

REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICE | PEER REVIEWED

Story of the Rocking Rainbows 2019 – 2025

Sophie Sabri ^{1*}, with contributions from Reg, Ina, Michael and Matthew

¹ Music therapist based in Wellington, Aotearoa, New Zealand

* musicwelltherapy@gmail.com

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Abstract

The Rocking Rainbows is a music band that began in 2019, blending therapeutic music-making with a spirit of collaboration and self-expression. What started as a simple idea between Reg (band member) and Sophie (music therapist), soon grew into a band with three other members: Michael, Matthew and Ina, the latest joining in 2024 and bringing a new musical energy with his Pacific Island drum (pātē). The story of the band is shaped by the voices of disabled musicians who have used music as a tool to build confidence, express emotions, and navigate challenges. Through collaborative songwriting, the band created songs inspired by personal experiences, relationships, struggles, and joy. Their performances at events like the New Zealand Fringe Festival and Newtown Festival in Wellington, New Zealand allowed them to share their music with wider audiences, building self-esteem and fostering a sense of community. The band's journey highlights the power of music to connect, grow, and inspire, turning obstacles into opportunities for growth. The Rocking Rainbows' evolution is a testament to the transformative nature of music and its potential to empower disabled individuals, to promote their creativity and share it with the world.

Keywords: community music therapy; disabled musicians; performance; empowerment

This community music therapy project took place at a service for adults with learning disabilities. "The Rocking Rainbows" is not just a band; it is a movement that challenges preconceptions about what is possible in the world of music. Through their unique blend of genres and heartfelt performances, they showcase their talents and the value of representation.

This article is a collaborative piece of writing with all of the band members and was written over a period of six years. It retraces the history of the band from its creation in the music therapy room to its evolution, performing on public stages at local music festivals, and making several TV appearances.

“It all got started when you asked me what instrument I wanted to play. And I went THAT!” Reg recalls with a vibrant gesture towards a fiery red electric guitar. The spark ignited.

Next it was Michael who joined up. He wanted to play the drum kit and finally Matthew joined up to play the bass. Later, Ina joined in. As each member joined the band, The Rocking Rainbows came to life.

From 2019 until 2020, I worked individually with all band members. Eventually, the idea of playing with other people came up in a music therapy session with Reg and we thought of looking for a drummer to play with us. Michael proved to be the ideal collaborator.

Collaborative Songwriting: The Rainbows (Michael and Reg)

Our joint sessions with Michael and Reg started in 2021 and consisted of improvised music making and collaborative songwriting. The music therapy goal was to build confidence in playing instruments, to explore collaboration, and to express emotions.

Our strategy for songwriting was to select a theme to explore. We had four themes which were to talk about: a person, a place, a problem or an experience. I asked questions that would encourage content production. Each person took time to express their thoughts and they supported each other’s self-expression. Michael and Reg wrote several songs together. They enjoyed talking about staff members from the day programme they attended, for example. The emotions that came out during songwriting varied from joyfulness, playfulness, connectedness and pride to expressing fear, sadness and life challenges.

Here are some of the titles of our songs to give an example of the range we wrote together: “Queen of the house,” “Amanda The Thunder,” “My song for you,” “Music with Sophie,” “We love to perform,” “Chilling out,” “Too much noise,” “Nervousness.”

The lyrics of the following song “I can’t take it anymore” were composed collaboratively between Reg and Michael and reflected their unique ways of dealing with life challenges. The songwriting process included filling in the blanks and discussions around the theme. The song was played with distorted electric guitars in a rock music style. Michael played the drums, Reg was the lead guitarist and singer, and I played rhythm guitar.

I can’t take it anymore

Am

I took a chance

To be kind

Everything was fine

And I cried

Chorus: F G Gm x2

Now my life has changed

I can’t stand the pain

I did everything for happiness

Going out and having a meal

Being kind to people

Listening to some music

Chorus

Dm7

Am

It was worth it to write a song

By the end of the year we had composed several songs, recorded them, created a CD together and performed our music during concerts I organized at the facility.

