

YOUTH MUSIC

**Self-Expression: “For once I’m going to get heard”:
exploring the links between
songwriting, self-expression
and wellbeing in young
people**

October 2021

It's hard to be a young person in the UK. A recent [data release from the Office of National Statistics](#) shows that the wellbeing of young people in the UK is declining, with young women in particular reporting lower levels of overall life satisfaction and happiness over the past five years. The charity [Young Minds](#) estimates that five children in every UK classroom have a mental health problem. And undeniably, the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown has affected young people's mental health, with young people reporting lower levels of life satisfaction and happiness, and higher levels of loneliness than older groups ([UCL COVID-19 Social Study](#)).

At Youth Music, we understand the transformative power of music making. The projects we fund report a variety of positive outcomes for the young people they support, helping them to develop musical, personal and social skills through music. We know from our research that music is imperative for young people's wellbeing. Our [Sound of the Next Generation](#) report (2019) found that 85% of young people aged 7-17 in England said that music made them feel happy. For those young people interviewed, music was a vital tool for regulating their moods, exploring their emotions, and escaping negative feelings. Our annual [Impact Report](#) frequently sees projects reporting multiple personal outcomes for young people such as increased confidence, satisfaction and motivation. And our 2020 [Unlocked](#) report on young musicians' experiences of lockdown explored the ways that young musicians were using their music to build resilience, make connections with others, and access unrealised potential throughout a difficult period in their lives.

However, the young musicians our projects work with often have experiences that have a negative impact on their wellbeing, including mental and physical ill-health, economic deprivation, social and rural isolation, and family difficulties at home. We know that music is an excellent outlet for young people facing barriers, as projects frequently report that music making helps the young people they work with to express themselves. Youth Music projects regularly tell us that expressing thoughts and feelings through music is beneficial to young people's wellbeing. We decided we wanted to know more about this: why is writing songs and lyrics such an effective method for young people to express themselves? How does it help them to say what they want to say? And what can we learn from the projects and young musicians working in this way?

The research

In late 2019, we carried out a series of interviews with young musicians taking part in Youth Music funded projects that supported them to write, record, produce and perform their own original music. The interviews covered a range

of topics associated with writing songs and lyrics, exploring the impact that this has on young people's abilities to express their thoughts and feelings. As there was potential for personal and possibly sensitive ground to be covered in the interviews, we ensured that there was a member of the project's staff team present, that staff and young people were briefed beforehand, and that the interviewer established a friendly and safe environment by visiting the project for a full day or evening and getting to know the young people over lunch before conducting the interview.

As part of our commitment to embed youth voice in everything we do, young people had the opportunity to shape this research. It was imperative to involve young people throughout the entire process to ensure we were interpreting the data accurately and using it to its full potential. So in early 2021, we recruited four [Next Gen](#) co-researchers aged 18-25 to work with us on analysing the interview data to ensure the voices of young people were being represented and listened to throughout the entire research process.

The co-researchers came on board in late April and took part in an introductory workshop with members of Youth Music's Research & Evaluation team over Zoom. Some qualitative data analysis training was delivered, as well as participatory discussions around research ethics, data protection and considerations to bear in mind when working with sensitive qualitative data. There were also discussions about wellbeing and what kinds of outcomes the co-researchers might be looking for in the interview data. After a two-week review period, the co-researchers had individual calls with Youth Music to discuss their initial findings, and a second participatory analysis workshop was delivered, again over Zoom, in May. The themes and discussions that came out of the analysis workshop have informed the remainder of this report. Youth Music has authored this report, but the co-researchers were instrumental in the feeding back and editing of the draft.

The co-researcher team

Amil Raja



Amil is a 22-year-old music producer based in South East London. He began his musical journey as a classically trained violinist. Musical tours in Europe with his local orchestra were fun: he made good friends and found out more about others' lives. Amil is a keen researcher having just graduated with a degree in Psychology from Goldsmiths (University of London). He's interested in the links between music and mental health, particularly in promoting wellbeing. He's also a volunteer at the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, helping to evaluate research proposals.

Grace Stubbings

Grace is an experimental dream-pop music producer from Hartlepool, she goes under the AI alter ego "Moonray". She also plays synthesizer in the alt-rock band Venus Grrrls. She has performed alongside bands such as All Time Low, Bloxx, and Anteros. She has had airplay from Radio 1, Radio 6, and a variety of BBC Introducing shows. She is an advocate of music being a positive outlet for wellbeing, that's why she is a co-founding member of SWMCollective. She has hosted interactive installations in The Studio, Wintertide Festival and led workshops at various schools. She recently was awarded the 'Covid-19 Composer Award' from Sound and Music.



