

Alan: A Search for Competence

I received a call from a case worker who said she had a client that liked music. A few days later, Alan walked into the Music Therapy Studio carrying a composition notebook filled with lyrics. He wrote songs, he said, played drums, and sang. Alan was 43 years old and described himself as a person with autism. He lived independently in a supported apartment run by an agency that provided services for people with developmental disabilities in their local community.

As I became better acquainted with Alan over the next few months, I learned he had a drum set in his house growing up and had performed in some music shows while at a residential school for children and adolescents with special needs. He wrote a few songs as a young man while in a program to prepare him for independent living but didn't keep up with it. He picked up the practice again several years later during a long stint in the hospital while having a medication work-up. He continued writing after that and had completed quite a few songs by the time we met. He didn't have any way to go beyond the stage of writing the lyrics in a notebook and imagining the songs in his mind. He never thought he would have the opportunity to actually record them. So after some discussion at our first meeting, it became clear that was what we should do - make a recording of one of his songs.

Alan is the first case story in the book because his work in the Music Therapy Studio might be considered the most "studio" of all, in the sense that he used his sessions in a conventional manner - to write, rehearse and record songs. We then make a music video and he releases the project publicly. An inquiry into what makes this therapy sets the stage for later examples and an understanding of music in all its forms as therapy. In our first few sessions, we established the basic pattern of working that would set the basic pattern for virtually every session after that. The whole process typically takes three to five one hour sessions.

Step 1: Structure the Song & Make a Demo

Alan presented his song to me. He had the lyrics written down and a melody in his mind along with the style and feel of the music he wanted. The Southern Rock group, The Outlaws, was his favorite group, so everything we did had some connection to that. I helped him finalize his composition, figured out the chords to support the melody, and when he was satisfied with our basic arrangement, we recorded a demo with him singing and me on acoustic guitar.

Step 2: Record the Drum Track

Using my computer's multi-track recording program, we recorded a rhythm track with Alan playing the drum kit. Alan would sing while I played a rhythm guitar off-mic. The guitar and voice were minimally audible and were there to act as guides for later overdubs. The main task was to get a good drum track and a good feel.

Step 3: Add Vocal & Instrumental Overdubs

Alan recorded his lead vocal and I overdubbed guitar, and bass according to Alan's instructions. Then we both overdubbed additional parts such as background vocals and percussion. In future recordings, music therapy students would often help out with vocal or instrumental support.

Step 4: Mix the Recording

Finding the right volume balance for all the tracks.

Step 5: Film a Music Video

Alan wanted to make a music video and we discussed ideas for it. This would include various shots of Alan singing, playing drums and acting a role in relation to the storyline of the song, using the previously recorded and mixed song as the audio. In subsequent videos, sometimes additional acting and dialogue was filmed as a prologue to set-up the song with Alan directing. Usually, I or, sometimes, music therapy students would appear as supporting players.

Step 6: Alan and I Edit the Video

Under Alan's direction we determined the right order of video scenes to compliment the song and synchronize any filmed singing and playing with the recording

Step 7: Release the Music Video

I published the video online and sent the link by email to Alan. He then sent it out to numerous friends, family and professional support staff.

After four years of weekly sessions, Alan has completed three albums of twelve songs and music videos and is currently working on a fourth collection. We've uploaded his collections on a music sharing website and he sends it to everyone he knows. He is a talented songwriter, and Alan's friends and family are amazed. But even though Alan likes to get accolades from people, I think it is simply making music that is most important to him; having this songwriter/recording artist as a part of his everyday life is very fulfilling. For Alan's family and social network, seeing him in this new light outside of his identity as a person with a disability was a revelation. One family member who wrote a letter to me, commenting "The work you've done with Alan is astounding!" In considering what I actually did, yes, there was a degree of proficiency I learned during my years as a conventional musician. As a music therapist, though, my primary competence was in allowing and supporting what was already there in Alan to live and flourish. One day, as we talked about how astonished his friends and family were at his newfound identity, I said, "Maybe they thought you didn't have it in you." His response: "I did."

What Makes It Therapy?

I suppose most people can understand that such a process could be called therapeutic but, in particular with music therapy, it is important to differentiate between the words *therapeutic* and *therapy*. A great concert or a campfire sing-along with friends might be therapeutic, meaning it would release stress, uplift one's mood, and create a short-term positive outlook. But soon enough, one's problematic mood or behavior patterns would return. Successful therapy would require something more long-lasting, where positive developments obtained in therapy sessions transfer to one's everyday life. I think we can see in Alan's story, how music helped him to feel better about himself and gave him a framework in which to grow and develop. According to psychotherapist, Michael Franz Basch (1988), the primary goals for therapy can be characterized as a *search for competence*, achieved through:

- *Mobilizing and maintaining a self-respecting attitude*

- *Furthering one's developmental process*
- *Improving one's self-image*

Connection, Communication, Expansion

Alan comes to the studio to record his song in the same way and for the same reasons any musician comes to a studio, yet he always refers to his work with me as “music therapy,” never simply music or recording or “coming to the studio.” When I ask him what he means, he says it helps him express his feelings about issues that are concerning him. His songs have frequently confronted personal and social issues related to living with a disability, such as the loneliness of feeling different and people with disabilities facing prejudice in some way. Beyond this, as a songwriter, he has an awareness of his audience, and he is writing for them as well as for himself. He has verbalized this on occasion, saying something like, 'I want to give people something new.' Good songs also express important feelings for others.

