We'll Sing a Song Together: Joyful music-making as a humanizing force in early childhood spaces

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Abstract

Music's power to support early childhood development across learning domains is well-documented. However, the humanizing impact of music in early childhood spaces is often overlooked. This paper follows my musical encounters with babies, toddlers and preschoolers, along with teachers, parents, and administrative staff across Chicago in the Fall of 2025, during an exceptionally stressful time for the city and its people. I consider the ways music, in particular, live music in small groups, can be a humanizing force for children, families, and ECE practitioners. Drawing on the history of music in the civil rights movement, the pioneering work of children's musician Ella Jenkins, and the facilitated, egalitarian song leader tradition, I argue that live music-making should not be viewed merely as a teaching tool, but as an irreplaceable human experience. I present active music-making as a compact intervention promoting humanism, well-being, personal agency, and stronger community bonds.

KEY WORDS: music, early childhood, humanism, wellbeing, joy

On a windy morning in October, I bundle into an Early/Head Start center where I am a resident musician. Ms. Andrea, a classroom aide, greets me, all smiles. "Miss Anne-Marie (we all address each other as "Ms./Miss") you played that Milkshake song this weekend. Did you see me? I was DANCING!" She throws her arms high, laughing at herself, replaying the moves. "I was DANCING. That's my song!"

Only a few days prior, armed, camouflage-clad US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents had attacked a shelter a few blocks away. No one knew where they would appear next. There was real concern they might show up at the school's outdoor celebration. Ms. Andrea was at the welcome table. She would have been the first to face ICE, if they did arrive. And yet she greeted the families with a dance and a smile. My band had played for the children and their grownups, unaware of how far our music was traveling. I enter the building feeling hopeful. My fellow musicians and I had spread some courage and joy when ICE agents were spreading fear.

A Humanizing Pedagogy

What is it about music… beyond the remarkable way it can address all four learning domains… that makes it such a social glue, such a humanizing pedagogy? How best can music be shared/offered in order to do this? My project here is to illuminate the way music, specifically live music in small groups, can be a humanizing force in an early childhood setting. On that particular October day I was performing with my band, but on roughly 300 days of the year, I'm singing solo on a tiny classroom rug. And that is where the biggest impact happens. Ms. Andrea called "Milkshake" her song because of the countless days we had used it in her classroom to create a moment of lifted joy amid the struggle to provide consistent quality care inside a world and systems that do not necessarily support that struggle.

We'll Sing a Song Together

As ICE hammered Chicago, as federal funding for Head Start was in jeopardy, and as multiple marginalized communities were under attack, (including my own), I found that a feeling of chaos was my new norm. I noticed that singing with children quieted my worried mind and brought my attention to the present moment. I have long recognized music as a powerful humanizing force, but noticing its impact on my own nervous system, I became newly curious. I wanted to understand and document my daily music-making with children and families across the greater Chicago area, and try to capture the ineffable community-building that happens in a music circle. By sharing what I learned, I hope to offer fresh reasons for viewing authentic music-making as a portable and enlivening intervention in the early childhood classroom.

Approach

To explore the role live-music making has in humanizing the early childhood space, I use my personal experience as an early childhood musician as a lens, while drawing from the history of music in the American civil rights movement, including oral histories; research on music and the brain; research on music in early childhood; the work of early childhood music pioneer Ella Jenkins; dialogues with classroom teachers; and my own daily journal entries, notes, and memories of making music with children and families across Chicago's highly culturally diverse landscape. Because music is best understood through lived experience, I have used first-person narrative as a frame. I have limited my journal entries to the short period of time of Fall, 2025, while ICE was most active in Chicago, in order to laser in on the impact of early childhood group music making during an exceptionally stressful time.

Everyone in the Circle: Music as Inclusion
Sweet Home Chicago

The "guitars" are tiny, cheap toy ukuleles really, not playable, but the children are also tiny, only two years old, and they strum and tug the strings of their instruments with the confidence of aged blues artists, listening and taking themselves seriously. We are in an Early Head Start classroom in Bronzeville, a hub of the Black Arts movement.

> *"Come o-onnn*
> *Babyyy don't you want to go-o-o"*

Eight children are accompanying me as I slide and bend notes. The lead teacher, Ms. Lachelle, calls out, "Anne-Marie, you better PLAY," nodding her head and tapping her foot to the beat. I dig in a little deeper, buoyed by the encouragement. I start the verse. I'm looking for call and response.

