



Any sound you like

Robyn:

Hello. My name is Robyn Steward. I'm a member of the core team at Heart n Soul at The Hub. I'm also the lead of the Music Jams.

Melissa:

Hi, I'm Melissa and I'm the project coordinator at Heart n Soul at The Hub.

Mark:

Hello, it's Mark Williams here. I am the artistic director and chief executive of Heart n Soul and I'm one of the core team at Heart n Soul at The Hub.

Jenny:

My name's Jenny and I'm the project manager for Heart n Soul at The Hub.

Mark:

I know that the Music Jam was something that you have been very, very keen about almost from before we even got into The Hub.

Robyn:

Yeah, I think in the application stage, some of it, I think, was that I really wanted to work on The Hub and I didn't want to be in a position where there wasn't something for me to do. So I thought, what could I do? And I thought that because one of the things, at one stage there was something about, "Does being with people with learning disabilities make you feel well?" I guess I was thinking that a lot of the jams I'd been to, I'd felt like it was very focused on technical ability, like modes and stuff, because I'm a jazzier. So people, they focused on modes and technical ability, doing fancy stuff with modes.

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For me, music is about communication and about emotions and there seemed to be this standard that you had to be before you could be part of it. And I just thought, well, that excludes a lot of people, but maybe that's also a sort of reflection on what it's like to have a learning disability or autism in that there is this expectation that you will be able to do this thing or that thing to be able to be an equal participant in the world. And if you can't do those things, you're sort of cast to the wayside. And I think that's wrong because I think everybody is a human and has the right to be part of society. And so I thought that it kind of fitted in with the theme of the project, which was wellness and wellbeing. And that seemed to be a big thing and Wellcome had a thing about mental health.

I think a lot of people with learning disabilities and autism experience social isolation. And so, by being together, I think, because if you go to a special school, then the mainstream world doesn't learn about you. And then when you're an adult, a lot of the world's closed off, you don't have those same connections or experiences. I feel like everyone, whether you've got to learning disability or autism or not, they could spend time together and have fun and I really felt like The Hub was the place that could do that.

Mark:

Yeah. Well, you're right because one of the things we set out to explore really was could health and wellbeing be improved if people with and without learning disabilities spend creative time together. And it also worked brilliantly in the physical space of The Hub, which obviously, our idea had been to make the big space in The Hub not just full of desks and people sitting quietly on computers. We wanted it to be creative space.

Jenny:

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I think what you just said, Robyn, about the Music Jams and your kind of thinking behind it makes a lot of sense. You and then eventually William, and also with support from Sam and David, and a bit of support from me and Melissa, Mark, I don't know, gradually the whole project just became completely sort of self-run. And I think that for me was probably one of the most exciting things about this whole project, was just being able to completely just hand something over and just go, 'Yeah, just run with it'.

And I'm also really happy to just see the experience that everyone has got from doing this and where it can lead in future, because as a musician, I also felt a bit of that kind of... You're always a little bit intimidated. I think everyone feels it. Some people really love that sort of setting, sort of going along and showing off how many notes they can play and stuff and kind of almost enjoy creating that sort of atmosphere, whereas like this was like the kind of antidote to that.

And so for me, I actually, as a musician, found it really, really liberating as well just to go along and not feel any kind of pressure whatsoever in what I played or what was expected of me. I could sit back when I wanted to, I could join in when I wanted to, I could go and have a cup of tea when I wanted to, it was just so free flow. And just the way we were all sat around together around in those big sofas.

Just the setup of the space I think really added to that feeling as well because it creates a whole different situation if there's a jam session going on, particularly if it's on a stage and you actually have to get up on the stage in order to go and join in. It's like, you're really making quite a big leap there, as opposed to the kind of middle ground of that is like, okay, maybe you're all on the same level in a room, but there's still like, "Oh, the musicians are over there and the audience is over here." Whereas at your Music Jams, the whole thing was just a

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complete mishmash. We were all just sat around, kind of reminded me more of going camping and sitting around the campfire, that kind of atmosphere, which I really love and feels like the most natural way of making music for me.

Mark:

But, and Melissa, your first day-

Robyn:

Was a Music Jam.

Mark:

Or certainly in your first week?

Melissa:

That was my very first day.

Mark:

That was your first day!