Mai Nguyen

Mai is an 18-year-old classical pianist and composer. She holds a Distinction in ABRSM Grade 8 Piano and is a laureate of over twenty piano competitions across Poland. Apart from her solo performances, she also performed with orchestras and accompanied choirs in respected venues including the Royal Theatre in Lazienki Park and the British Embassy in Warsaw. She advocates the therapeutic effect of music on mental health and wellbeing, and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic she has organised two virtual choirs performing songs from Gary Barlow and Band Aid that inspire change. The virtual choirs, alongside her original compositions can be found on her YouTube channel "Ngoc Mai Official". She is currently pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Music at The University of Edinburgh.



Ola Brewster



Ola is a versatile musician, with more than 10 years' experience as a string player. She plays both the acoustic violin and viola for weddings and events solo as well as in ensembles and orchestras. Though her background is rooted in Classical music, Ola is multifaceted and enjoys playing covers from a range of different genres as well as writing original music. She has worked with organisations such as Croydon Music and Arts and Chineke! Foundation.

During her time as a student in London, Ola found a passion for teaching the violin and continues to teach music in Manchester where she is now based. Working with young people and making the arts more accessible and diverse has always been important to her.

The interview participants

We spoke to a wide range of young musicians as part of this research, ranging from aged 14 to 24. In total we spoke to eleven young people: some individually and some in group interviews. For anonymity, their names have been changed to pseudonyms. The table below shows a summary of each interview participant.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age group	Region
Arthur	Male	18+	East Midlands
Misha	Female	18+	
Thalia	Female	18+	
Aisha	Female	14-16	Yorkshire
Kelly	Female	18+	
Rahim	Male	18+	
Callum	Male	18+	South East
Ethan	Male	18+	
Connor	Male	14-16	London
Ellie	Female	14-16	South East
Sean	Male	18+	

The findings

We identified two main themes the ways in which the young musicians we spoke to use their music as a tool to express themselves. The first relates to the use of music and lyric-writing as a means of processing emotions and events, and as a therapeutic tool for regulating and channelling their moods into something positive. The second relates to how these musicians then communicated their stories and emotions through their music with other audiences, and how it made them feel for other people to hear their music and the thoughts and feelings it represented.

“It helps you to understand your own stuff better”: exploring and understanding thoughts and feelings

When asked about the things that inspired the content of their lyrics, almost all the young musicians we interviewed tended to write songs based on their own experiences. Using the music as a means of processing their feelings was commonly mentioned as an important part of why they did it: writing about their experiences was a way of exploring and understanding the things happening in their lives.

“Sometimes hearing your thoughts out loud – it’s almost like speaking to yourself as well. It really helps you even understand your own stuff better, as well as helping other people understand theirs” - Thalia

Many talked about the way they felt before and after writing or performing one of their own tracks. As well as needing particular physical and environmental conditions to write music (for example, being in a quiet room or on a walk), several young people found they also needed to be feeling a certain way to be able to write effectively. Youth Music’s team of co-researchers labelled this process of writing music as therapeutic for some, and indeed many of the young musicians themselves told us that they found the process of writing music cathartic, making them feel calmer or more positive about a situation than before:

“So I take that negative emotion, and I put it on a piece of paper, kind of like, why I’m upset, why am I so negative, and then it kind of just unloads it all, and then I’m back to just neutral feeling.” - Ellie

“For me, it’s getting that frustration out and getting that anger out, and writing down how I feel about the people around me who’ve hurt me, like, it makes me feel good, because I question myself sometimes. But it makes me feel better, and I feel like, today I’ve got everything out in the open, today I’ve wrote everything down.”- Aisha

For others there was a sense of being able to let go of difficult feelings or experiences once they'd put their thoughts into music:

"It can be a really good release actually, it's kind of like, therapy in a way, for me anyway, being able to write something and get it out of my head, so it's sort of off my chest as well." – Arthur

"I think to move on as well. Like, how do I word this? For example, if something's happened in my life, and I write about it, I can move on with my life, like I can actually move forward with my life." – Aisha