> *"One and one is _____"*

Silence. The teachers don't fill it in, I raise my eyebrows as if to say, "Do you not know the math?" which makes them laugh. Obviously the toddlers don't know the answer. I'm trying to get the grownups to sing.

> *"Two and two is _____"*

The adults shout "four!" which is echoed by a couple of the children; now we are adults and children together in one rollicking band.

I have always viewed the work I do as activism. I am a musician who specializes in performing not *for,* but *with*, young children and their supportive adults. Most of my

work is situated in an Early/Head Start school on the South Side of Chicago, but I also lead parent-child classes at a community music school, support socialization in an EHS home-visiting program, help parents create lullabies through the Carnegie Hall National Lullaby Project, and visit classrooms in preschools across the city and suburbs. I have spent my career singing mostly not on big stages, but on tiny classroom carpets, in neighborhoods with historically limited access to money and systemic power. In the thirty years since I began, I have been privileged to sing in almost every corner of this sprawling, two hundred twenty-eight square mile city of nearly three million people; in languages I speak, and sometimes in languages I can only sing in.

Snow, Śnieg, Nieve

Music is compact and powerful. It communicates inclusion, hope, strength, joy, welcome – all in the space of only two or three minutes. Singing in languages other than English can be a declaration of community, and I always include some songs in Spanish. But I also try to represent other languages as best I can. Recently I visited a suburban library where the audience spoke seven different Eastern European and Asian languages. I asked the parents to teach me their word for *snow*, and then I sang that word over and over, in call and response with the children and adults, to the tune of "Frere Jacques." Cell phones came out to capture video as each language got its turn in the "Snow Song." Parents often make videos of moments they want to remember, and moments they want to share. Using just one little word in a song had been even more impactful than I had hoped.

"Where do we live?" I call out.
"Chicago!" sing the teachers.
"Chicago!" echo the children.
"Back to that same old place
Sweet ho-o-ome Chicago-o-o."

I have played "Sweet Home Chicago" countless times this year, bending notes, sliding, wailing. From the perspective of teaching little kids, it's a great song to use, with its limited range melody and use of the minor third. But that's not the only reason I use it. I also want my Black students to celebrate their home and who they are. I want to bring them Black history through making blues music. The song, originally an acoustic Delta blues recorded by Robert Johnson, sings about the Great Migration of Black southerners to Chicago (Johnson, 1936). The song itself, like so many of my students' great-grandparents, traveled from the American South up to Bronzeville, Chicago. Transformed by drums and electric guitars, it is now a familiar staple of Chicago-style blues (Sites, 2022). The melody is also a perfect vehicle for sharing and safely containing complex emotions. These experiences live outside a lesson plan, in a place of human expression. And this fall, during the constant attacks on our city, singing "Sweet Home Chicago" also felt like secret code among the adults: "We got this. We will be OK."

You'll Sing a Song, and I'll Sing a Song

Active, live music-making is beneficial for everyone in the room, not just the children (Wolf & Moon, 2025). Music calms, regulates, soothes and energizes (Levitan, 2020, p. 275). It also calls us to be fully in the present moment (ibid). Early childhood teachers and parents face tremendous stressors. Every day, as I engage folks in music-making, I see adult moods transform from low to high; distraction yield to engagement; and I see children basking in the light of that musical connection, attending, listening, and playing together. As I begin my day of singing with children, my pulse slows, my mood becomes more hopeful, and my feelings of isolation and powerlessness give way to a sense of connectedness and agency.

I am admittedly biased, but I can think of no other act that can serve to change hearts and moods with so little time, cost and infrastructure.

Amplifying Voices, Spreading Courage: Music and Activism

We Are Not Afraid: Protest Songs

There is a long history of using music to impart courage. We see it in the liberation movements of the twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, as I write this, Minneapolis protest choirs are creating a new tradition of organized resistance singing, building on the work of past activists. While the Minnesota song leaders are composing new tunes, the American civil rights activists transformed familiar music for their purposes. The nonviolent American Civil Rights Movement, or, as historian Vincent Harding labels it, "the movement to expand democracy," was strategic and organized (Harding & Ikeda, 2013, p. 113). Activists considered music an essential tool, and adapted hymns from the Black tradition to be used in sit-ins, protests, and other settings "to build a sense of solidarity and unity of purpose" and "to maintain the morale of activists in times of discouragement" (Spener, 2016, pp 3-4). The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) trained activists in song-leading techniques at the Highlander folk school (Carawan & Carawan, 2021).

