



"I GOT A SONG:"

NURTURING STUDENT CREATIVITY THROUGH SONGWRITING

STUART CHAPMAN HILL, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY
NAfME NATIONAL IN-SERVICE CONFERENCE
NASHVILLE, TN
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MUS 210: SONGWRITING
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY
FALL 2014

MW, 6:00pm–7:50pm
Music Practice Building 219 (Mondays)
Music Building 145 (Wednesdays)

Stuart Hill, instructor
Music Practice Building 221 (office hours by appointment)
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COURSE AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The primary aim of the course is to develop and refine the ability of class members to express themselves through songwriting. Songs are one of the most powerful means for personal expression, incorporating aspects of culture, individuality, poetry, and music.

The four strands of the course are as follows:

1. understanding artistic characteristics of existing songs through the critical analysis of lyrics, harmony, melody, rhythm, form, and arrangement,
2. developing compositional ability through the writing and performing of at least six songs throughout the semester,
3. critiquing the songs of other class members in a constructive manner, demonstrating an understanding of various viewpoints and compositional styles,
4. reflecting on one's own personal journey as a songwriter through maintaining a composer's journal.

The approach to teaching and learning in this course is quite *constructivist*. There is no body of information to be transmitted, memorized, or recalled on a test. Rather, each individual student will *construct* knowledge about songwriting in his/her individual way via exposure to new songs and ideas, analysis of the process of songwriting, giving and receiving feedback, engaging in the trial and error of composing and revising, etc. The knowledge to be constructed emanates not from a single source (like a textbook or readings) or a single person (like the instructor), but from the shared and varied backgrounds and experiences of class members. Understanding and embracing this approach—especially if it stands in sharp contrast to many of your previous learning experiences—may be helpful in navigating the challenges in this course.

GOALS FOR TODAY:

1. Look to scholarly/professional literature to answer the question, "Why songwriting?"
2. Look at emerging research that might help us understand songwriting pedagogy
3. Examine the "Michigan State model"
4. Consider possibilities for adapting this university-oriented model to K-12 settings

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TURN TO IGHBOR

new!

60



A black and white photograph of a person's hands playing an acoustic guitar. A microphone is positioned above the guitar, capturing the sound. The background is dark and out of focus.

WHY SONGWRITING?

Kratus, J. (2007). Music education at the tipping point. *Music Educators Journal*, 94(2), 42–48.

- Music education needs a 21st-century re-imagining
- “The best-selling instruments in the United States are the electric keyboard and guitar. They are instruments that allow for a lifetime of musical performance and creativity and enable a performer to play alone or with others and to sing while playing. Many keyboard and guitar players even compose their own songs” (p. 45)

In his classic comedy *Annie Hall*, filmmaker Woody Allen remarks that relationships are like sharks; they have to

tions once a critical mass, or tipping point, has been reached. Gladwell employs his theory to explain such disparate events as the

Williams, D. A. (2011). The elephant in

the room. *Music Educators Journal*,

98(1), 51-57.

- Ensemble settings often limit students' ability to be creative (director makes all decisions)

- Advocates for “models where creative decision making plays a much more important role” and “where composing/arranging/improvising are at least as important as performing and listening” (p. 54)

Abstract: Practically all teenagers find pleasure in music, yet the majority are not involved in school and school music assemblies. College requirements, the quest for high grade point averages, scheduling conflicts, uncooperative parents, block schedules, students with too many competing interests, or the need to work may limit participation in music classes. While there is little music teachers can do to overcome many of these hurdles, the elephant in the room is the very model we use for music education in the schools. The large performance ensemble was established as the model for music education during the early 1900s and has remained relatively unchanged for a century. Is this model a significant part of what is causing so few students to enroll in school music classes? Recommendations are presented that must be considered as the profession moves forward.

Kratus, J. (2013). Preparing music educators to facilitate songwriting. In M. Kaschub & J. Smith (Eds.), *Composing our future* (pp. 267–282). New York: Oxford University Press.