When asked how writing music made them feel, several young musicians talked about a sense of relief at being able to say the things they want to say:

"It gives a sense of relief, like you've got something in you that you manifest, like there's a bit of happiness from that." – Arthur

"It kind of makes me feel relieved, because I get what I'm thinking on a piece of paper." – Ellie

Similarly, writing music about difficult or challenging situations in their lives gave the musicians the opportunity to channel negative energy into something positive or avoid difficult situations:

"For me, it's writing things down, and me feeling better, so without speaking to someone about my issues, it's speaking to myself about issues. I make it into a song, and I make it into something that I enjoy and I love." – Aisha

"[How does it] make me feel? Controlled. I've got a lot of shit that's been going on, and yeah, it makes me stay focused so I don't do, like, getting back into a gang, getting arrested." – Connor

In addition to expressing feelings and stories, there was also a sense that some young musicians used their music to explore and express their identities. Some reflected on their journeys as songwriters to date, explaining how their musical identities were still evolving, but that aspects of their personalities were influencing their music, and vice versa:

"I don't know what genre of music I am yet, I'm still working that out, but I like to just do what I feel." – Misha

"I think, being a first timer in this whole thing, for me it really allowed me to unpack my identity a bit more. Which I think is a challenge if you don't have an outlet for it. I found a lot of the things that I did, like rapping for the first time, singing for the first time, writing stuff for the first time, was a challenge that I needed to go through so I could understand myself in a way that I didn't really before." – Thalia

"Too scared to say it but not too scared to sing it": communicating thoughts and feelings to others through music

As well as the opportunities to explore their own feelings and emotions through their music, the young musicians spoke about how music helped them to then communicate those feelings to others. Almost all the songwriters we interviewed were also experienced at recording and/or performing their music for other audiences to hear, and those who hadn't yet done much sharing had plans to:

"When [PROJECT] has the next event I'll be here to show everyone that it's me. If they don't like me, they don't like me, I guess!" - Connor

"I think I'll be really nervous! I think I'll have stage fright. But I'll have to - even these little performances, it's going to build my confidence up until I actually do something big. Do you know what I mean, I'll have the confidence then. So yeah, I think it's benefitting me and it's helping me." - Aisha

When asked why it was important for other people to hear their music, the range of reasons varied, but overall, there was a sense that music is a unique and personal way of sharing stories with others. For many young musicians, the motivation came from wanting other people to hear and relate to their stories:

"I like the feeling, getting all my deepest sorrows out there so that everyone else can hear it and understand." - Callum

"So I feel like if I write my lyrics and I get them out to the world, for thousands to listen to, well, people will actually listen to it, and people can relate to it, and people look up to me." - Sean

We spoke with the musicians at length about what makes music such an effective tool for getting these points across. The musicians generally told us that the amount of effort and time required making a song makes the end product, and the message behind it, more meaningful:

"If I'm putting my time and effort into making a song, writing my own song, singing it, performing it, recording it, this that and the other, and they're listening to it, it's sort of an action. Like if you're speaking to someone, you're speaking to someone. And to me, words don't mean anything, but this is kind of an action, if that makes sense, because you're putting your time into it, and you're thinking. It takes a lot to write a song, it takes a lot to get it perfect." - Aisha

The fact that music is a form of art and entertainment also made it an appealing way to get a point or a story across.

"If I sat them down and spoke about my life, they'd probably get bored of it, not gonna lie. But if I put it into a song with effects and a beat as well, they'd like it." - Sean

There was a sense that artistic licence sometimes made it easier to say potentially controversial things:

"There are things you shouldn't say that people don't want to hear. But in tracks you can say it because it's a music piece." - Misha

For others, there was something about performing a song to a crowd of people as opposed to having a difficult conversation with one person that made music an effective tool for getting their point across:

"You feel you're too scared to say it, but you're not too scared to sing it. So you make a song, and then you finally get your point across. 'Cos you're not scared, you're able to say what you want to say, and that's mainly what song writing is for me [...] So, say you want to talk to your parents about something but you can't do it face to face, so you invite them to a performance, and you sing a song which is directed to them about what you want to say, however, you don't have to talk to them about it. You're not just telling it to your parents, you're telling it to this whole room." – Ellie

It's clear that for these young musicians, songwriting is important for feeling heard by others around them, particularly when it's not always the case that young people are listened to. Feeling heard and as though their stories and experiences matter to someone – be that specific people or wider society in general – is important:

"Just to get [people] to understand, 'cos they always question and question and question, but, the only time they do actually listen is in my music. So that's why I put it in a lot – my most day-to-day problems especially – in my music, so at least if they don't understand now, maybe in the future they will." – Kelly

"I'll think about everything that's going on, and that'll translate into lyrics": motivations and inspiration behind songwriting

There are several motivating factors for a young musician to start and continue writing original music. While many young people we spoke to had some prior experience of music making before joining a Youth Music funded project, for others their involvement with song and lyric writing was new, and the project provided them with a foundation to build on gradually.

