



KEVIN ROTH

On Making Children's Music Interesting

Think children's music is all about purple dinosaurs and insipid ear-worm melodies? Think again, says keyboardist, dulcimerist, singer, and composer Kevin Roth, who has released more than 40 children's and adult albums on labels such as Sony, PBS, and Random House as well as his own label, My Quiet Times. Rather, Roth says, the kids' music game is won via equal parts creativity and honesty, with a healthy dose of business persistence thrown in.

Rather than digging into children's music from day one, Roth first established his name in the world of folk music. "I made my first album on the dulcimer and started to become known for playing that instrument and singing," he says. "Smithsonian Folkways was looking for a new dulcimer player to record and I came along. I was this precocious 14-year-old who was playing unusual pop repertoire at live concerts, and they took me."

His big break in the world of children's music came courtesy of a fortunate PBS gig. "I had made a handful of children's records, and my *Lullabies for Little Dreamers* album caught the ear of a producer at PBS," he says. "He hired me to sing the theme song for the show *Shining Time Station*, and it grew from there. I was lucky to catch the wave of children's music that was happening at the time, so when people like Raffi began selling lots of records, I came along and started working with Sony and Random House as well."

As a children's music composer, Roth has won awards from the American Library Association and Parent's Choice, while *Parents* magazine described one of his albums as "everything children's music should be." His current children's projects include a series of book-and-CD sets called *Tales of Wabby*. With music written on piano and recorded with voice, piano, and dulcimer, *Wabby* tells stories that captivate children and packages Roth's music in an intriguingly business-friendly form (more on that later).

Based on Roth's business and creative experience, here are some tips to help you make your own children's music—or any sort of music, for that matter.

Use unique instruments, or playing styles, to develop your signature sound. Roth was 13 when he first saw a lap dulcimer performed live, though he'd heard the sound before on Joni Mitchell's *Blue*. "It was modal and I understood it technically, based on what I'd learned about playing piano," he says. "I fell in love and it became my portable piano."

Roth started adapting Joni Mitchell tunes, as well as songs like "Over the Rainbow" and "Amazing Grace," to the new instrument the only way he knew how. "I played dulcimer like I play piano," he says. "I imagined a full piano accompaniment. Since most dulcimer playing is relatively simple, traditional repertoire, nobody had heard it played like that before. People thought I was a genius, but I just didn't know any better." [Laughs.] These days, Roth uses both instruments to create his unique sound in the studio. "I often track with dulcimer then overdub piano to sweeten everything," he says. "Piano is always in there, in one form or another."

Experiment with writing on one instrument and performing on another. "Piano is the first instrument I ever played," Roth says. "I used to come home from elementary school and just try to figure out melodies. I couldn't read or write music in traditional notation, so I used to take my mother's lipstick and write numbers on the keys—1, 2, 3, 4—and then write them on paper in order. That was my notation."

Decades later, Kevin still writes at the piano (albeit with no lipstick on the keys)—but given his fluency on both instruments, he often performs those same songs live on dulcimer, especially when pianos aren't available. "When I was young, I remember hearing McCoy Tyner play dulcimer," he adds. "He used it in a modal way. It was very inspiring." [To hear McCoy on dulcimer, check out "Mode for Dulcimer" off of his 1976 album *Focal Point*. —Ed.]

Make kids' music that parents will like. When it comes to creating music that you can sell, keep your prospective customers in mind. "Two-year-olds don't have credit cards," Roth says. "So if your music isn't tolerable to parents, they're not going to buy it for their kids. There's a lot of horrible music for kids out there that parents just can't stand."

Make kids' music that you like. "A lot of children's music sounds the same because people try to make it sound like every commercial kids' song they hear," Roth says. "I write for preschoolers, and the kids are really honest. If they don't like you, they tell you, so I try to keep everything honest and original. If it isn't amusing to me, I don't do it."

Consider using a theme. If you're having trouble getting started writing children's music, a good place to begin can be with a character, or set of characters, à la Roth's *Wabby*. A second strategy is to focus on a unifying theme rather than a fuzzy critter. Another of Roth's current projects, for example, features a combination of nursery rhyme instrumentals mixed with relaxing nature sounds. "It's hard to listen to all 22 tracks in a row," Roth says of the lullaby-branded disc. [Laughs.] "It really makes you fall asleep."

Create a physical product. "You can't autograph a download," Roth says. "Especially at live shows, people still want to buy an artist's product. That's the nice thing about children's books with CDs attached to them, like the *Tales of Wabby* series." He further asserts that CDs



Though he often plays acoustic pianos at live shows, Roth composes primarily on a Yamaha Arius digital piano at home. "It's got a nice touch, and the ability to record demos in it is really useful," he says. Though he's owned vintage, rebuilt Steinways and Baldwin acoustic grands before, Roth currently appreciates the portability—and small physical footprint—of the Arius above all else.

In addition to his acoustic piano work, Roth plays the diatonically tuned mountain dulcimer and the hammer dulcimer, bringing a distinctly pianistic aesthetic to both instruments. As the name implies, strings on the hammer dulcimer are struck rather than plucked, making it a unique "forerunner for the piano," Roth says. Like the piano, strings are grouped in sets of two or more, each group tuned to unison, to help the instrument sound with more volume. Pictured at bottom is the "guitarcimer," a more portable, custom instrument that Roth helped design for his live gigs.

remain an important tool for networking and self-promotion: "CDs are essentially the new business cards."

Play live for kids. Not only will you quickly learn what kids like and don't like, you'll also get more gigs and, hopefully, make more money. "You can get a million hits on YouTube these days and not really know if it means anything," he says. "I'm going back to what I did years and years ago—playing at libraries and schools, as well as concert halls, when budgets exist for that. It's a very down-to-earth thing to do."

Use social media with a long-term view. "When I used to make records, it was a big deal: 'Wow, he's a recording artist!'" Roth says. "Now, anybody can record anything, get a Facebook page, and in a week, be a 'star.'" The problem is, such notoriety doesn't necessarily last once the initial ego boost wears off—and Internet fame doesn't necessarily make for a solid career foundation. "Keeping a useful, visible presence on the Internet takes maintenance and stamina, and most people just don't want to put in the work after a while," he says. "If you are willing to put in the time and attention to keep things going, it can be a very useful tool for children's music and beyond." Michael Gallant



Paul Stookey of Peter, Paul, and Mary talks about Kevin Roth.

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