Songwriting is a “form of composition that resonates with adolescents and connects to their musical world” (p. 269)

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RESEARCH ON SONGWRITING

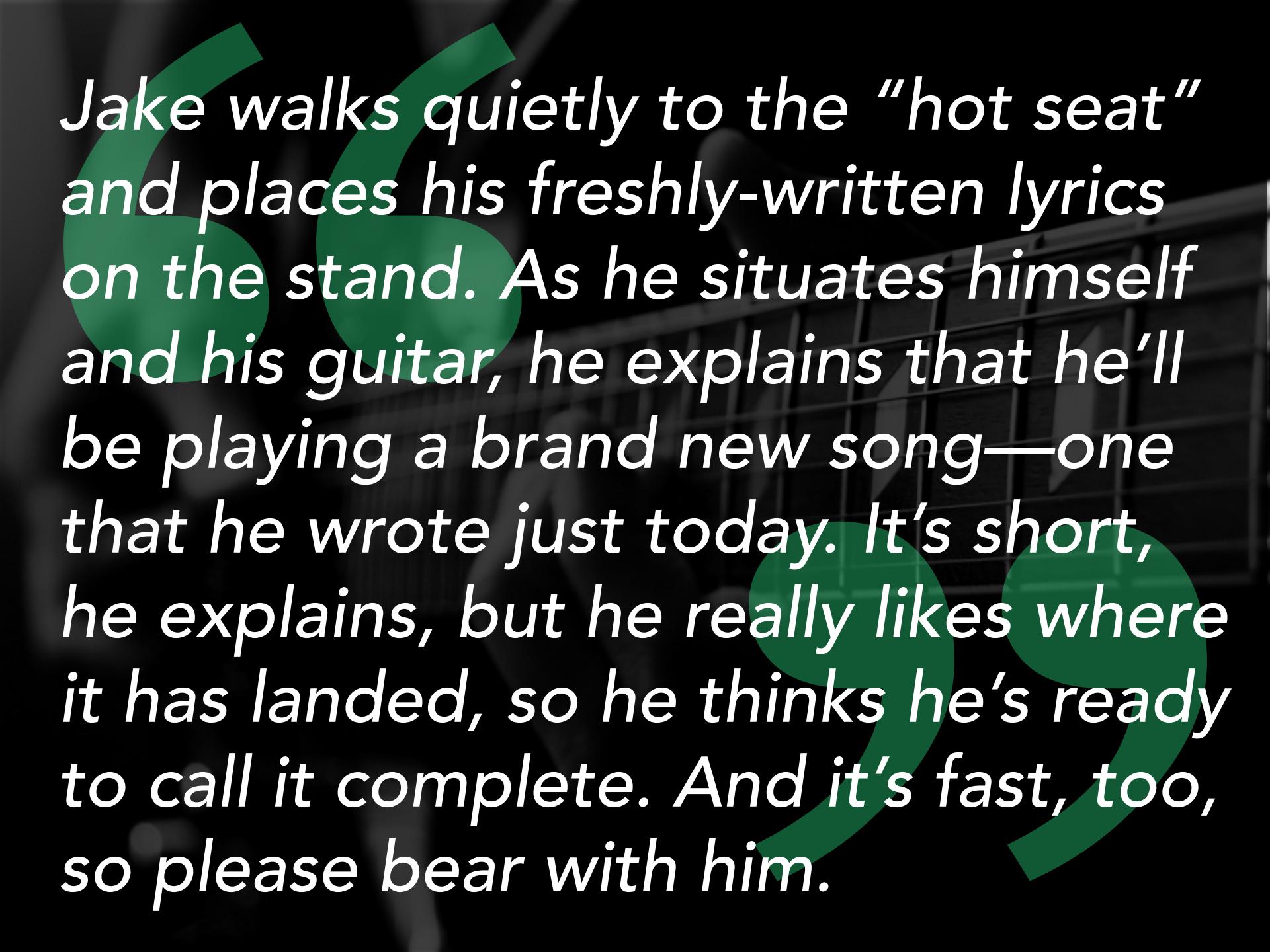
- Relatively little research on songwriting in music education literature—fairly new topic for the profession
- Some work examining professional songwriters (DeVries, 2005; McIntyre, 2011)
- Abundant research on songwriting in music therapy (e.g., Baker, 2013; Baker & Krout, 2012; Baker et al., 2008, 2009; Dalton & Krout (2006)

