Using Favorite Songs as Prompts

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Some of the most successful classroom lessons find their origins in life's simplest moments. Many of my favorite lessons feel as if I stumbled across them. The prompts rarely pop up from the pages of books but often jump out of life's episodes. The following writing lesson, which came out of just such a moment, captured the imaginations of my high school freshmen. The idea grew out of an evening of listening to some live music, during which one song in particular caught my ear. The song, called Invisible, is an original piece by Robert Medici. While the music was playing, I found myself searching for a napkin to copy the lyrics on, all the time thinking about how well my students might relate to them.

I think the lyrics, which are transcribed at right, are richly poignant. In particular, the song addresses themes and issues that seem to be part and parcel of the teen years. Certainly, at one point during our high school experience, each of us has felt as invisible as the songwriter's words describe. Because of that, I decided to use this song as a writing prompt in my freshman writing workshops.

I introduced my students to the lesson by talking about my belief that a good song tells a story. As I passed out copies of the lyrics, I explained that we were about to listen to a new favorite song of mine and asked the students to pay attention to what stories the song conjured in their minds. After playing the song through several...
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times, we then brainstormed in our notebooks about what this song's story might be. My students' ideas included stories of people

- not being noticed or not getting attention
- feeling as if they have "no life"
- feeling like a "thing" and not a person
- feeling misunderstood
- feeling depressed or anxious
- who had been recently dumped
- experiencing a loss
- expressing their love and finding it unrequited.

I played the song another time and prompted them with more questions: "Who might the character(s) in this story be? Tell me a little about them." After allowing some silent time for them to get their thoughts down, we discussed our brainstorming. My students' responses ranged from the sublime to the sarcastic, with their imagined stories revolving around characters such as

- a high school aged boy/girl
- a young person misunderstood by his/her parents
- a thirty-four-year-old homeless man
- a man rejected on his twenty-first birthday
- a young person struggling with his/her sexual identity
- a divorced man who has lost his children and/or friends
- a person suffering from depression or social anxiety
- a person who feels invisible to God
- a person who is misunderstood because of his/her religious beliefs
- a high school writing teacher who wants to be a novelist.

I kept a running list of our ideas on the board so that they could see all of the wonderful variations we had created. After we listened to and complimented one another, I gave the class the last step in the directions: "We are going to use this song as a guide for a story. You might use the lyrics as the philosophies/feelings of your character or as the building blocks in your character's life story. You may want to be the main character, to pick a friend or family member to serve as a character, or to create a whole new person."

The writing that resulted from this activity was easily some of the most successful for my struggling students. They were energized by the song's themes, and I felt clever and insightful as I recognized that this workshop was not going to be a chore for anyone. In her piece, Jenny wrote in first person:

It was like I had disappeared. I saw Joey and his new girl friend Chris Black. She was a cheerleader! He dumped me for a cheerleader!! I was stunned.

Megan was more direct, "It was another typical day in high school, or as many considered it, a living hell."

Meanwhile, Christine developed a narrator for her story:

She feels very lost. She is in a brand new environment with so many older people around her. Every time she goes to her next period class, she is always being pushed around by upperclassmen.

And Sophia wrote in journal/diary style:

Everyone knows each other here. I feel so left out. Everyone was talking about all of his or her memories of middle school. I miss my old school. I want to go back.

Several students created innovative and expansive fiction. These students explored imagined people with their stories. Beyond reshaping and reproducing their own stories, this prompt enabled these writers to take risks. Jonathan wrote about a character who was a clergy person, "For the past two weeks, the five-eight priest with gray hair has been avoiding his family whom he cherished his whole life... He has been like this ever since his mom died; he feels invisible to God." Alan, who was otherwise a very concrete thinker, took on a homeless person's thoughts: "He lives under a bench in a park where only seagulls live. He has one shoe, a pair of pants, and one shirt. He has no friends, no family, and no life." Jesse, who typically clung to comic offerings, crafted an empathetic story of a girl impregnated after a one-night stand:

Mary felt so used and dirty. She sat in the dark room and cried... Nobody would understand. It felt like she was invisible and had no one to turn to. Nobody would accept her or understand. She was all alone. She escaped over the fence with ten dollars on her and hitched a ride where nobody would ever find her.