COVID Time

During the COVID restrictions we worked online, and this lasted for about 8 months. Michael and Reg both lived together, so it made it possible to work as a group. During our online sessions, songwriting became even more of a therapeutic tool as it enabled them to express, share, and process their feelings. “We’re going bonkers” is one of the songs that was born during that time. It highlighted the struggles they faced during the lockdown period and formulated their wish for the future.

We’re going bonkers

Cm D#m A#m G#

Intro: Reg guitar solo

Nothing comes to mind
Lockdown is empty
People staying home
People getting a jab

We got our first jab done
To keep us safe
Lockdown makes you go crazy
You have to stay in your room

**And you go bonkers, bonkers,
you go bonkers,
bonkers**

I can’t wait til it’s over
When we get to level 1
Back to normal
With Sophie and everyone

We want to play music
I can’t play on the red guitar
I can’t play on the drumkit
That’s why we’re getting bonkers

**We’re going bonkers,
bonkers
Cause we are bonkers, bonkers.....**

Reg guitar solo

To get back and see everyone

When we got back to working face to face, Michael and Reg looked forward to performing their music for others. Performance had always been a motivation for our songwriting and playing. It also enhanced a sense of community, as shown in our song “To the crowd.”

Acknowledging the connections we have with people in our community is very important to the band members. Looking at the lyrics analysis, we noted that performance was associated with feelings of happiness, and the members were also realistic with their challenges such as getting over their fears of performance.

To the crowd

(...)

Verse 2:

The music is good
It makes us feel happy
Concentrate on our singing
People listen
Happiness, listen, be kind
Play together with our voices

Chorus:

We are looking forward to it
Playing in front of people
It's a bit scary
but once we warm up
We get into it
Oh yeahh

Songwriting Process

Music therapy was a safe space for Michael and Reg to share their emotions, their perspectives, and talk about their life experiences. They both were very respectful to each other, allowing space for self-expression and supporting each other's contributions, even when minimal. Some of the songs were more directed by Reg at times and others by Michael, depending on the theme. My role as a music therapist was to facilitate a balance in the levels of participation so that everyone felt good about the process and had space to share their ideas. Sometimes one line was written by Reg and the next line by Michael, and so on. Sometimes there was more flexibility, and one person contributed more, but was supported and approved by the other to do so. There would be systematic consultations between the three of us, sometimes just with eye contact, facial expressions, nodding of the head, or interjections to approve the process. Silence was important at times, to enable thought production. Sometimes the writing of a song happened all in one go. Like any creative process, ours was unique to the day.

This was a truly collaborative experience. I have observed that Michael and Reg built a stronger friendship from sharing the music therapy space, and the songwriting process became more and more fluid as time went by. There was so much respect amongst us that no conflict arose at any time, though we know it can happen in many bands. The benefits of being part of a band were high, and I can recognize that Michael and Reg were grateful to have this safe space to talk, to be heard, to create and play music.

Public Performance: NZ Fringe Festival (Michael, Reg and Matthew)

Matthew joined the band in October 2022. We thought of him as a bass player and singer for the band. Matthew has a great ability to remember song lyrics and has an incredible ear for picking up any instrument fast. After only a few weeks of practice, Matthew learnt by ear all of the words of the song we had composed and found the bass guitar lines. We

decided to register at a regional art festival and had our first public performance for the NZ Fringe Festival in March 2022.

Here is some feedback from the band members after the show:

“I liked having family there. There was no challenge, I was fine.” said Michael.

“I was nervous from start to finish. I managed it with concentration. That was hard. My hands were a challenge, I was feeling tired. There were challenges but I got through them. When I got home, I put my pajamas on, brushed my teeth and went straight to bed. It was a good night I reckon. The blues was my favourite.” said Reg.