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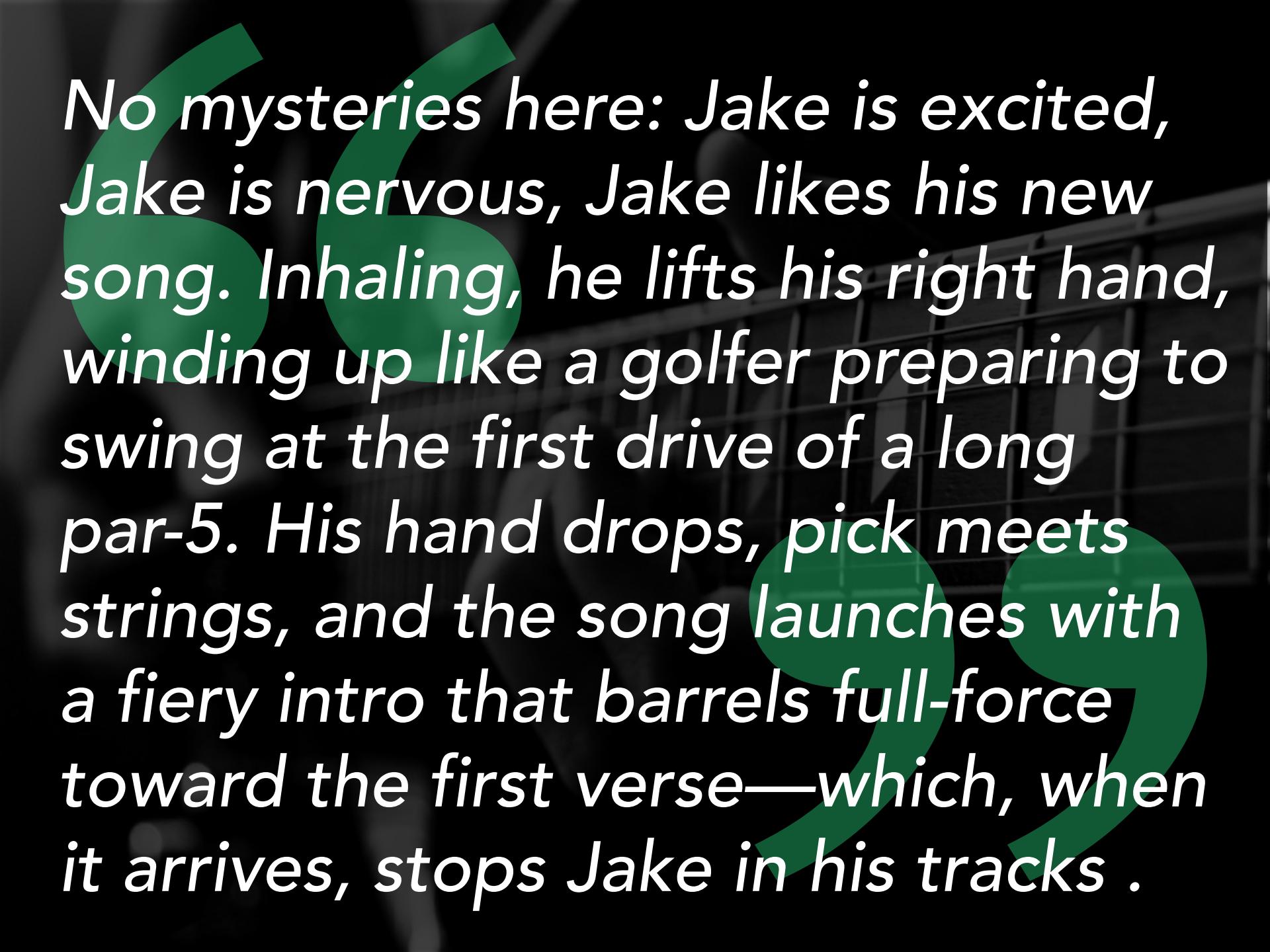
- Tobias (2012): High school songwriting and technology course; “hybrid space”/“hyphenated musicians”
- Draves (2008): University songwriting course, social element very important in helping students develop self-esteem as musicians
- Riley (2012): University course; emotional stability, therapy, self-expression, self-discovery, and overcoming challenges