Historian and civil rights activist Vincent Harding, a friend and confidant of Martin Luther King, Jr., talks about the role freedom songs played in imparting courage. He speaks about a verse of "We Shall Overcome."

"Sometimes, people would be in dangerous situations and would sing: 'We are not afraid. We are not afraid.' To be clear, they were not singing about how unafraid they were. In fact, they were trembling with fear," and they were singing about "their determination not to let fear overcome them" (Harding and Ikeda, 2013, p 115). Singing often happened in jails, sometimes with groups in one cell calling and responding to each other from upstairs and downstairs (Carawan & Carawan, 2021).

Jambo, Sanna, Jambo

In the introduction to her biography of pioneering children's musician Ella Jenkins, Gayle Wald writes: "Ella's career posed the question, What does civil rights sound like for children? She answered it with deceptively simple songs that taught them to see beauty and value in themselves and others, and that ranged fearlessly over genres, periods, and national traditions" (Wald, 2025, p 5). Her work - which valued other's voices, used call and response, and took children seriously as collaborators - had a profound impact on me and countless early childhood educators.

Singing in the preschool classroom and activist singing traditions share some commonalities: preschool musicians often speak of "zipper songs" where the original lyrics are replaced – sometimes on the spot – with lyrics more suited to the occasion. The term was coined by folk activist Lee Hays, who "called it a zipper song because you could change one word and you had a whole new verse. Zip another word in" (Seeger, 1984). Ella Jenkins was responsible for bringing this spirit of flexibility into children's music, as well as bringing in songs from the Black American tradition, and songs in other languages (Wald, 2025).

Not Really Singing About Baseball

At the same time the ICE agents are escalating their assaults on our community, the Chicago Cubs are in the post-season baseball playoffs. In my parent-child class in an affluent Northside neighborhood, the parents look tired and worried. I understand. I am

also a parent. One Saturday morning I decide to sing "Go Cubs Go" to boost our spirits and serve as a proxy for protest.

Turnout for the class is low. I am worried about one of our families, a mom who is from Guatemala. I email her later to make sure they are OK.
The handful of us who are there sing loudly:

> *"Hey Chicago, whaddya say,*
> *Cubs are going to win today,"*

My throat catches every time I sing "Chicago." Again, it feels like a secret code. We are together. We will keep each other safe. I'm not really singing about the baseball. I'm using the song as a container, zipping in my love and worry for the people of this city. When I get home, I hear back from Magaly, the mom I was worried about. They had missed because her daughter had a cold. The next week, they are back in class. I do extra songs in Spanish as a kind of sung protest. I wish that our singing could keep them safe from ICE, instead of only offering belonging.

El pueblo, unido, jamás sera vencido

After class, I head over to the nearby playground. I have brought my drum. This is one of several "child friendly" No Kings rallies, organized by neighborhoods so that children could participate in democratic protest, without risking aggressive crackdowns from ICE, police, or the National Guard. I wander about, looking for the other musicians. There aren't any. All of my friends have headed downtown for the big march. A mom approaches me excitedly. "Are you here to lead us in chants?" "I'll play the drum if you give me a chant," I say. She casts about, asking her friends and family, "What are those chants everyone was doing?"

I'm a GenX old school protester and a little surprised no one came with a plan. I begin with a chant borrowed from Chile's Nueva canción movement:

> *"El pueblo, unido, jamas sera vencido!" (Alvarado, 2023).*

I'm expecting everyone to jump in, but no one knows it. This is a mostly white, anglo crowd. I'm standing here with a child-size African djembe which was made for my daughter by a friend in Guinea, feeling very white and mindful of cultural appropriation. I kind of wish I'd brought a different drum. I decide to offer an invitation. I hold out the drum to a family, asking the parents if their kid wants to try it. They say yes, but their child is a little shy. I ask him what the sign he made says, and he proudly chants the words, turning it into a rhythm on the drum. Suddenly we have a plan. Dozens of families want to try. Now we have lots of chants, and the parents' faces are alight as they video their children reciting homemade rhymes that describe the open, inclusive, participatory society they want their children to live in.

Invention, Agency, and Change: Music as Creative Exchange

When I talk about using live music in the early childhood setting, I am speaking about music that is alive and unrestricted. Responsive, call and response. Malleable. I've been asking myself - how is it different from a performance (for me?) How, for instance, does it differ from the day my band played for the outdoor festival?