Reasons for starting to write music varied: for some, the motivation to start writing stemmed from having a general passion for music:

"I just had a passion – I have a big passion for music, so I just started picking up the pen and started writing. And I did it once, and then I really liked it, so I just kept doing it. It was like I couldn't stop doing it, so I just did it." – Rahim

For others, the interest in songwriting grew as a result of attending a Youth Music project:

"I was one of them kids that had trouble in school and all that, so at the age of 14 I didn't even know I could do music or anything, I just played football, whatever. And I got sent to a place called [PROJECT NAME]. [...] And the thing is, although it was to teach us about music, they help

us as well, 'cos I come out of home struggles and stuff like that, so, this is the only place I can get away – and it's kept me out a whole heap of trouble.” – Kelly

“I think since [PROJECT NAME] and those gigs, I've just been trying to work on developing myself as an artist, cos I've not really explored that much yet, 'cos [PROJECT NAME] was the first time that I'd ever actually done anything like that.” – Thalia

No matter how experienced in songwriting the young musicians were, there was a sense that they had a lot to say. Inspiration for music and lyrics came from a variety of places, ranging from real-life situations and events happening in their lives personally or in the lives of people they know, to politics, current affairs and cultural events happening elsewhere:

“I write my own songs, I base it around my life story, and my feelings, my emotions. So I just put all that into my songs.” – Aisha

“Mainly my original songs are based on personal experience, or experiences that I feel need to be addressed. So for example, my song, [SONG TITLE], that's about my bully which I had in Year 6 who is still bullying me to this day.” – Ellie

“How I feel, with the government and everything in the world, it feels like, you're in prison, you feel trapped, you can't do anything. And all I want people to know is what I'm talking about.” - Sean

Inspiration for lyrics often came to the young musicians at spontaneous points in their day – for example, on a walk or on the bus. We discussed the conditions in which they write: the time of day, their surroundings, the kind of mood they need to be in. Interviewees often preferred to write alone, at home or when travelling:

“When I'm on the bus, or when I'm walking home, anywhere where I'm actually thinking through things, and then suddenly, I'll think about everything that's going on, and that will then translate into lyrics. And I normally just write straight into my phone notes, cos, walking down the street with a pen and paper, it's not gonna happen!” – Ethan

“I write it anywhere I go, if I'm on the bus, walking, wherever. I write my music anywhere, to be honest. As long as it's not that loud, where I can focus. [...] It just comes to me. I'll be thinking about something, and then I have beats and that, I've got some beats on my phone, and I'll start writing.” – Rahim

At projects funded by Youth Music, the young musicians receive support and make use of resources to perfect their work. The [approach](#) that Youth Music funded projects take puts the young person's voice at the centre of their delivery; rather than a top-down “student and teacher” dynamic, young musicians are seen as peers, and the process of writing is often a collaborative one, driven by the young artist. This approach gives young people ownership and autonomy over their music and enables them to feel in charge of their own

decision making and to establish themselves as musicians in their own way. Many interviewees told us about how the music leaders on the project support and encourage them to grow in skill and confidence when writing and performing their own music:

"That's one thing that's stuck with me ever since, she [MUSIC LEADER] walked in and she kind of saw the dynamic of the studio, and the guys were sat at the desk, and we were kind of sat in the back like waiting for them to tell us what to do, and she was like 'right, you lot, out of the studio' [to the men], and she kind of moved us forward, and almost gave us permission that we somehow felt we needed." - Thalia

"I'll finish a track and I'll be like 'yeah it's cool' or whatever, 'but now I need an opinion before I can move on to the next part of the song'. So that's why [laughs] all the time I'll be coming to [MUSIC LEADER], like 'can you listen to this, can you listen to this?'" - Misha

