

Chapter 12: The Resonance Is the Composer: Students Soundwriting Together

By Trey Conner, Emma Hamilton, Amber Nicol, Chris Burton, Kathleen Olinger, Alyssa Harmon, & Ivan Jones, University of South Florida, St. Petersburg

3. “Chop-n-Whine” by Chris Burton (lyrics), Amber Nicol (guitar), and Ivan Jones (guitar)



Caption. The view from behind Chris Burton’s laptop during sensory writing on the Harbor at USFSP. Ivan Jones (left) and Amber Nicol (right) play baritone and acoustic guitars, while Chris types up “Chop-n-Whine.”

Whereas Amber Nicol (a practicing musician) and Ivan Jones (a practicing musician and DJ) embraced the non-semantic and asignifying force unleashed in the freesound! and noisemaker workshops, Chris Burton was at first a bit perplexed by all this noise. Chris at one point challenged the turn to soundwriting, asking what all this noisemaking had to do with our recursive process of growing compositions by emergence. But his question was earnest—he was curious, not annoyed. This question was a watershed, a critical incident for the community. Trey shared Steph Ceraso’s (2014) multimodal listening article with Chris, added this text to the freesound! sequence, and shifted the calendar so that we could do a sensory writing workshop for our next class session. Chris’s sensory writing, which he composed directly to the wiki while listening to Amber, Ivan, and Trey sing and play guitars outside during the sensory writing workshop.

As you listen to what follows, we especially want you to notice how sharing foundational texts can help students feel more comfortable with songwriting exercises that are new to them.

Transcript of Conversation

[improvisatory acoustic guitar picking]

Amber: It might be in C. *[inaudible discussion]*

Trey: Feels like B.

Amber: B?

Ivan: That's fine.

Trey: *[shouting across the lawn]* Hey, Christina!

[Amber begins singing Bob Dylan's "Don't Think Twice, It's Alright" over the continuing acoustic guitar picking; more inaudible conversation.]

Trey: Now is the time!

[Amber, Ivan, Trey pluck and strum, Chris taps his leg and types upon his keyboard. Amber continues singing, with lyrics occasionally able to be heard over the louder acoustic guitar.]

[Sound of a plane flying over the harbor; song continues.]

Trey: Very nice!

Christina: Bob Dylan, right?

Chris's Written Response

As the above experience was taking place, Chris typed the following in response.

Chop 'n' Whine

Sitting across the bay, two guitars pick and play among the crazy chop-n-whine.

Underneath a shaded tree, cooling breezes help me see the humid day feel oh so fine.

They catch a soothing rhythm which the music carries in 'em right into a killer jam.

It's a pocket of nostalgia where the words will never foul ya while you break that creative dam.

The lapping water sound with the chirping birds around make your stresses slowly drown.

Another jam begins while acoustic strums ascend and mix while planes land on the ground.

Chorus

The chop-n-whine heard all of the time makes its way right up your spine.

The chop-n-whine heard all of the time makes you just want to stop on a dime.

We all need a way to set aside our hate to simply chill for a time.

The chop-n-whine heard all of the time makes the music feel sublime.

Lyrics of cowboys, cookies, milk and other joys make sounds of musical noise.

Damn, this music rocks! You hope it never stops. You're hearing ScanTrons in a Glovebox.

The textures and the sounds form a mixture that compounds ideas for the very next tune.

You're geeking for an hour, playing songs through "flower power" with ideas to make it louder.

A rattle snake jumps in, blending rhythms like the wind, no poison—only lovable sin.

The soft blue sky is the canvas in your eye, with all the sailboats docked nearby.

Chorus

The chop-n-whine heard all of the time makes its way right up your spine.

The chop-n-whine heard all of the time makes you just want to stop on a dime.

We all need a way to set aside our hate to simply chill for a time.

The chop-n-whine heard all of the time makes your music less of a crime.

There are sirens heard, chopper blades are spun and whirred, the world outside sits uncensored.

But that's okay, you will wait and find a way, to squash the stress so you don't go insane.

Singing Ex's and O's, you actually feel it in your toes, music everywhere, you just don't know.

You could like this for days, life is stressful anyways, leave the crazy to clichés.

You let the beat jump high, strumming sounds you can't deny and block the tensions that won't comply.

Chill'n with Italian Ice, even ice cream would suffice to help you remember the world can also be nice.

Chorus

The chop-n-whine heard all of the time makes its way right up your spine.

The chop-n-whine heard all of the time makes you just want to stop on a dime.

We all need a way to set aside our hate to simply chill for a time.

The chop-n-whine heard all of the time makes all of us friends for a lifetime.

Chop-n-Whine Chords

Near the end of the workshop, Trey, Ivan, and Amber strummed different chord patterns (G C D G, bridge D C G) to Chris's words, and later some chords were posted as feedback to Chris's sensory writing draft:

[Upbeat instrumental acoustic guitar arpeggios and chords, in the following pattern of chords: G C D G, D C G]

Closing Reflection

Perhaps next semester, the process will take yet another turn through another dialogue or encounter, and the song will continue to evolve.

In some workshops, Chris was paired with Ivan, who usually focused almost exclusively on and through digital audio workstations (DAWs) in his soundwriting forays. Although he had no prior knowledge of or interest in DAWs, Chris, after working with Ivan during class, taught himself Audacity and reframed DAWs as a valuable and generalizable writing tool for his process. Following Paul Théberge (1997), we noticed the ways that compositional practices and procedures are built into the design of DAWs. For example, the Audacity effects menu can be read as a suite of rhetorical figures and tropes. As Chris discusses in his reflection writing, he then used Audacity to produce soundwriting elements in a narrative piece on family and Thanksgiving rituals.

In his reflection writing, Chris traces his engagement with soundwriting through the different workshops/experiences. He wrote:

My experience with soundwriting showed me that individual connections are made with each sound and are personal to the individual making that connection. As we shared our sound rhythms in class, I originally found our efforts simply made noise that seemed chaotic. But as we continued there was a rhythm that emerged. And from that rhythm, I started to find a connection to it all. I found myself isolating and juxtaposing the sounds to make order from the chaos. Once I had that connection, even though I was not actually playing an instrument, I began to loosely write lyrics to the sounds and music. In a later session of sensory writing, I continued with this technique while Ivan, Amber, and Trey played their guitars outside as we sat next to the docks with background ambient noise such as emergency sirens and helicopters were most prominent. In my final project, I revisited sensory writing and composed a personal essay describing events of the recent Thanksgiving holidays and included childhood memories as a comparison. Within this essay, I embedded audio sounds which a simple click of the mouse allowed the audio file to play. These audio sounds allow the reader to have more of a personal experience while reading the piece. Along with the visual images throughout the essay, the sounds and audio files added depth to the meaning which helped the reader make a stronger connection with the piece.