To enter into a classroom and sit on the rug beside tiny humans in a song circle requires from me a humility, a belief in the child as artist, as a *musical being* worth listening to. It also calls me to be still for a moment, as I take the temperature of the room, noting behaviors, eye contact, teacher mood; attending to tears, and striving to be as un-startling

a transition as possible. I bring a plan and I also plan for change. I build a little "fluff" into my lesson so that in addition to addressing musical learning (eg high/low, finding voices, keeping a steady beat, learning a new song) there's room for two other items: children's requests, and a song that I know is a guaranteed "banger" for both kids and adults. That song I tuck into my lesson plan with the express purpose of lifting moods, imparting courage, and gaining as much participation as possible. Often, the requested song IS a song that will accomplish these goals.

Do That Robot Dance with Me

It's the last day before Winter Break, and boy do we need a break. This has been a challenging school year, and it's only December. When I walk into a room of eight older twos/young threes, Sebastian shouts "ROBOT!" while another child calls "chippy chop!" My plan had been to do some songs about snow, but in response to the children's requests, I revisit the traditional finger play Chop Chop which goes:

> *"Chop, chop, chippity chop*
> *Cut off the bottom and cut off the top*
> *What there is left, we'll put in the pot*
> *Chop, chop, chippity chop" (Feirabend & Trinka, 2006).*

This song, which I had introduced the prior month, gives the children an opportunity to suggest food to chop up and put in our "soup," while also giving them an opportunity to work on steady beat, phonemic awareness, and, when we add rhythm sticks, small motor skills. So, while I planned the song for the learning it offers, there's a whole other world of joy and connection that happens when we play it. They know the song now. They feel a sense of mastery over it – they've clearly been doing it even without me in the classroom. I am unprepared for how much my heart lifts to hear tiny Kyndall chanting "chop, chop, chippeebee chop" as she pats her hands together in a chopping motion. Today the children want to spend a long time on this song, leaning in deep with tasty suggestions (tomatoes) and outlandish ones (airplane). Abraham's mischief shows in his twinkling eyes as I wail in mock horror, "Ohhh noooo. An airplane in my soooooup?? Yuckyyyy" He is delighted in tricking me, a small transgression, making yucky soup.

Then Sebastian repeats his plea for Robot Dance, with a multiword sentence that just about knocks me over in its careful construction. He looks me directly in the eye and, instead of shouting "ROBOT" as he did when I walked in, he politely asks, "PleaseIcanhave this song it is called Robot Dance."

As I launch into Robot Dance, Ms. Josephine hollers, "That's my SONG!" (Akin & Doherty, 2023). I know the kids' favorite part is "R -O-B -O-T, do that robot dance with me," which only happens twice on the recording, but doing it live in the classroom with them, we go four times around, tension building with each repeat. This kind of adaptation isn't possible with a recording. I'm responding in real time to the children's requests, their preferences; I'm changing the song's form, I'm allowing the container to expand to include the children's ideas. I watch each child, responding to his or her reactions. I adjust my own volume in swells and diminuendos to meet the mood and to help maintain sensory regulation. We are all on our feet dancing. I'm strumming my guitar like I'm in the world's biggest rock band, when the school's receptionist comes in the door to deliver some papers. She "robots" in the door, arms bent tight at the elbows, head bobbing side to side, and after setting down the papers, she joins us, busting some pretty impressive robot dance moves. Then one of the security guards walks past, and she stops at the window facing the hallway and also joins our dance through the glass panes. A custodian pops his head in, and he joins in, with a delighted smile and chuckle. Now we are eight children, two teachers, one teaching artist, and three support staff, all dancing together.

With some reluctance to let this magical moment go, but knowing there's another classroom to visit, I gradually slow the tempo to begin to let them know the song will end soon, so they can begin adjusting to the transition.

When children's musical input is taken seriously, they learn that their ideas are worth listening to. They also learn that change is possible. A song is not a fixed object. It can be manipulated and reconfigured to suit the moment. When adults take time out of their busy grownup day to stop and dance with the children, to share in the joy of the song, they are communicating: you matter. You are worth my time. And also: music matters. Joy matters. Connection matters. A three-minute song was transformed into a whole community. For those three minutes, in that tune, we were united.

Change Is Always Possible

A song that is live rather than recorded is a song that can be molded, adapted, changed, repurposed. The idea that we can *change* something acts as humanizing pedagogy (Iruka, 2022). A healthy society depends on citizens understanding that change is always possible.