Melissa:

Yeah. And I remember Jenny before I started asked if I had any instruments to bring for the Music Jam. And I had a ukulele that's just been sitting on my shelf but for years, and I've always been meaning to play but just never got around to it. And I thought I'd just bring it. I felt really intimidated. I've been to like music jams because you feel like there's this standard and you have to be good enough to join it. And all of the behind the scene work of actually learning, you have to do on your own before you could join in.

But yeah, I just came with my ukulele and I remember just feeling so welcomed and just accepted, and kind of those insecurities went away as soon as I started playing because everyone was so welcoming. And

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yeah, I couldn't think of a better way to start a job really. Yeah. I remember Louise and Dylan had ukuleles so there was a little crew of us learning together. And then you let me borrow your chord book and you and William tuned my ukulele. So it was just like this real family, like I was, yeah, just became a part of.

Mark:

From a Heart n Soul perspective, I think the Jam was wonderful in that it brought together people who normally wouldn't be in a room together from Heart n Soul. So you'd get some of the younger musicians and people who went to Do Your Own Thing mixing with some of the real originals like Cheryl. And Pino was there sometimes. And then other people who never really kind of showed that much interest in music or weren't part of bands or anything. And it just was a really lovely kind of levelling space.

Mark:

But actually, what came across as well was the kind of quality of people's musicianship and also sort of comfort that everyone had with playing with each other, and that was very infectious. And I think that that really made it a much easier environment for people who maybe it was a new thing for to come into. And I think a real, we've always been talking about flipping the microscope, but I think we were very much flipping the power in that situation, and that was a really practical experience of being in this space where you're clearly not the leader. You're being invited into this space. And yeah, I think that was probably quite profound for quite a few people.

Robyn:

I was also very taken by Eliza's comment about the instruments because I didn't really think the instruments were... I thought that most of them were, apart from the one handed triangle, I thought most of them were kind of like the sort of things you'd find in a music shop.

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Jenny:

Yeah, there was a lot of thought that went into selecting those instruments actually. We really wanted to... I remember you, Robyn, really thinking carefully about people's access needs and what kind of instruments people could easily just pick up and just join in with. And if you had any sort of physical disabilities, finding ways around that, so that there was something for everyone that everyone could make use of. And yeah, it was a really thoughtful process that you did there.

Mark:

It's been amazing that we've found a way to maintain the spirit of the Jams even when we're not physically together.

Robyn:

Yeah. I think we're lucky. I think it's really good that because we got William until after about six months of doing the Jams in The Hub, Jenny suggested that William from the band Electric Fire, that he could come and run the Jams with me, and we could be co-hosts. And that was a very good idea because it meant then... Because William, he's a proper, proper musician, like Mark is. He can play the bass and he can do all this stuff. And he's really got good sense of time. And he has a lot of great skills, and so being able to share that, I think I have a lot of skills around making people feel welcome and the sort of the bits around the edges, I think, but William is a very talented person. So I think that was really good because, particularly then when we moved online, we had this idea that we could record individual people making sounds and then they could be tracks, and William could make them into tracks and they sound like you'd hear them Radio 1.

Robyn:

So I don't remember how it happened, but we decided that having a sort of timetable of different activities would be a good idea and we're

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having scheduled breaks and stuff. And so, me and William would take it in turns to lead different activities. And we'd plan that all out beforehand and we had a visual timetable with pictures. I remember the free jam one was all these squiggles and then there was solos and then there was small groups, and there was call and response, and there was various other symbols.

Jenny:

I thought that was how we kind of started working together. I remember we used to have, in the beginning, really long planning sessions. We used to spend like two hours, didn't we? Having kind of mini jams just between us, just to sort of try things out and sort of practice, like how do you facilitate a group? What activities work? Where do you need to be really clear on certain things? And just creating, spending, yeah, a lot of time, yeah, really planning, but planning through doing it, through practicing it.

And I remember when we sort of kind of started, yeah, writing down the different types of activities that we could do. And we ended up with this kind of, yeah, collage of things that you could sort of stick up on the wall in any order to make a timetable, but then it was so flexible that you could just kind of swap and change any of those activities around. Yeah, you might have a rough plan, but then you always can change it and adapt and go with the flow and feel, okay, what's really working? And kind of go with the energy of that. And I just think we sort of, without really thinking about it, that's how we sort of naturally ended up planning the Music Jams together and kind of using that as a method of how you and William could sort of really take charge of what you were doing.