“Yeeees” expressed Matthew with a lot of enthusiasm. “Chilling out” was Matthew’s favourite song to perform. After the Fringe festival performance, our band’s name evolved from The Rainbows to The Rocking Rainbows. This change reflected the band’s growth in self-esteem.

Figure 1. The Rocking Rainbows 2023.



Note. Photo credit: Haakon Carruthers

Getting noticed

Community performance at a school. Soon after our public performance, we received an invitation to perform at a special school where fellow music therapists worked. The anticipation buzzed in the air as the band members prepared to share their music with a new audience. Packed together in a van loaded with our musical gear, we felt like we were going on an unforgettable musical tour.

Reg recalled “I was not nervous this time. They welcomed us first. Then we did our thing.” Michael even added that having a proper welcoming made us feel “safer.” Reg also recalled, “The performance went pretty well. I think they had a good time.”

At the end of the gig, Michael took a leap of courage, stepping up to the microphone to deliver a speech about Easter. “I liked talking to people,” he shared, capturing the essence of connection that music enables.

Matthew, with his distinctive perspective said, “School kids was good.” He said he liked going somewhere new. The newness of the setting amplified the band’s engagement with their music.

The team of music therapists working at the school noted that the Rocking Rainbows performance was a source of inspiration for the youth, proving that becoming a touring band was possible even through disability. This brings some reflection on the Māori

concept of *tuakana-teina*¹, a model of learning and teaching that emphasizes reciprocal relationships and shared growth between people of different experience levels (Bishop & Berryman, 2006). On one hand, the band gained recognition and confidence from performing in front of a younger generation, while the youth gained inspiration from witnessing the success of a band that embraced their disabilities.

Collaborative gig. We received another invitation to perform on a stage with another group of disabled people for a special event at Thistle Hall in Wellington. The venue was packed and about 50 people attended. Reg said “Our staff and flatmates were there. It was important that they came.”

“We played The Blues, Gypsy, Bonkers, Nervousness, and Saving Lives,” shared Michael and Matthew in unison. Reg said “I liked the other band playing ‘Sweet Caroline.’” For Michael, the stage became a realm of enchantment. “I liked the stage.” And Reg supported him saying he liked the lights on the floor and the quality of the sound. The band members reported that they liked all of their music performances and were impressed to see people taking pictures of them with their cellphones.

I recalled the band had a momentous conclusion. “We had a very good speech from Matthew at the end.” Matthew does not usually speak much so this was a great surprise for us. He was also eager to introduce our band next time. Matthew’s eagerness to take on a new role showcased the band’s united front and evolving dynamics.

The energy of the stage also carried its toll. “I was tired when I went home,” admitted Reg, and Michael and Matthew shared the sentiment of fatigue. Nevertheless, the collective spirit remained unwavering. “Let’s do it next year out here,” Michael suggested, a testament to their commitment to their craft and their longing to keep performing.

Sharing the stage with another band had the effect of increasing the visibility of The Rocking Rainbows to a broader audience. People who came to listen to the other band became new supporters of The Rocking Rainbows, extending their audience beyond the usual community of family members and support workers. One radio presenter who attended the event was impressed by the performance and invited the band for an interview at their radio station.

Furthermore, the relationship developed with the other band has been mutually influential, inspiring each group’s creative process. The Rocking Rainbows appreciated some of the songs performed by the other band, while also receiving positive feedback in return. Contributing to the visibility of disabled musicians in the local arts and music scene represents an important step towards social change. Research in music therapy and community music suggests that increased visibility of disabled artists plays a crucial role in promoting social inclusion, challenging normative assumptions about ability, and advancing equity within the arts (Mitchell, Stige, & Vaillancourt, 2022; Viega, 2017).

Radio and TV interviews

After our performance at Thistle hall, we got invited for an interview on Wellington Access Radio. You can listen to the recording on the following link:



¹ *Tuakana-teina* is a Māori concept referring to the relationship between an older (*tuakana*) and a younger (*teina*) person, typically an older and younger sibling, also used as mentor-mentee relationship in a reciprocal sense where both are teaching and learning from each other.