This morning, Isaiah requested Milkshake. Then I learn from the children that it is River's birthday. I say, "Well we will need to sing Happy Birthday today!" Isaiah's face suddenly lights up. "Let's make a birthday milkshake song!" He sings:

> *"Birthday milkshake,*
> *Shake it up, shake it up,*
> *Birthday milkshake*
> *Shake it all up!"*

The older children are smiling and making eye contact as they confidently sing the new lyrics. They keep experimenting, zipping the word "birthday" into song after song, and their classmates join in with gusto.

Through musical language play, the children used their own creativity and agency to build community, as they changed a song to celebrate a classmate.

Community Glue: Music to Connect Us

I love the moments when I crank out a song in a classroom and the teacher exclaims, "That's my song!" Favorites range from Blues to "Kindie" to Latin to call-and-response American folk. I'm always in search of that level of enthusiastic engagement. I chase it, the way storm chasers go after tornadoes.

There's something in the rhythms, the chords, the voices, the egg shakers rattled in chaotic time; there's something in the euphoric stomps and claps, or in the gently entrained rocking, that unites us, across age, class, gender; across education and across organizational status; there is something in live music making that creates a temporary home for everyone inside it. And I have spent most of my working life trying to make it happen and trying to explain it to others.

A Respite from Stress

Early care and education spaces are often highly regulated by state, local, and federal entities. There is a large amount of reporting and paperwork. What I have seen, as a teaching artist who goes from school to school and classroom to classroom, is that live music circles can offer a respite from the stressors that children, staff, and families encounter. I asked a veteran classroom teacher to reflect on the value of live music

making. She said, "Let's be real, childcare can be stressful. That music helps. Our hugs help." She compared music's impact to that of a hug, pointing out they both elicit oxytocin.

When I first was employed at the Old Town School of Folk Music, back in 1996, I was given a teaching handbook that included the expectation that in every class we taught, especially the first class, we should be sure to facilitate a "musical moment" where each student had the vibrant experience of actively making music–even on the first day of guitar class. It was so different from ways I'd been taught about music in the past. It was putting the physiological experience of music-making at the very top of the goal list. Beyond acquisition of skills, beyond fluency, beyond repertoire and memorization, there is the ineffable, phenomenological, utterly undefinable, "know it when you feel it" experience of being involved in group music-making.

We need music. And yet, as technologies have advanced, music sharing has changed. When I first began teaching, for example, teachers learned songs from each other, in a swapping that mimicked the folk process. If a new teacher joined a school, she brought with her a new set of circle time songs. Today, we have countless streaming options – some high-quality, some less so. There is a time and place for recorded music, and it can be a great resource for learning new material. But well-edited recordings should not replace the imperfect, clumsy, fully alive music-making that is the right of every human.

A Profound Connection Beyond Words

When I head into a classroom, in addition to carrying the confidence that music lights up the whole brain, and that making music fosters language, cognition, large and small motor, and social-emotional development, I carry the conviction that by making music together with the adults who love and care for them, children and the adults are experiencing a profound connection that is beyond words.

I have been after this ineffable thing for decades. I have attempted to quantify it in grant reports; to write it into program objectives; to benchmark it with "look fors." This paper is part of my long quest to unpack this magical experience and share it with early childhood practitioners in the hopes that we begin to articulate how profound it can be to simply join with other humans – even the tiniest ones – and create music together. It's my aim to lift early childhood music from the realm of a teaching tool and define it as the life affirming, health building, community creating, human experience it is.

Carry Me Home: Music Expressing the Inexpressible

Sometimes we need music because we don't have the words. Recently one of my four-year old students was killed in a tragic accident.

We are all still reeling. We are reeling from budget uncertainty; and ICE raids; about ten miles north of us, armed agents aggressively entered a childcare center, including classrooms where children were present, and roughly arrested a teacher who had legal work papers (Yang 2025); we are grieving the death of a beloved longtime classroom assistant who was like everyone's Auntie; and now the death of this precious little boy. We are not OK. I come into the building with my guitar on my back, even though I am not scheduled to be there. My only thought is, "I must have something I can bring."

As soon as I'm inside, I remember that no one is expecting me, and think, "What on Earth am I doing here?" But then the school director sees me and seems to understand. "Did you come to share your little honeybee buzz?" she asks. "Yes," I say, "But no one is expecting me." She suggests I go around to the classrooms and offer to sing, again she calls it my "little buzz." I go out onto the patio, where two or three classrooms are

outside in the bright September sun. A couple of teachers whoop a hurrah as they see me. I ask: "Is it OK if I just play y'all some music?" There is a very grateful, group "Yes."