However, in addition to the encouragement provided by others on the project, many of the young people also appeared to be extremely self-motivated, inspired by their own progress. Achieving goals and recognising their own growth spurred them on and kept them going:

"Once it was mixed here and mastered here, I went home and I kept listening to it. I think that was the only song that I was actually listening to, 'cos I actually liked my music, weirdly, and I didn't even listen to any more music. I was inspired by myself, which is really weird, but at the same time, isn't, because I'm looking back on it and I'm like 'this is good' - and the more I listen to it, the more I get a feel for it. So I released it." - Sean

"Now I'm passing on my knowledge that I've learnt": collaborating and connecting with other musicians

We identified a strong theme of the collaborative and communicative nature of music making, and there was a real sense that inspiration can be given to and gained from many different people in the young musicians' circles and beyond.

Interviewees spoke frequently about the various musical role models in their lives. For some young musicians, inspiration came from famous musicians:

"I used to deny myself, 'cos I'm crazy, different, and that - and that's why I learnt from Kate Bush and stuff [...] she taught me as well, to be like, weird and crazy and just embrace it." - Kelly

"You know 'Stand By Me' - Ben E. King? How old is that song? And it still gets played. When you think how amazing that these people are, long gone, they probably thought they were going to get forgotten about. People still play them, they still remember them. I want to be one of them." - Callum

For others, their role models were closer to home, with several interviewees citing their music leaders or peers on the Youth Music projects as sources of motivation to keep improving:

"When I listen to other people's music, it encourages me to write my own." – Aisha

*"Collaborating with a lot of the people that I met on [PROJECT NAME], I've been trying to take little bits of skills from what everyone's kind of teaching me, and working myself up that way."
– Thalia*

For several interviewees who had been involved with the funded organisations for quite some time, there was also a strong desire to *be* a role model to younger musicians starting out in their songwriting journeys. There was a sense of pride in their own achievements as musicians and writers, and of wanting to pass that knowledge on to others by becoming mentors and young leaders on the projects that had taught them so much:

"The staff taught me how to be more confident in myself and all that, and now I'm passing on my knowledge that I've learnt, 'cos I've mastered all that, and I'm giving it to the kids now. I'm mentoring this 15-year-old, and she writes her own music and everything, says she wants to be a writer and a rapper, and I'm like 'woah I'm the perfect person!'" – Kelly

"I've inspired quite a lot of people, actually, to start music. There's about five I can name. There's one, he came across my song, and he really liked it, and he was like 'I'm going to try doing that', and he did, and now he comes here, and I helped him as well." – Sean

For others, the sense of responsibility to younger peers and family members even influenced their own lyrics, and several participants told us how they took younger listeners into consideration when making choices about language to use:

"Before, it was just like 'whatever I feel, I say it, I put it out' – but I noticed that a lot of my nephews and nieces were listening. And so I started being a bit more careful with what I say [...] I feel like that's one thing that really inspires me right now, just looking at my nephews and nieces growing up, and them being like 'yeah, I really like what you're saying.'" – Arthur

"I have little sisters – and I kind of want to be a figure of aspiration for them. So I'm trying to put that into my music and set an example for girls that are younger than me that don't have that kind of person to look up to." – Thalia

Sharing their musical knowledge with others was a huge motivator for many of the interviewees we spoke to, because it gives the young musicians a sense of purpose that transcends their own needs. Being seen as a role model or someone for their younger peers to look up to boosts confidence and gives the young musicians something to be proud of:

"I didn't think I was ready yet, I didn't even have confidence to talk to anyone, but since I've come here, the students come to me as well, and say 'yeah, can you help me', and now I feel

like a real mentor, officially. I love mentoring – I love helping anyway, just in general. Especially music, like I'm a master of that now, so it's the younger generation needs all the good knowledge." – Kelly

This theme of motivation – both in terms of gaining it from the people around them and giving it to others – formed a large part of many of the discussions with the young musicians, and Youth Music's co-researchers highlighted the importance of collaborating and interacting with others in their analysis. Now more than ever, after a long period of isolation, feeling part of a community is vital. Belonging to a group of like-minded people who uplift and inspire each other can enable young musicians to comfortably express and share their thoughts with others through their music, allowing them to feel seen and heard by the people around them. The projects involved in this research fostered exactly this kind of environment, and even those young musicians who told us they preferred to write and work alone appeared to appreciate the fact that they were part of something bigger as a result of taking part in a Youth Music project:

"It's like a home. We see it as a music family, we're all there for each other. We don't have to know each other or whatever, but we're still welcoming, and that's what I love about it, it's just rare to get a place like this, I don't know any other places to be honest." – Kelly

How can song and lyric writing contribute to wellbeing?