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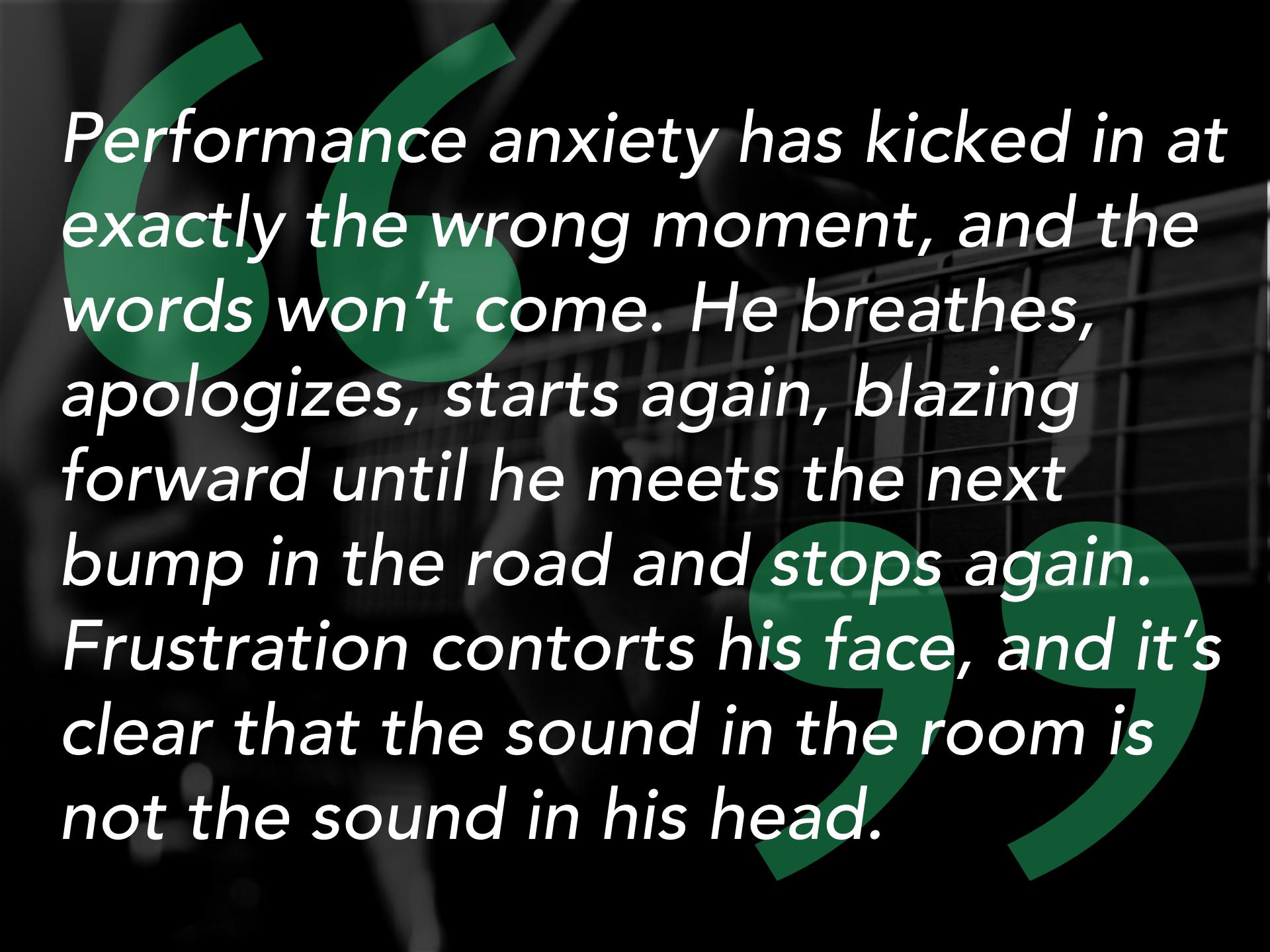
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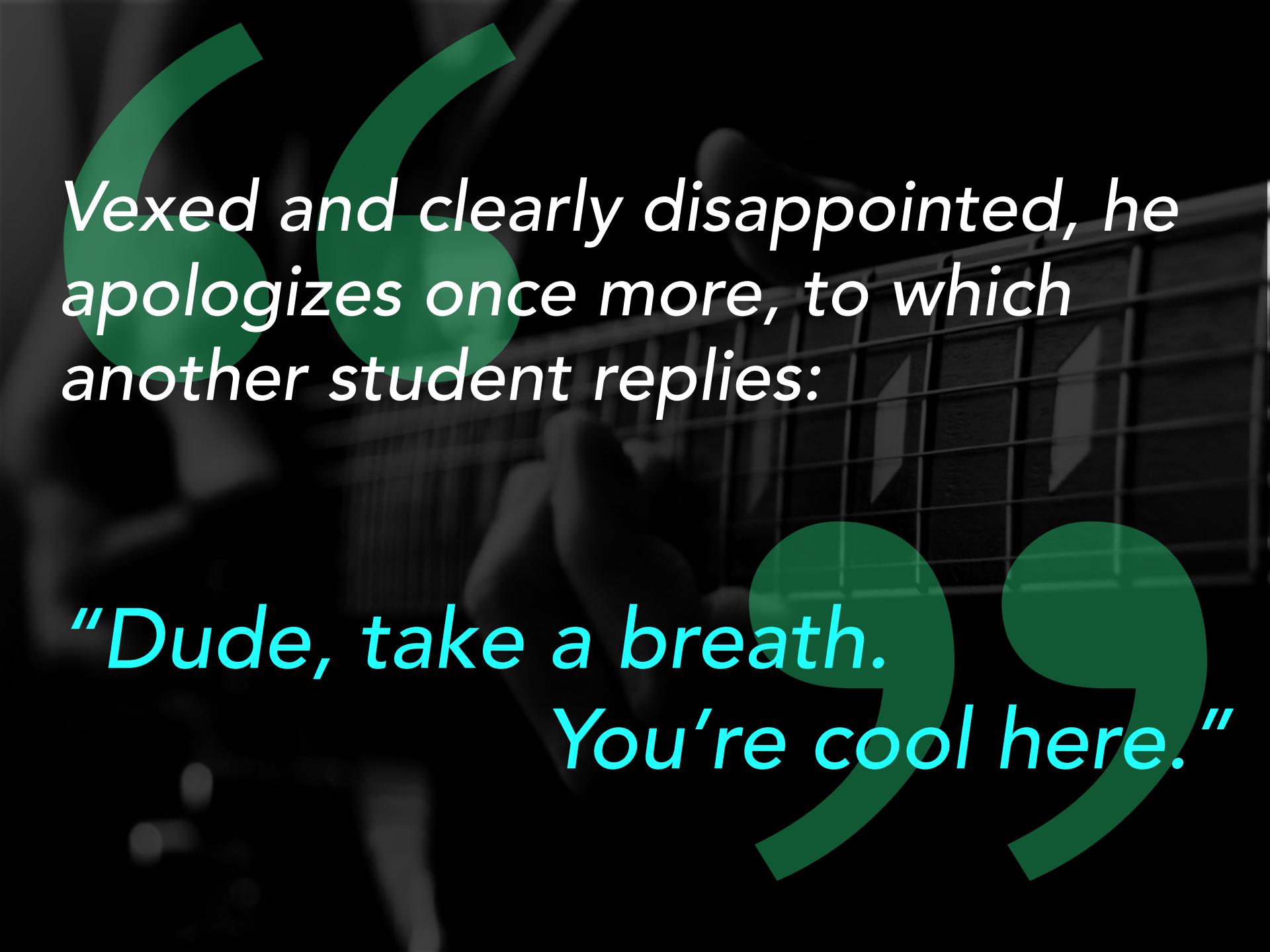
Jake walks quietly to the “hot seat” and places his freshly-written lyrics on the stand. As he situates himself and his guitar, he explains that he’ll be playing a brand new song—one that he wrote just today. It’s short, he explains, but he really likes where it has landed, so he thinks he’s ready to call it complete. And it’s fast, too, so please bear with him.