Wellington Access Radio Interview²

Michael reflected that the interview was “Good. Be kind, slow down, music is good for you. I like it.” His words resonated with a profound understanding of the soothing power of music. “Listen slowly, use your voice slowly, slow down, listen music stop, not too fast. Listen to the music. Music is good. I like it.”

For Reg, the interview was a unique opportunity to express himself. “I enjoyed it, talking,” he confessed, revealing the joy he found in sharing his story. He recounted the origins of The Rocking Rainbows, highlighting, “How did I get in the band and I said Sophie started it. I was first in, then Michael and then Matthew came in third.”

A few months later, we got invited for another interview at Wellington Access radio with another presenter. Matthew’s reflection, concise yet evocative, captured the essence of the radio encounter, “James talked about songs. Headphones, James, microphones.”

As the band was eager to perform more, I researched venues and more opportunities to showcase the band. In 2024, the Rocking Rainbows proudly performed at the Newtown Festival in Wellington on one of the main stages. This was an incredible experience for all band members to play in front of a very big audience and with a famous NZ actress being our MC. The band also performed for The NZ Fringe festival in collaboration with a local punk band who got to the Wellington Regional Final of the Battle of The Bands later in the year.

Thanks to this exposure, we got interviewed to go on TV twice within a month. You can find the links to the videos below:

Good Sorts – TVNZ³



News hub⁴



Welcoming a New Member: Ina

In February 2024, Ina joined the band. I discussed with the band members whether they’d be open to inviting a new member and they were delighted. There is a strong culture of inclusion at Evaro and this was reflected by the spontaneous response from the band members.

Ina was already known for having a great talent at keeping the beat as he had previous experience in band membership. I was also working with him individually. From my perspective as a music therapist, I could see the potential of Ina participating in a group session to expand his experience of connectedness to a group and enhance a sense of belonging. Ina is the only person coming from a pacific island at the service I work at and his culture is very important to him. One beautiful way that Ina wanted to contribute to the Rocking Rainbows was to play the pātē (slit drum), which is a wooden percussion instrument from the pacific islands. Ina brought his instrument from home to the band practice every week. With Ina in the band, our compositions took new avenues and our music expresses a unique vibe. “I enjoy music and to keep the beat on” said Ina.

² <https://player.accessmedia.nz/Player.aspx?eid=5e0a91c3-afc5-4ac0-83be-a8bfad95445d>

³ <https://www.1news.co.nz/2024/05/13/good-sorts-meet-the-music-therapist-helping-those-who-need-it-most/>

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=669248615288547>

Music Recording

In 2025, we continued to perform when opportunities arose. We played again for the NZ Fringe festival and featured an opening act from a solo disabled musician and a closing act by the same local band as the previous year. This proved the importance of lasting relationships established with the community of local musicians. We also performed at the same special school as the previous year to preserve the connections we had. This extensive experience of performing led us to think about recording our music for our followers. I took the band to a recording studio to make our first semi-professional recordings.

We proudly released our first EP, *Awaye*, in July 2025. Our music is available on Bandcamp, and I produced CDs for the band members to ensure they could access and enjoy their music in a more tangible way. For the band members, sharing their music brings a strong sense of pride, which is further enhanced when it is shared with their *whānau*⁵. One of our followers, a local radio presenter, has also programmed our music to be played on air, further extending our reach and visibility within the community.

This sense of pride extends beyond the band members themselves. For instance, one of Reg's family members had printed a t-shirt with a photo of Reg playing his guitar as a way to encourage and celebrate him during performances. Another band member has built a supportive online fan base made up of his *whānau*, demonstrating the broader impact of our music within our communities.

Performing, recording, and increasing our social media presence were all steps we took collaboratively, through regular consultation and shared decision-making.