Underlining their favorite lines of the song turned out to be good advice for writers struggling to begin. After focusing his attention on a few lines, Alec was able to get started:

Beth was starting to get mad because she thought that Billy had not talked to her enough and had no right to be jealous in the first place. Beth felt invisible because Billy is ignoring her and not talking to her.

Billy thinks Beth is as pretty as a picture and wants to keep the
relationship strong. The fact that Beth feels invisible really hurts Billy, but he still wants to keep up the relationship.

Sharing our brainstorming always works well, too. Andrew was unable to find a topic that grabbed his attention, but as we went through the list, he was able to relate to an idea. And when I suggested that it might be easier for him to write with someone else as the main character, his story flowed onto the page:

As he walked downstairs, his mom yelled at him and told him he was a lazy bum. “Why can’t you be more like your brother?” she said. His brother was a total jock. He was a senior at Staples.

Dane doesn’t really have any friends because people think he is a geek. At gym, Dane is pathetic; people laugh at his bad coordination and awful skills.

As a precursor to this lesson or as a continuation of it, you may want to let your students choose their own songs. With the recent renaissance of interest in jazz, you may want to expose your students to Billy Holiday through a recording of her classic Solitude, with which Medici’s song shares a similar tone and theme. And don’t forget that Charlie Parker loved listening to country and western raconteurs.

I must admit that in the course of this lesson, it was interesting to watch my students, who are mostly Limp Bizkit or Eminem fans, moan and groan through the first few times we listened to Medici’s songs. Now, they actually ask to listen to his folk-rock songs during our workshop days. But, it was the success I saw my class encounter with this lesson that really made it worthwhile to both them and me. In students’ final portfolio letters, many wrote of this paper as being their favorite workshop experience. Andrew, who had such trouble starting his paper, wrote, “I think that if someone read my ‘Invisible’ story, they would think twice about making fun of someone different than them.” Monica was enthusiastic about the novelty of writing to music, writing, “I really love music, which was why I enjoyed writing this story.” Christine reflected, “I think the reason why my thoughts have come easier to me is because you assigned us topics that I enjoyed writing about, such as the ‘Invisible Song.’”

When the writing workshops were first considered at my school, they were thought of as a supplement to regular English courses that had a distinctly drill-oriented flavor. But I believed my students needed more. My design has involved giving students time to become fluent on the page before I restricted their writing with format-driven exercises. I wanted my students to write from their interests and needs so that all other academic concerns would make more sense. And when a student uses a sentence like “I enjoy writing,” a teacher knows he or she has done something right. Feedback like that is enough to keep a teacher looking—and listening—for other, equally inspiring ideas... waiting for that next inspirational moment... no matter when or where it is to be found.

Michael Fulton teaches the writing workshops at Staples High School in Westport, Connecticut. A fellow of the New York City Writing Project, he is currently associated with the Connecticut Writing Project. He is the author of Exploring Careers in Cyberspace (Rosen, 1998).

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Call for manuscripts

Writing About the Unfamiliar

For the winter issue of The Quarterly, we are looking for accounts of students writing about a world they are experiencing for the first time. Under the theme, “Writing About the Unfamiliar,” we hope to discover examples such as that of a professor of English who traveled with a group of his students to Yorkshire and the Lake District in England to explore the world of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Brontës. Delving into an environment that they had previously experienced only in literature, the students’ explorations peaked their senses and inspired their writing.

The adventures covered by this theme need not be anything as exotic as a trip to the English moors. “Writing About the Unfamiliar” may grow out of a group visiting a college campus or a writer exploring a neighborhood that he or she hasn’t visited before. And while we want to see student writing, we also want to learn what techniques teachers use to push students to greater perception of and reflection about new experiences.

The deadline for submissions to the winter issue of The Quarterly is November 16, 2001. Please email your submissions to editors@writingproject.org, or mail them to:

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