No mysteries here: Jake is excited, Jake is nervous, Jake likes his new song. Inhaling, he lifts his right hand, winding up like a golfer preparing to swing at the first drive of a long par-5. His hand drops, pick meets strings, and the song launches with a fiery intro that barrels full-force toward the first verse—which, when it arrives, stops Jake in his tracks .



Performance anxiety has kicked in at exactly the wrong moment, and the words won't come. He breathes, apologizes, starts again, blazing forward until he meets the next bump in the road and stops again. Frustration contorts his face, and it's clear that the sound in the room is not the sound in his head.

A black and white photograph of a school hallway. In the background, several students are walking away from the camera. The foreground is dark and out of focus.

Vexed and clearly disappointed, he apologizes once more, to which another student replies:

*"Dude, take a breath.
You're cool here."*



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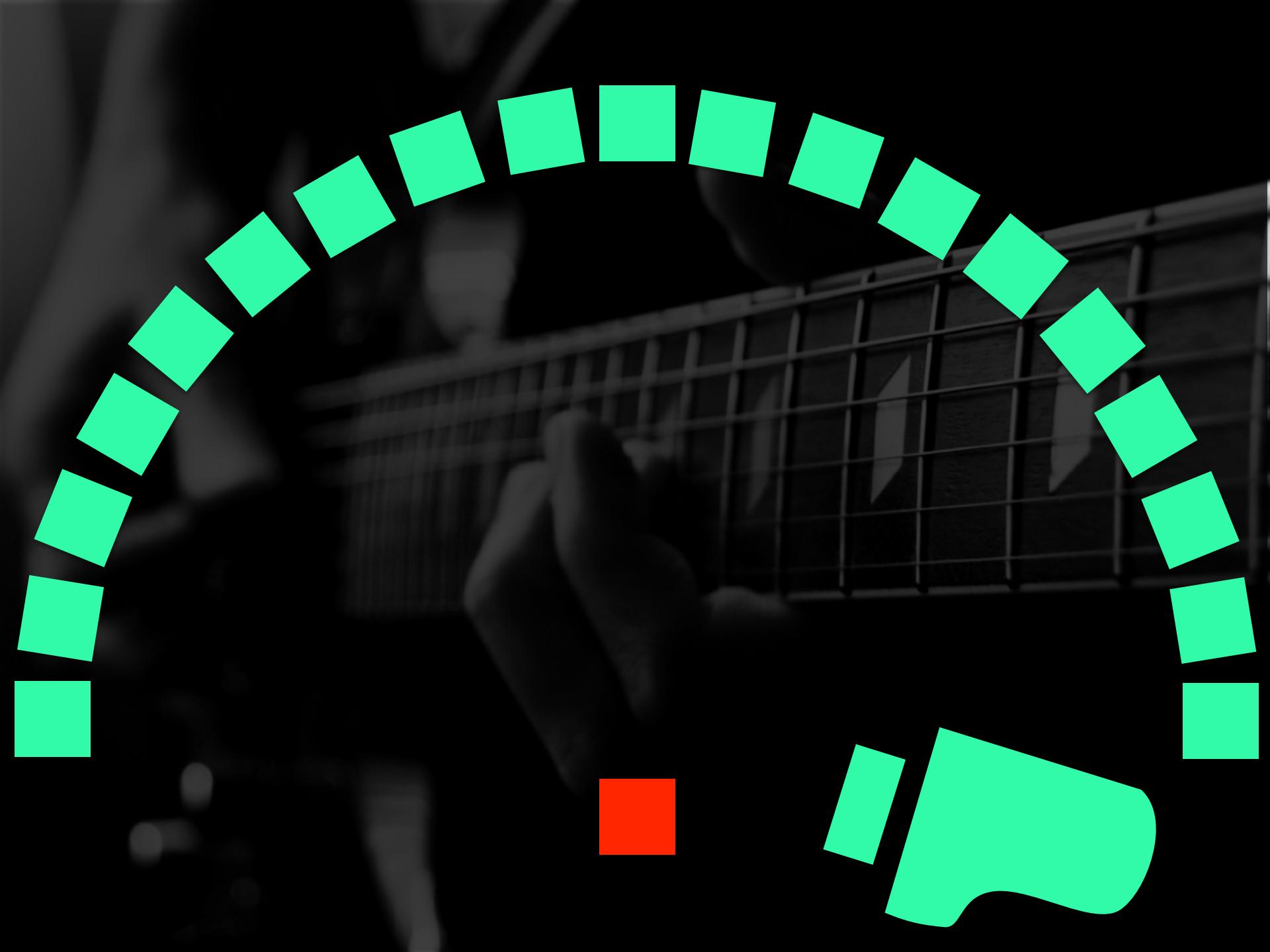