And so I sit in my grief in the sun on the foam patio, unzip my guitar case and began strumming. I don't know if I started the songs, or a teacher did, but we don't sing sad tunes. We sing regular old nursery rhymes: "Itsy Bitsy," "Wheels on the Bus." It feels good to sing together. Music matters to people. And as is often the case in ECE, the children have no idea what we adults are staggering beneath. We are their shield, their gentle strong protectors, working to make the world seem even-keeled when it is rocking and reeling in a storm. Singing helps give us something to do. It gives a place to put emotion that feels safe and secure to the babies. We hear our voices together. We sing loud and full-throated. For me, it is a comfort, and I think it is for the teachers as well. We watch the children smile and clap and toddle over. I let them strum my guitar, and it is soothing to let a baby make the strings vibrate across the wood. A honeybee buzz. There was something so powerful and calming about just joining in to sing.

Conclusion: A Musician in Every Early Childhood Classroom

As I finish writing this paper, new and more forceful federal attacks on early childhood and mothers are happening in Minneapolis and across the nation, adding chaos, grief and stress to so many lives. Small children don't have the luxury of waiting for the world to calm down. The critical first five years of brain development happen whether there is peace or not. And so we keep singing.

I'm reminded of Ella Jenkins' song, which I sang to some fussing infants this morning, who stopped crying to listen:

> *"You'll sing a song, and I'll sing a song*
> *And we'll sing a song together*
> *You'll sing a song, and I'll sing a song*
> *In warm or wintry weather" (Jenkins, 1966).*

Singing with children will not, in and of itself change unjust systems or solve major social problems. But it provides an opportunity for connection, co-regulation, community-building and hope. Without hope, no other action is possible.

In "Why Music Matters Now," a research project of Carnegie Hall, the authors concede music's limitations to address immediate, serious needs. But they offer a vision for music as a humanizing balm in early care and education: "What if music became an opportunity to re-imagine care? What if by threading music through everyday moments where caregiving unfolds, we affirmed the dignity of caregiving and invented daily ways to celebrate the first thousand days or five years of young families' lives?" (Wolf & Moon, 2025, p 7).

From the Concert Hall to the Circle Rug

Live music has a tremendous power to humanize a classroom or a community. These exchanges are deeply meaningful for the musicians as well as the children and caregivers, pulling musicians from their stages and into direct exchange with the broader community around them. And so I add my own questions: What would happen if music students took time, once or twice a year, to partner with an ECE classroom, demonstrate their instrument, and play a selection that is indicative of the instrument, along with three or four tunes from the toddler greatest hits list? If they zipped the children's names onto a melody? If they took a day to sit in the lobby and play music for the families during pickup or drop off? What would happen if more funders invested in helping professional

musicians develop some basic early childhood classroom skills that would allow them to engage families with young children? If more music schools offered ukulele lessons especially for teachers? What would it mean for the musicians from a local community orchestra to take a day to go out as solos or duos and play lullabies in an Early Head Start classroom? How would that transform the musicians, the children, the school, the families, the community?

Hope, Resilience, Creativity, Connection

My experiences singing with children and families during a time of extreme stress and fear in Chicago have confirmed my belief in the humanizing power of music. My dream was, and continues to be, a visiting musician in every early childhood classroom, especially Head Start. The richness of music supports not only growth across all four major domains of learning but also offers a warp and weave of connection which can sustain children, families, and staff who are living and working inside bureaucratic structures that cannot be significantly altered. Music is like water…it can seep in through the cracks. Music goes where many other interventions cannot, and increases hope, resilience, creativity, and connection. This is the restorative power of group music-making. This is the opposite of fear.

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Anne-Marie Akin is a teaching artist specializing in helping parents and young children express and connect through music, rhythm and vibrant language. She has served as resident musician in early childhood programs across Chicago, developing wrap-around programs and curricula that include family and faculty engagement. Anne-Marie is a Jubilation Foundation Fellow (for spreading joy through music), faculty member at Chicago's Old Town School of Folk Music, a songwriting partner of Carnegie Hall's National Lullaby Project, and an artist for Ravinia Festival's Reach Teach Play program. A vocalist and guitarist, she composes classical, pop and country music. A prior recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts teaching artist fellowship, early childhood librarians may recognize her as the creator of the popular children's tune, "The Milkshake Song." Anne-Marie is also an early childhood library consultant, essayist and poet, and holds an MFA in nonfiction creative writing from Northwestern University.