Before releasing any material, we discussed in clear terms the implications of sharing music, videos, and photos publicly. Concepts such as copyright, ownership, and privacy can often feel abstract, so it was essential to explore the potential consequences of publishing content online and of sharing information for this article. The members of The Rocking Rainbows were all eager to share their music and story widely and without hesitation. I see my role as a facilitator; like a tool that the band members can access to help make their vision possible, and I support them in continuing to dream big.

There is a deep sense of achievement that comes from performing and releasing music of their own creation, and this is evident in the joy that lights up the band members' faces when they watch or listen back to their performances. This pride is also shared by their *whānau*, who celebrate these accomplishments as milestones in both personal and collective growth.

Link to our Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/p/The-Rocking-Rainbows-61558143707536>

Link to our Bandcamp: <https://therockingrainbowsmusic.bandcamp.com/album/awaye>

Reflections

As the band progressed in its musical journey, so did the goals of the music therapy. The goal was initially to facilitate self-expression, reflect on life experiences and process emotions. As the band evolved, performance as a social engagement became an important goal for the sessions and also influenced the music composition process. Performance served as a means of connection with others, allowing members to share a positive and

⁵ Extended family, family group, a familiar term of address to a number of people—the primary economic unit of traditional Māori society. In the modern context the term is sometimes used to include friends who may not have any kinship ties to other members (Moorfield, 2011).

successful image of themselves, expressing their creative identity and being seen. In that case, experiencing the significance of being seen not only by a music therapist but also by a wider community. By sharing their musical selves, the band members' self-esteem and sense of achievement grew greatly (Ansdell & Stige, 2018; Viega, 2017; Williams, 2014). This can be witnessed in the way people present at the service, the interactions they have with other people, and their increased confidence in playing music in the music therapy room as well as on stage.

The Rocking Rainbows have become a great source of pride within the service I work at. The band members are viewed as rock stars, a perception that mirrors their own growing sense of pride, self-belief, and recognition of their musical abilities within the supportive environment of the service I work at. Public recognition through radio and television appearances has further enhanced our reputation, both within the local community and the national music therapy field. Indeed, the Rocking Rainbows are now well known within the New Zealand music therapy community.

Comparisons with other community music therapy projects reveal similar benefits associated with performance. For example, in the band "Musical minds," Ansdell (2005) identified that performance felt "so good" because it fostered a sense of identity, embodiment, completion, "being who you are not and doing what you can't." It also cultivated a sense of social authorship and mutual respect among members.

Similarly, Peter Jampel (2011) conceptualised the five dimensions of performance as this interconnectedness between the musicians, their internal worlds, the music being played and the reaction of the audience. The fifth dimension arises when these four components are fully synchronised, producing a "peak moment" of psychophysiological arousal. This heightened state (feeling-state), characterised by positive emotion and a sense of spiritual connection, represents what Jampel identifies as the ultimate reward of performing collaboratively as a band.

In my practice, creating a space for musical exploration has been central to fostering creativity and collaboration within the band. I have found that allowing room for spontaneous and experimental music-making encouraged new ideas to emerge naturally and helped group members feel a sense of ownership over the creative process.

I made a conscious effort to ensure that everyone had the opportunity to contribute to the composition, providing extra support for those who may be less confident or hesitant to participate. Improvisation often served as the foundation for our creative work. I usually invited one person to start a jam, and the rest of us followed, allowing the music to evolve collectively. After each improvisation, we took time to debrief as a group, discussing what we experienced and exploring ideas that could be developed further.

In our sessions, there were times for free flowing with the music, other times for learning new things and even time where I would encourage them to push through challenges. For example, we had a piece of music composed in 3/4 and our drummer felt drawn to play in 4/4. It was constructive for him to work through this challenge and learn to play in 3/4. Sometimes I advised on which note or rhythm to play for a stronger cohesion in the music, sometimes the music itself carried all it needed.

Recording our sessions has also been a valuable experience, enabling us to revisit and refine musical material in later meetings. Throughout this process, I viewed myself not only as a therapist but also as a musician whose creative input was equally valuable. Balancing these two roles has allowed me to support the band's growth while contributing authentically to the shared musical journey.