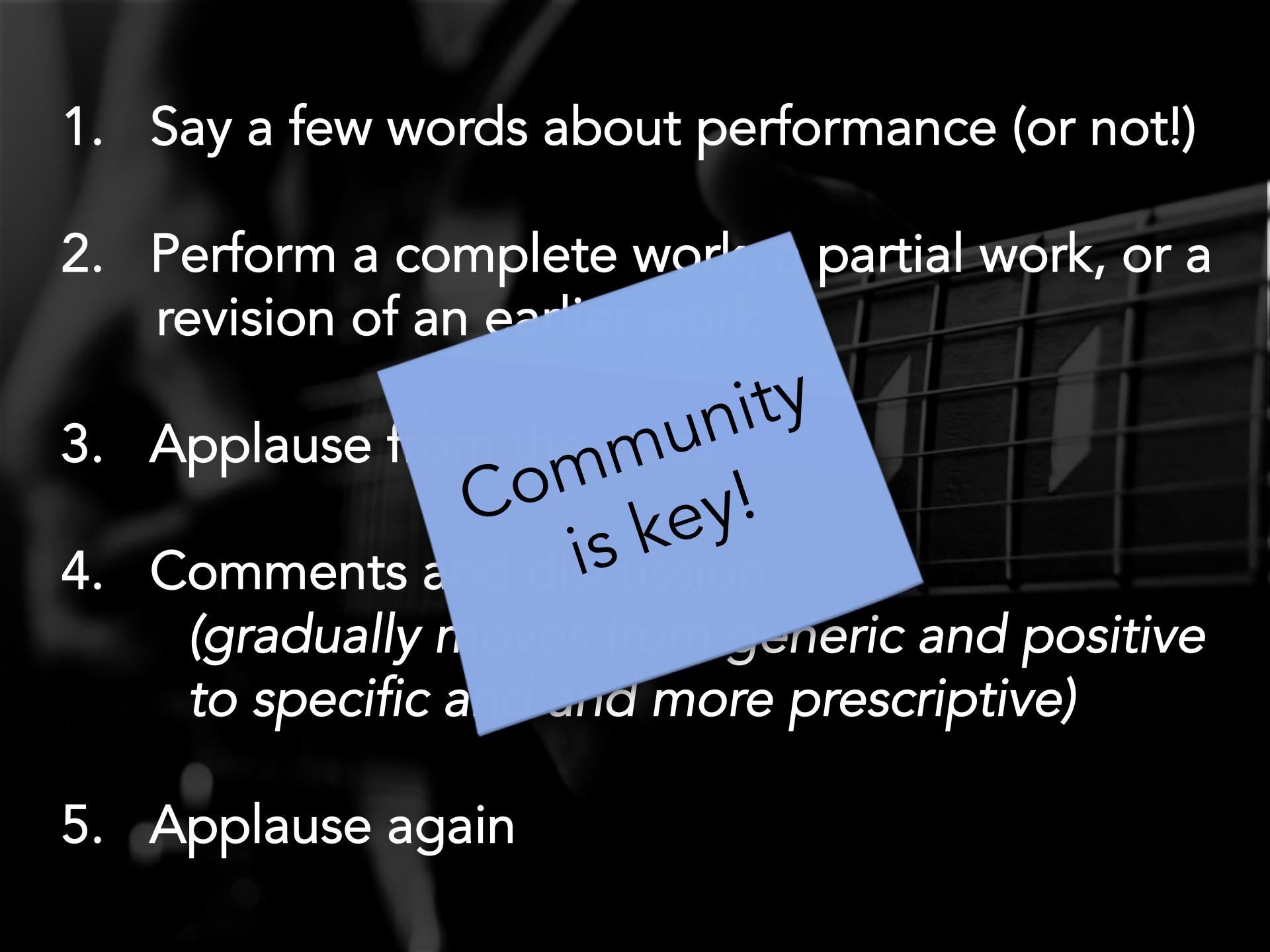
THE “MICHIGAN STATE MODEL”

- MUS 210; offered by the College of Music; open to any student (not just music majors)
- Only prerequisite is ability to accompany oneself (guitar, piano, ukulele, GarageBand, etc.)
- Bulk of class is “workshop” format: students play songs for class; class members listen and offer feedback
- Two 110-minute class meetings each week; enrollment capped at 20 students

THE “MICHIGAN STATE MODEL”

- “Workshop” procedure
- “Starter” assignments
- Mini-presentations
- Songwriter journals
- Analysis paper
- Mini-lessons



- 
1. Say a few words about performance (or not!)
 2. Perform a complete work, partial work, or a revision of an earlier work
 3. Applause the author
 4. Comments and questions (gradually narrowing from generic and positive to specific and more prescriptive)
 5. Applause again
- Community
is key!

