

# Musical Healing

RETHINKING MUSIC THERAPY, FORMER EUGENE MUSICIAN REDEFINES MUSIC THEORY

By Will Kennedy

“Just think about what you want to talk about,” Joey Helpish tells me via a Facebook message. Helpish, perhaps better known to Eugene music fans as Unkle Nancy, lives in Portland now, where he operates Dandyland Studios, plays music, teaches and offers a new service he calls Song Therapy.

I’m about to try Song Therapy out for myself. In a Song Therapy session, conducted entirely on a Facebook chat video call, Helpish listens while you unload your feelings, or whatever might happen to be on your mind. While he’s listening, Helpish writes lyrics inspired by your words, with your words woven into them, or using your words in their entirety.

“Some examples of things that I’ve turned into songs are the story of meeting a significant other, losing a loved one, a traumatic experience, goals you have, who you have become as a person, feelings you have been processing or just how your week has been going,” Helpish says.

By the end of the session Helpish sings a song back to you accompanied on ukulele, a manifestation of your worries and concerns. The song is uploaded to Soundcloud, and you get a link to take the song with you.

I wasn’t sure exactly what I would talk about when Helpish’s call came through on my cell phone. Helpish’s round, grinning face with a pink knit cap on top appeared on the screen, looking a bit like a baby with a whiskery chin.

After explaining to me how the process works, we got started. The words came easily.

I talked about how school recently started for my daughter, how she didn’t like school, and my own ambivalent feelings about conforming to such a flawed public-school system in the first place.

I also talked about myself. Earlier in the week I’d discovered a song called “Not” by a band called Big Thief, and how the song had absolutely knocked me sideways.

It was the kind of song that made me fall in love with music all over again, that made me want to make music myself, but also, in some small way, the song made me



Illustration by Chelsea Lovejoy

hate music. Hate it, because I know, deep down inside, I’d never be able to make music with such simmering intensity and dark visceral beauty.

I rambled. Helpish listened. He told me to continue. We talked about him. Helpish grew up in Newport. He got a guitar when he was 12 and has been writing songs in one form or another his entire life. His family was poor. A friend’s family could afford piano lessons for their son, and Helpish asked his friend to come directly to his house right after each lesson to teach Helpish everything he’d just learned.

“I had a community of church musicians. I started hanging out with a lot of blues guys,” Helpish says. The first chance he got, he moved to Eugene, where he built a following with the vaudevillian acoustic punk of Unkle Nancy. Helpish still performs occasionally with the project, most recently on the Ninkasi Stage at this year’s Whiteaker Block Party.

Eugene will always be home, Helpish says. He’s just the kind of person that needs to move around a lot.

About a decade ago, Helpish decided to take Unkle Nancy on the road, touring for three years straight. Life on tour took a toll on his health. “Septic arthritis, bad anxiety,” Helpish says. He was also diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome. “It all came crashing down on me,” Helpish says.

To recuperate, Helpish moved to Portland and spent a year and a half barely leaving his room. Soon, his grandmother’s health declined, and he moved back to the coast to care for her.

“This kind of miraculous thing happened. I took care of her and I got better,” Helpish says.

After about 10 minutes my rant was over.

It was time for the next step in my Song Therapy session. Helpish asked me to pick three or four emotions from a list of seven emotions he calls “root motives” — love, longing, sorrow, hope, power, despair and transition.

Seven emotions corresponding to the seven notes in Western music’s octave, skipping the eighth since it’s just the first note in the scale repeated an octave higher. After choosing, Helpish then works the mnemonic backward, turning the root motives into chord changes that then dictate the melody of my song.

Not only does Song Therapy redefine music therapy, it’s an ingeniously simple rethinking of traditional Western music theory, a new way to explain the extremely outdated language we use to talk about music, Helpish says.

The concept of root motives came to Helpish when he heard middle C referred to as the sound of “love.”

“That’s bullshit!” he thought, because music, like emotion, is relative. But the notion of music having a direct corollary to human emotion stayed with him. He assigned emotions to each note in the scale, and each musical mode.

“It matches up with the seven modes of a major scale. In a natural major, or Ionian [mode], love is the first chord. In a natural minor or Aolian mode, despair is the one, love is the third, and so on,” Helpish says.

Testing his theory against popular music, Helpish discovered Chris Isaak’s hit ballad about unrequited love, “Wicked Game,” is in Dorian mode, or in Helpish’s system, longing — and if you’ve ever heard the song you know longing is what that song is all about.

It was then that Helpish knew he was on to something, and he began using this root motive system in his music lessons.

“I have kids that understand music theory but in an emotional way,” Helpish says.

It was just a matter of moments before Helpish was ready to play me my song. It began with a sweet and sad ukulele arpeggio, Helpish’s gruff, barrel-chested voice delivering the line “feeling powerless under the weight of decision.”

I’m not sure if I said those words in my rant. But he heard those words in what I said, and articulating them back at me showed he was really listening, and to be heard on that level sent an undeniable ripple of emotion up through my chest and behind my eyes.

Helpish has worked with about 130 paying Song Therapy clients, and he’d like to expand the service. Some come to him weekly, and he’s also provided the service as a form of obituary. Mostly, Song Therapy is about just about listening, casting in sharp relief how little time we spend really listening to each other in our everyday life.

Helpish calls it extreme listening and validation.

“You assume that everything they say is true. When you take the time to do that, fucking magical things happen,” Helpish says. ■

To book a Song Therapy session, search Joey Helpish on Facebook or Instagram. The cost is \$50 for a one-off, paid up front; rates available for longer-term therapy.

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