Having explored the benefits of songwriting for the young musicians we interviewed, the co-researchers discussed some of the ways in which these benefits link back to overall wellbeing and mental health. The following section considers some of the ways in which being able to write and share their own music can be beneficial for young musicians and their mental wellbeing.

“I write to get messages out there”: music gives young people a purpose

The strongest of these themes was that music writing gave young people a sense of purpose. For some, it was about diverting their negative feelings into something positive, or distracting themselves from thoughts that made them unhappy:

“It makes me distracted in that moment. At least if I’m angry or whatever, it distracts me from that moment. It makes me feel a bit better about myself – well, a lot better to be honest – and, like, ‘ok, I’m capable of doing this.’” – Kelly

“It’s just, to keep me distracted from misery, I guess. Not really doing too well without music. I’d do something reckless I guess.” – Connor

For others, it was the sense of duty that came with talking about important things:

“I songwrite to get the messages out there, for people who need to listen to them.” – Ellie

“I like to talk about realness, you know what I mean? So I like to be different from everyone. You know how some people make songs about cars and money and all of that. People just want to talk about stupid things like that. But I want to talk about the bigger picture – more meaningful things.” – Rahim

The team of co-researchers highlighted that it’s important for young people to feel like their opinion counts, and to be taken seriously when speaking up about injustices and the things that are important to them. In the interviews, the young people unanimously agreed that a song can sometimes be valued more by others than a simple conversation. People value not only the additional effort that goes into making that song, but also the fact that it can communicate much more than words – not only the verbal message but also the emotions and feelings behind it. The co-researchers also identified that having freedom to express these things in their own way was important to the interviewees, noting that many young people experience a lack of freedom in society today. Music allows young people to set their own goals outside the confines of academic grades and standards, leading to increased autonomy and ownership over what’s important to them.

Amongst those young people who were then passing on their wisdom to other young people, sharing their knowledge and experience to help someone like them get into music, there was an important sense of meaning and purpose that went beyond their own needs. Being able to inspire other young people and setting an example for them provided the young musicians with a sense of importance and pride.

Wellbeing theories (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 2011) highlight these same themes of purpose, meaning and autonomy as important attributes of good overall wellbeing. Finding an activity that they can have ownership and control over, and helping others, all tie in with these factors.

“I could be the voice for them”: music helps young people to connect and communicate with and on behalf of others

The drive to communicate feelings to (and on behalf of) other people was another important theme. The use of music as a communicative tool was clear throughout every interview, and the connections made with other people through music were often very powerful.

A lot of the musicians talked about wanting other people to relate to them and their experiences. Particularly when it came to mental health, a common aim for the musicians' work was to try to help other people like themselves:

“Because lots of people go through depression and anxiety and all that stuff, so I think I could kind of be the voice for them, you know what I mean?” – Rahim

“I get a lot of messages, daily, basically saying how my music helps them, ‘cos they’ve been through that pain. And I feel like a lot of the people in the UK have been through pain like this, with depression and stuff.” – Sean

The sense of responsibility to communicate to others through their music and lyrics and to be a voice for people who aren't always heard was strong in several interviews, showing how effective music can be as a communicative tool:

“Before I share it, I’m thinking ‘oh, obviously yes, I write for me, I don’t care what other people think anyway because it’s my story’, but at the same time, I would love people to relate to it, and when they do, it just makes me feel amazing, in a sense of, at least if no one else is heard, and for once I’m going to get heard, I can speak on [their] behalf.” – Kelly

In a society that doesn't always listen to young people, music provides a platform for their voices to be heard. The topics covered in their songs - ranging widely from political opinions to spiritual messages - were all deeply personal and important to the young artists. The ability to express themselves through

music and the awareness that their messages could reach a wider audience was valuable to the young musicians. Our team of co-researchers also identified that not only does communicating views and feelings help each individual young musician, but it helps society too. Seeing issues through the eyes of young people gives essential insight into important topics and helps us to understand each other more. It shows young people themselves that they have much to offer, and that being heard doesn't have to be dependent on their age. Connecting with others and belonging to something bigger than ourselves is imperative to a strong sense of wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 2011).