"STARTER" ASSIGNMENTS

First meeting: play a cover of a song you know or an original, if you have one

Second meeting: take a song you know and love and add a verse of lyrics

Third meeting: find a pre-existing text and turn it into a song

After third meeting: self-determined

MINI-PRESENTATIONS

Aerosmith, "Dream On"

Mini-presentation of a song you admire (10%)

Each class member, at the end of the semester, will give a brief mini-presentation (8 minutes) on a song he/she admires and lead the class in a discussion of what makes that song "tick." During the course of your presentation, you will play a recording of the song, offer some analytical thoughts about what makes the song "tick," and invite class members to join in discussion with you. The idea is to discover what is unique and effective about the given song in a relaxed, collaborative fashion. You will sign up for your day to present within the first few class meetings.

Timeflies, "Amy"

Tally Hall, "Ruler of Everything"

Reel Big Fish, "Sell Out"

SONGWRITING JOURNALS

Songwriting journal (20%)

Each class member will keep a songwriting journal in which he/she will be expected to write about 200 words each week. The idea here is to introduce an intentional practice of reflection to your songwriting process. The contents need not be particularly formal—your journal might contain prose reflection, annotated lyrics, extended bullet points, poetry, etc. It does not matter whether your journal is in hard copy or electronic form. There will be two “journal checks” in the course of the semester: the first will take place on **Wednesday, October 1**; the second will take place on an unannounced date later in the semester. Grades will be given on the basis of completion *only*.

ANALYSIS PAPER

Written analysis of a song you admire (10%)

The idea behind this assignment is similar in spirit to the mini-presentation described above, but requires you to engage in slightly deeper analysis and to explain your thoughts in cogent prose. Your analysis should be approximately four pages in length, though more is always acceptable. You should not use the same song you used in your mini-presentation. I will grade you on the sophistication of your analysis, the organization of your thoughts, and the quality of your writing. Naturally, I will take your musical background/experience into account: music majors, for example, are likely to use different terminology than those who have less formal instruction (with obvious exceptions). Your analysis will be due on **Wednesday, November, 19** (by 11:59pm).

TEACHER-LED* “MINI-LESSONS”

The screenshot shows a Google Slides presentation with the title "Flashing Lights". The menu bar includes File, Edit, View, Insert, Format, Tools, Table, Add-ons, Help, and "All changes saved in Drive". The toolbar below has icons for text, bold, italic, underline, etc. A list of poetic devices is displayed:

- Masculine rhyme: one syllable at the end of line rhymes
- Feminine rhyme: multiple syllables at the end of the line rhyme
- Anadiplosis: ending a line with a word that starts the next line
- Alliteration: multiple words begin with the same consonant sound
- Assonance: interior repetition of a given vowel sound
- Consonance: interior repetition of a given consonant sound

A section titled "Flashing Lights" contains a poem by Kanye West:

"Flashing Lights"
Kanye West

She don't believe in shoc'in' stars
But she believe in shoes and cars
Wood floors in the new apartment
Couture from the store's departments
Was made for love to star
In more of the trips to Africa
Ordered the hors eacute, ride the water
Straight from a page of your favorite author
And the weather's so bright

* most of the time



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scheduling issues

performance expectations

classroom set-up

THAT'S GREAT, BUT...

administrative support

equipment needs

teacher expertise



IN MY IMAGINARY CLASSROOM...

1. Find school, grant, and/or fundraising money to support purchasing class set of ukuleles
2. Institute weekly “uke jam” (on Fridays)—learn chords, simple songs, harmonizing techniques
3. Distribute text of a piece that will be prepared for performance; have students write short songs using this text
4. Compare students’ compositional decisions with those made by piece’s composer



TURN TO A NEIGHBOR



TURN TO A NEIGHBOR

PEDAGOGICAL TRANSFORMATIONS

- Teacher authority/power: getting in the way?
- Reconsidering goals/standards
- Teacher as community member
- Teacher as “expert”
- Teacher as multi-faceted musician