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Arkansas songwriting camp uses music to teach girls about art, leadership, confidence

by Sean Clancy | July 17, 2018 at 4:30 a.m.

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Trust Tree songwriting and recording camp participant Samiyah Hervey of Little Rock sings while playing drums during a recording session at Capitol View Studio. - Photo by John Sykes Jr.

One of the newest bands in Little Rock is a drum-and-bass duo of 'tween girls called Wakky Babies.

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It's late June, and though the Wakky Babies formed just a few days ago and had never played bass or drums before, they're already laying down a track in the studio, an original composition about the joys of being outdoors rather than sitting inside watching TV.

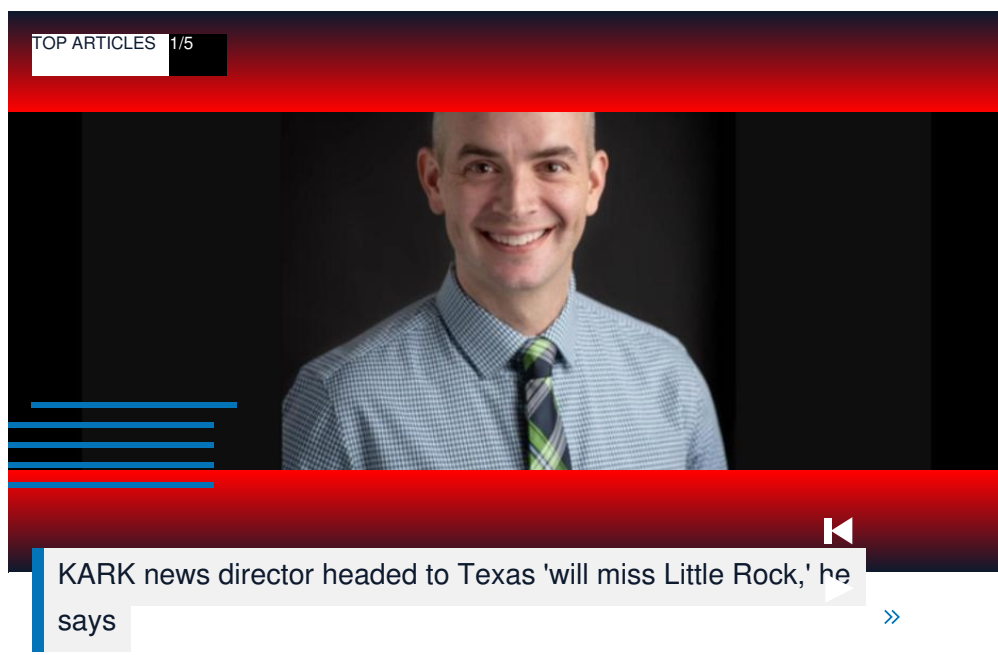
"Why don't you go outside/in the nice weather," sings 11-year-old Beatrice Robinson, plucking a string on her bass while 12-year-old Samiyah Hervey keeps time behind the drum kit.

They haven't yet settled on a title.

CAMP LIFE

The pair are in the middle of a recording session at Capitol View Studio in Little Rock as part of a summer songwriting and recording day camp for girls ages 9 to 15 organized by the nonprofit group Trust Tree Arts & Leadership Programs.

"I've been to a lot of camps, trust me," says Beatrice, her face curtained by long, multi-hued hair. "This is the first one that I actually felt like I'm not weird. Maybe I am, but here I feel like I'm not an outcast. At all my other camps, I was the weird, tree-hugging dirt-worshipper. This is my favorite."



Samiyah agrees.

"The camp is amazing," she says during a break in recording. "This is the first camp I've ever been to, and so far it's been good. I want to keep playing drums."

Samiyah and Beatrice are among the eight girls attending the two-week camp, learning how to play instruments, write songs and record. Guiding them are Trust Tree instructors and musicians Corene Spero, Jordan Wolf and Melanie Castellano, bandmates in Little Rock group DOT.

New York native Spero founded Trust Tree last year to "offer arts and leadership programs to girls in the Little Rock area," she says as Sam and Bea have a quick lunch. "I say arts and leadership programs because this camp is as much about leadership, teamwork and communication as it is about music. As they're working on their songs they're also working together on problem solving, time management, team building and working through differences."

Vernita Greene, Samiyah's aunt, says the Trust Tree songwriting and recording camp has been a good experience for her niece: "She was so excited. She just opened up. She's real quiet, but every day I picked her up she had such a big smile on her face. She was so happy and told me how much she enjoyed it."

The camp got off the ground last year, with a group of girls gathering each day for a week at Spero's home to learn songwriting. This year, the offerings have expanded, with three weeks of camps and an upgraded location.

Last month, the girls rehearsed at the spacious Center for Humanities and the Arts at University of Arkansas Pulaski Technical College in North Little Rock and then recorded their songs with

producer/engineer Mark Colbert at Capitol View before a June 30 performance brought the two-week camp to a close.

Having the camp at the arts center is a big step up from last year, Castellano says. There are several practice rooms equipped with pianos and other equipment, and there's more space for the girls to play and rehearse.

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There's also a variety of instruments to choose from, some of which were donated. The campers got to choose what they wanted to play when camp began.

"We didn't have anyone tackle the acoustic guitar this year," Castellano says. "Last year, that's what [a camper] played, but then we had this smaller, electric guitar made for women. She got super excited about that, and that's what she's playing in her band now."