Within our ensemble, rhythm served as a powerful unifying element. My role as music therapist involved remaining attentive to ways of fostering cohesion in our collective music-making. Once the group found its groove, the direction of the music became less important as the shared rhythmic experience created a strong sense of unity and emotional connection. Eye contact also played a crucial role; members closely observed each other's

movements and cues. For instance, Reg and I often moved in synchrony, could signal the start of an expressive drumming solo.

In this context, my identity as both therapist and musician was central. I sought to support others' self-expression, facilitate the creative process, and use my musical skills to help realise the band's collective vision. This process required ongoing discussion, experimentation, and repetition, through which the band's sound and sense of cohesion gradually developed. What brings joy to my heart is when I step out and can hear the cohesion in the music, when I can witness the autonomy of the band. I believe that the band has reached a level of experience and connection between members that would allow them to play on their own, without my support. All of the years practicing turn taking, songwriting, collaborating with each other and being adventurous in the music making are skills that the members have acquired and which contributed to increase the autonomy of the band members.

Conclusion

As a registered music therapist, I feel that my place has been to find the special skills where each person could shine in the music and to support the music making from there. I felt driven by intuitively creating music that gave us the best opportunity for cohesion, enabling these peak moments in the music when everyone feels connected and when the magic happens. The band survived Covid time with online sessions and a lot of songwriting to express their feelings and work through the challenges.

I have deeply enjoyed witnessing and contributing to the evolution of the band. I feel a real pride in playing with everyone and I feel our band contributes to social change as it is very rare to see disabled musicians perform in public events. The more exposure we get, the more awareness we can create on the potential of music as an expressive and therapeutic form. Music is a modality where disabled people can strive and get recognition by sharing their talents.

I asked the band members what they hoped for the future:

Michael answered "Be kind to people, talk nicely, listen with your ears, the band we watch. That's it."

Matthew said, "Play more music!"

Ina responded, "I enjoy it, more music."

Finally, Reg said "Play some more music. Just keep rocking and peace!" making the universal sign with his fingers.

Notes

All the people involved in this paper have chosen to keep their real names and to share the fruit of their work in music therapy as well as in public performances.

Before publishing this article, we discussed in clear terms that photos, videos, and text presented here would be publicly accessible. All participants gave informed consent to be publicly identified, a decision that reflects their sense of ownership, pride, and agency over the music they create. As Krüger and Murphy (2023) emphasise, acknowledging clients' rights to their creative work is not only an ethical requirement but also an opportunity to strengthen their sense of identity and authorship.

The Rocking Rainbows take great pride in sharing their musical journey. They are proud of the work they do, the music they compose, record, and perform and they value opportunities to share their talent with the wider world. As Krüger (2018) notes, the act

of public performance can be deeply validating, allowing creators to “stand out as someone worth listening to, with a voice and a story to tell” (p. 473).

The purpose of this article is to serve as a platform for the band members’ voices and perspectives, giving them rightful authorship, visibility, and agency over their own narrative. Their decision to appear publicly and to be credited for their creative work reflects a core value in community music therapy: that disabled individuals have the right to be heard, recognised, and celebrated as artists.

About the Authors

Michael: He is a drummer, he has been on TV, he is happy to be part of the Rocking Rainbows.

Matthew: He is in the band and he plays the drums, the guitar, sings and clap his hands. He feels like playing in the Rocking Rainbows.

Reg: He’s a good singer, he played the guitar, the bass. We’re missing him since he passed away.

Ina: He is playing the pātē in the band.

Sophie Sabri: Sophie Sabri is a music therapist based in Wellington, Aotearoa, New Zealand. She trained in clinical psychology in France and graduated a master’s degree in music therapy in New Zealand. She has a passion for community music therapy and believes that music should be accessible to anyone. She enjoys setting up spaces where people can unleash their creativity with freedom and where music is used to connect with others.

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