

# Songwriting strikes a chord

23-year-old class returns to campus after brief departure during COVID



Knox Williams, a student in Frank Webster's songwriting class, uses class time to work on an original song. Photo by Henry McDaniel.

Graphic by Sophie Leung-Lieu.

## Chloe Lewcock people editor

By design, McCallum's Fine Arts Academy creates an environment to induce creativity and produce both academically and artistically well-rounded students by the end of their four years. Taking this purpose to heart, Frank Webster decided reintroducing the once-popular songwriting class back into the curriculum was his mission as he began his first year of teaching at McCallum. By his second year, Webster was able to persuade administration to put the class back onto choice sheets and offer this unique introduction to writing original music.

A musician and songwriter himself, Webster understands the value of bringing the songwriting experience to aspiring young artists. "Often in the music department, unless you're doing composition or something creative, it's about how you interpret somebody else's work, how to play a song well, and just mastering your instrument," Webster said. "In songwriting, you're starting with a blank sheet of paper, which doesn't really happen in a traditional music class too often."

The class was originally developed 23 years ago at the very dawn of the Fine Arts Academy by former choir teacher Gene Raymond and English teacher Robert McArthur, for whom Webster was student teaching at the time.

"They started the program, and it was wildly successful from the very beginning," Webster said. "It was just really cool to be here at McCallum in this environment where not only were the kids creative because of the environment, but also the home environment was a creative place, and songwriting seemed like a very natural fit for what this school could do and become known for."

Despite its popularity, the class was

dissolved several years ago, long after Webster left his student teaching role.

"The songwriting class is a creative writing class," Webster said. "It's about lyric writing and things like that, and it's not necessarily about music theory. Nobody just improvises a perfect song. There's lots and lots of writing process that goes into that, and that might be a little bit different than the way a traditional music teacher might teach it."

Webster starts from the basics and works up from there to create a cohesive knowledge of songwriting. No matter the level of the student, or what their musical background is, the class provides opportunities for everyone.

"What was really important to me in the songwriting class versus all my other classes is creating a sense of community from day one, where the kids respect one another," Webster said.

Webster hopes to convey a sense of respect both in and outside the classroom.

"Throughout my experience of 30 years of hanging out with some of the greatest songwriters in the world, I've found that they always respect other songwriters, no matter where they are in the process," Webster said. "They know the struggle, how hard it is, and they know that you have to write 100 mediocre songs before you get that one."

The wide range of experience of the students in the class make the songwriting process different for each student. For sophomore Chim Becker, the class gives her more confidence in the musical world and provides insight into the industry of songwriting.

"I want to be a musician and songwriter when I grow up, and I have learned valuable skills in the class, having to do with both writing and the business side of pursuing music as a full-time career," Becker said. "It's a very open and accepting space and when we present our works. I feel very comfortable."

The class is unlike most for Becker since it gives her creative freedom to develop music while learning at the same time.

"My favorite part of the class is how flexible it is," Becker said. "We get a lot of opportunities to work independently and collaborate on different projects."

Most classes begin with an exercise that Webster creates from things he and others have found useful when writing songs.

"It's all about exercises and how you begin thinking like a songwriter," Webster said. "We might write on a theme. A lot of songwriters will have a short little phrase and use that as a springboard to build a song off of."

In addition to writing songs in the class, students must also perform them.

"In-class performances are just kind of showcases where the kids have to present where they are with their music at any particular point," Webster said.

While the class does create some temperamental moments, they are part of the greater picture of getting to be a performer with original pieces. To aid with the challenging moments and provide insight, Webster invites guest speakers to share their experiences.

"My hope is I can get guest speakers in on a Monday every two weeks," Webster said. "[I hope] whatever they say, whatever they share, can be a springboard for the next writing assignment. It's cool to hear someone who's an absolute professional."

Even for students such as senior Cash White who are already developed in the music industry, have been on tour and even

produced music of their own, the class still shows new ways of creating songs.

"I think the best part of the class is everyone expressing themselves in a unique way," White said.

White, part of the band Red River Trucking Company, takes the opportunity to try something new, something that helps both his band as a whole and him as an individual.

"Being a songwriter involves a lot of creativity, so that's awesome to see in a classroom with your peers," White said. "I prefer working alone because it allows me to express myself to the fullest extent."

As one of the music capitals of the world,

Austin is the ideal spot for blossoming artists, and Webster hopes by the end of the year students will be a step closer to diving into this community.

"In Austin, people respect songwriting, and they respect original music," Webster said.

"But I think there's a whole different level of respect when you've created everything that the audience hears. If they hear it and like it, they respect the process, respect the writing."

The reintroduced class allows Webster to help students on the journey he once had.

"There's a permanence to it in a way, as far as the experience goes that will last them their entire lives," Webster said. "I still have the songs I wrote when I was a junior in high school. They're still part of who I am. And you just don't lose it. You hold on to them."

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- songwriting teacher  
Frank Webster