Samiyah says the drums beckoned.

"When I got there, we were looking at the different instruments and I started playing drums, and I really liked them," she says.

Beatrice says she was drawn to the bass: "Bass is kind of like a heavy object, and most of the kids in the camp are playing ukulele and small instruments, so I thought that maybe I could play a really heavy instrument that boys usually play."

Spero says all of the girls involved in the camp, which cost \$600, received full or partial scholarships, which were paid for through fundraisers and donations from the Arkansas Music & Arts Foundation, Acansa and others.

A one-week camp, minus the recording component, is scheduled for Monday-July 27, although Spero says all available spots are filled.

NORTHERN EXPOSURE

Spero, who has degree in women's studies from Oberlin College in Ohio and who studied audio engineering and production at the Institute for Audio Research, has been playing in bands, writing songs and recording music for more than two decades.

With her friends Robyn Goodmark and Julie Potash Slavin she was a member of Northern State, a female hip-hop/indie trio that formed on Long Island, N.Y., in the early 2000s. The group recorded three albums, including *Can I Keep This Pen* for Ipecac Records and *All City* for Columbia Records and worked with, among others, producer Chuck Brody and Beastie Boy Ad-Rock.

On the Southern leg of Northern State's final U.S. tour, she befriended Little Rock-based opening band American Princes. Through that friendship, she started visiting Little Rock in 2009 to record songs for her self-titled solo project with members of that group and moved here in 2010.

"I moved down here for music, and to become a part of this musical community," she says. "I love it."

She also brought a desire to help the next generation of female musicians.

"I think it's important on a lot of levels," she says. "It's important that they try new experiences and surprise themselves with what they are able to accomplish. That builds confidence, that builds self esteem and that's transferable to a world of other endeavors that they might undertake in their futures, whether music related or not."

But Spero adds that there's another motivation for her and her friends to help girls learn how to make music.

"Deep down, the real impetus for starting the camp is that we want -- especially in today's political and cultural climate -- to make it very clear to young girls that their thoughts and their creativity and their opinions matter, and that they are not on this earth to be ornaments," she says.

"Unfortunately it's still a revolutionary act in 2018 to teach a girl that what is in her brain and in her heart matters just as much as what's on the outside. In fact, it matters more."

In a room at the Center for Humanities and the Arts at Pulaski Tech, ukuleles are being strummed and piano keys are being plinked as a somewhat tentative chorus of voices sing, "It's a big, big world/and I just wanna have fun."

The song, "It's a Big, Big World," was written by the campers with help from Dazzmin Murry and Kabrelyn Boyce of local band Dazz & Brie.

Castellano, playing a white, unplugged electric ukulele, is helping Aubrey Stevenson, Anna Ward and Ruby Duzan with the chords to the song.

"At least we know how to play it now," says Castellano, a special education teacher at Little Rock's Parkview Arts and Science Magnet High School. "We'll have to work on the singing part."

Nine-year-old Aubrey says Trust Tree camp was her first experience at songwriting or learning an instrument.

"I hadn't played anything, really," she says, but now she has written her first song, "Daydreaming."

Campers Ruby Duzan, Audrey Lowe and Hannah Terry are veterans, having participated last year. They also make up the band H.A.R.D. Rhythm, who are practicing original songs for their recording session, scheduled for the next day.

"It's been an amazing experience to be here and be with these amazing people teaching us how to play and write songs," says 11-year-old Audrey.

Along with Dazz & Brie, other local musicians helping with the camps are Keesha Bass, Brie Conrad and Hope Findlay. Spero's Northern State bandmate Goodmark, the author of *Girls Rock: How to Get Your Group Together and Make Some Noise*, is also contributing.

FOR ART'S SAKE

Wolf, the other DOT member and an art teacher at Horace Mann Arts and Science Magnet Middle School in Little Rock, works with the girls on visual arts.

"We looked through their camp notebooks and looked for things that they could explore visually," she says at the Pulaski Tech campus. "We made sketchbooks and we did a bookmaking lesson. We are doing a sewing project for a banner for the show and they're working on collages based on themes from their camp notebooks."

With DOT one of only a few local all-female bands, Wolf says she would like to see a time when that isn't such a novelty.

"When we play with other women, it's always something that we notice. It would be ideal if it weren't so noticeable, if it were just part of the norm," she says. "I think getting girls on board early to learn an instrument, to feel confident not only in what they play musically but to be confident about sharing their thoughts and ideas, and accepting other girls and celebrating themselves, I think will really help them grow into confident and supportive young women."

Spero aims for Trust Tree to continue growing, with more camps and new programs.

"We plan to start year-round programming this fall," she says. "We definitely have a huge emphasis on music and the arts, but I do have a vision to expand into some programs that are focused more on leadership -- possibly even separate from the arts -- community service, things of that nature, those are still being developed and fleshed out."



Photo by John Sykes Jr.
Audrey Lowe (right) is in full guitar hero mode as her H.A.R.D. Rhythm bandmate Hannah Terry plays drums.



Photo by John Sykes Jr.
© Gene Sparto Gets Beatrice Robinson with her bass strap.

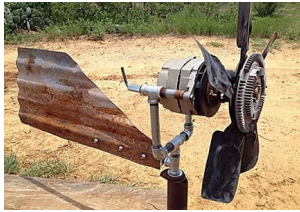
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