Alan does not consider himself a spokesperson, role model, or advocate for people with disabilities. Although some autism advocacy ideologies would say they do not consider any neurological type to be superior or inferior to any other, Alan considers his autism to be a disability and says that if he could press a magic button and not be autistic, he would do so. He feels that autism impairs his ability to be more in the mainstream of life with better career and relationship opportunities. Although it is true that there may be discrimination involved in these barriers, through his music Alan has gained an expanded prominence in his social network. He showed me an email from another professional who works with him. It said:

Alan, your writing gets better and better each time you send it to me. Hearing your words accompanied by music is special. Please don't ever doubt your talent. I know Rick works with you to make this happen BUT this was YOUR vision. Please keep writing more. Make sure you send this to our Newsletter. People need to see and hear the great things you are doing.

Unconditional Acceptance

Although I am interested in helping Alan make his music, as a therapist, I am interested in Alan's well-being and his personal growth. I maintain unconditional positive regard for him and his music. In addition to the introspection he gains from writing his songs, in the course of our in-studio relationship, Alan says things that many people might consider inappropriate; extreme statements of an anti-social, sexual, racist, “politically incorrect” nature. I think sometimes he is testing me to see my reaction as he often makes shocking statements with a smile. To a degree, it is dark humor but still, it reflects certain patterns of thought he has. Intrusive thoughts, he calls them. Most people would keep such thoughts to themselves. He blurts them out. He told me staff and other professional people around him would typically tend to censor him, saying something like, “Now Alan, you know we don't say things like that.” I engage him at face value. I don't judge him and I don't feel offended. He's never been hurtful to me or anyone else in the studio, such as students. As an artist myself, I like eccentricity and

surreal conversation anyway. I have a relatively high tolerance for exploration of ideas, even outrageous ones, through language or artistic expression. We have fun. If he says something shocking or offensive, I might respond with my own humor, offer an alternative perspective, ask him a question or challenge his perspective. I'm offering him an opportunity to get his thoughts out in the open, to have some self-reflection, and to receive some feedback so he can consider and evaluate his ideas. I think he might be a little "fuzzy" on what one might call socially appropriate boundaries. Occasionally, I've felt the need to set a limit if I think his statements might be distressing or embarrassing to students in the room. He might ask 'why?' but he accepts it. If the banter becomes too tangential or unproductive, I simply say, "Let's get back to work."

Commitment

Alan says he has a diagnosed anxiety disorder. If something in the recording process is not moving along perfectly (for example, he doesn't get something correct on the first take or there's a technical problem), he'll quickly become agitated, raise his voice, and say something like, "Oh no! We're never going to get this right!" As things like this come up constantly during the sessions, we've been through this scenario countless times. I reassure him that we've gotten through it before and we'll get through it this time.

He has improved in managing his feelings. Although he will often have an initial "knee-jerk" anxious reaction, he now composes himself very quickly, and we get back to work. The recording process takes time and involves inherent frustrations trying to get something the way you want it. On occasion we have had artistic disagreements or I have made technical mistakes. At times, I've brought up ideas or topics that Alan didn't like, and we needed to work it out. Through it all, he has always stuck with it.

This points to an important principle in the therapeutic alliance: commitment. When a client's anxiety, insecurity, or anger is triggered in some way, he or she may become extremely uncomfortable. The client has to make a decision whether or not to remain in therapy. Sometimes clients (or parents of clients) will make the decision to discontinue, with the mindset that it's not working the way they hoped, or music therapy is not right for them, or I am not the right therapist. There needs to be a strong enough motivation to show up week after week, manage the anxiety, and carry on as one's comfort zone is continually challenged. Alan has demonstrated this again and again. He has worked hard and with dedication on all his projects. They are important to him.

Generalization

Successful therapy, according to psychotherapist, A. Magret (1950) is defined as leading to occurrences of generalization from the formal therapeutic session to outside, everyday situations, including:

- *Changed Reaction-Sensitivities*
- *Increased Flexibility of Behavior*
- *Success in Handling New Interpersonal Problems*

It would seem reasonable to conclude that Alan's experiences in the studio have had a positive impact on his ability to trust other people and situations and to manage his anxiety in other circumstances. His self-esteem and his esteem by others have been positively impacted. He has ongoing real-life experiences that have helped him to have greater insight into his feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Alan is productive at a high-level endeavor and his prolific output as a writer and musician continues to accelerate such that we have an ongoing backlog of two or three songs waiting to be recorded. His new work continues to improve and reflect his growth as a talented artist. There is an entirely new component to his personal and social persona. Noted mind-body psychotherapist, Alexander Lowen (1975) defined happiness as the consciousness of growth. He believed that most people come to therapy because they feel their growth has been arrested in some way.

Alan has certainly made use of music therapy as a process of personal growth. I'm sure he understands this, although he may not fully be able to put it into words. When I asked him if he thinks our work in the studio has impacted his life beyond the music, he said, "I'm not sure. I've possibly gained some focus. I can stay with things longer." I think Alan underestimates his progress. Not long ago, I accidentally deleted a project from the computer that we'd worked on for several sessions and had almost finished. There was nothing to be done. It was gone. We'd have to start all over from scratch. Instead of becoming overwhelmingly anxious, accusatory or despondent as he might have in the past, Alan accepted the setback, marshaled his resolve and said, "Let's get to work." He made constructive suggestions; actually becoming more of a leader than any time in the past. With his proactive, positive attitude, we re-did the project in two sessions and it was an improvement on the one we lost. Now if that couldn't be called a well-realized search for competence, then I don't know what could be.