“It shows how strong I’m being”: music boosts young people’s self-confidence

Another overarching theme across the entire interview series was the confidence and self-esteem that music and songwriting gave to the young musicians. For some, that confidence came from achieving a goal or hearing their own music played back to them after working hard on it:

“Just hearing that track, because it was the first track that had got done, and actually been mixed, like it hadn’t been mastered but I knew that that was going to happen, and it was finally finished, it was recorded, it was mixed all in that space. And I sat through the mixing process and it just made me tear up, because I was just thinking, like, I worked so hard.” – Misha

“It actually makes me feel good about myself ‘cos I feel like I’m useless with anything else, but at least with music I know for a fact I’m amazing at that.” – Kelly

For others, confidence came in the form of recognition and praise from other people and audiences:

“When you’re talking to someone who’s quite straight up, and when they tell you you’re good, you think ‘yeah, I think I’m alright.’” – Aisha

“I don’t know, everything else, I’ve probably failed in my life, but in the sense of music, it always keeps going, I keep getting compliments. I don’t get compliments for anything else.” – Kelly

Many also found that as they grew in confidence and began to feel stronger in themselves, their lyrics started to evolve and mirror that confidence. Their songs and lyrics served as a tool to tell other people about that growth:

“It’s very, very positive, the whole tune, and it’s strong vocals and – what I like about this song is the strong vocals because it shows how strong that I’m being.” – Ellie

“The first song that I made was a drill song called [SONG TITLE] cos I used to be in a gang and that, and I didn’t really like it. Made me a violent person. They want people to think that I’m

always violent, and I'm trying to change people's perspective over me, cos a lot of people think I'm bad. But I'll show them." – Connor

Youth Music's co-researchers highlighted the pressures on young people to achieve goals, think about their futures and find something they excel in. Many young people facing barriers to music-making have things going on in their lives that negatively impact their self-esteem, and these additional pressures can lead young people to believe they're not doing as well as their peers. These young musicians are not only using music to feel good about themselves and boost their confidence, but also to demonstrate that confidence to those around them too. Additionally, making and writing music affords young people an opportunity to escape from the pressures placed on them and wind down from stressful situations.

"It's just something I love": music is a channel for young people's passion

Another very strong theme that emerged from the interviews with the young musicians was a sheer love for their music making. Youth Music's team of co-researchers all picked up on the passion the young musicians spoke with when discussing why they made music, highlighting the importance of young people having something that excites them:

"It's just something I enjoy doing. Something I love." – Aisha

"For me, there's a lot of high moods from it, I'm sort of, just vibes-ing, listening to the tune, I'm excited about what I can do with the tune." – Arthur

The co-researchers discussed the importance of having something that's just for them, highlighting that all too often, there is too much pressure on young people to achieve highly and consider their future and career. It is clear from this analysis that the young musicians we spoke to are incredibly driven and motivated by their music, and indeed, some did talk about wanting to pursue their music professionally. But for several others, their reasons for writing and making music were for the pure joy of it, rather than for any career purpose.

Conclusion

Music and lyric writing, and the freedom of expression that it facilitates, has significant links to personal and collective wellbeing of young musicians. It provides young people with a channel for their energy, drive and passion; it gives them goals to work towards; it gives them a sense of purpose and meaning; it provides a sense of relief, release, and enjoyment.

Music and lyric writing not only enables young musicians to better understand themselves and the world they live in, encouraging introspection and reflectiveness from a young age, but it also affords them a platform and a chance to be heard in a world that doesn't always listen to their voices. It allows them to raise a mirror to society and provide their take on things.

There are still barriers to this kind of music-making opportunity for many prospective young musicians. The young musicians we spoke to benefit from welcoming, reassuring environments on projects funded by Youth Music that support and encourage their development, but many don't get these opportunities. Providing comfortable, non-judgmental spaces for young musicians can allow them to experiment and safely make mistakes outside the confines of the academic curriculum, breeding creativity and enabling them to find their personal styles. Providing role models that represent them, their beliefs and their musical tastes can show young people of all backgrounds that music is a viable option for them if they wish it to be. Taking the time to listen and talk to young people about the music they've written gives them an important opportunity to be heard.

"I can now express myself in ways that I never could if I tried to speak words - and it's just through music. If I didn't have music then I wouldn't be able to say half the things that I wanted to." - Misha

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