll get together when we're telling the topic. And then we'll tell them what we're going to do around the topic. And then we'll tell them to come up with their ideas so they can put their ideas into one big thing. And I tell people, come up with ideas, if they were stuck.

Liz:

That's it. Sometimes you'd help out with choosing the beat and creating the musical kind of background that we were going to use that. You know, you'd be part of that deciding what what sort of music we were going to use on a particular day.

Daniel:

I was going to ask you what has changed over the past the projects. And I'm going to ask you from when you started as lead artist to how things are now. How do you say things have changed for you?

Jack:

I have learned a lot more about other people in the group. Things that they haven’t even told me as with them my best friends.

Liz:

Yeah, that's interesting, isn't it? Yeah.

Jack:

I also got to tell my friends stuff about me they don't even know.

Daniel:

So with that in mind, as lead artist Jack, how's it feel to learn new things about your friends?

Jack:

It's been very interesting because if I learnt some things that you didn't thought you even do. I would have think of one, but we’ve said a load of things.

Liz:

Yeah.

Jack:

And a load of stuff is come out of it like PowerPoints, songs.

Liz:

Yeah, and yeah, we have created a lot of the things that we probably wouldn't have created without I'm Me. Do you feel you've developed any skills through taking on the lead artist role?

Jack:

How to help people and how to take control of a group, if doing any stuff around.

Liz:

Or even when there are. You know, I’ve seen you doing things like taking the lead in a percussion jam.

Jack:

Yeah.

Liz:

You know, that’s, I mean, that's when we've got maybe 20 people playing different percussion, instruments in a circle, so it's pretty loud. And that's actually that's something. We've done as a whole group thing sometimes, using some of the prompts from I’m Me. And Jack is now able to go on the microphone and step up and kind of give people instructions. And he expects them to do what he asked. You know, that you say okay after four beats, we're going to stop for eight and you do it in a way that expects people to do that. And they do. And I think that's really that sort of confidence has developed over the time you've been working. We were talking about voice and and what people wanted to make space to say. And we had one or two people who are very caught up in negative things, they wanted to say, but we had a couple of people who just wanted to concentrate on positive things and things that made them happy. And you know there's not enough of that in the world and so that was another one of those, thinking about the sort of music that gives you that kind of feeling of talking about stuff that makes you happy. And Jack felt the country would be the way to go.

Jack:

Because everyone's doing country at the moment.

Liz:

Yeah, yeah. So we yeah, really happy with the country. So I think it's well, I think they're both great songs actually, but that one's just like describing a perfect evening. Sitting around with your friends talking nonsense, watching the sun go down and it does feel really happy, doesn't it?

Jack:

Yes.

Daniel:

Thank you for that. Thank you. Bye.