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Special Music by Special Kids

Michael Monagan

For about a year and a half I have been teaching songwriting in my class at Widney High School. My students are all developmentally disabled. Some have epilepsy; others, cerebral palsy, blindness, Down's syndrome, or muscular dystrophy. Nearly all of them have behavior problems.

When I first started the class, I played a song I had written, and explained its three components: structure, melody, and lyrics. I knew that much of this was not making sense to the kids, so I didn't bother it but went ahead with some creativity. I had each student sit at the piano and play three notes. This, I explained, was a melody. Then I added chords to each student's melody to show how a song is begun. Then I asked what they wanted to write a song about: What was on their minds? One student said, "I want a new car." I asked the kids for details: "What color is it? Where do you drive it? How do you take care of it?" Their responses became the lyric, and a song was born.

The class continued to write songs. If a student had an idea for a lyric, I would ask him or her to sing the phrase instead of saying it. I would then harmonize the idea on the piano, and we would go on from there. If no lyric was forthcoming, I would ask a student to sit at the piano and play a simple melody. I would then put chords to the melody. When the music was finished, I would have the kids close their eyes and tell me what images came into their minds.

In March, 1989, Rounder Records will release an album of 14 songs written by the class: "Special Music by Special Kids." The album carries endorsements from Smokey Robinson, James Garner, Leo Buscaglia, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Tiffany, and The Association of Directors of Special Education.

Needless to say, this success has the students (and their teacher) very excited. The kids have experienced a boost in self-esteem and a feeling of accomplishment all too rare in their lives.

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Appropriate Educational Policies

Based on an understanding of the learning difficulties resulting from mental handicaps, we present the following recommendations for policies to facilitate the normalization of persons who are mentally handicapped.

Integrate students with mental handicaps with their nonhandicapped peers. Students with mental handicaps placed in integrated regular school