“Beat That”: A multisensory experience of music
by Neil Jourdan

Beat That is a rhythm based programme which uses resonance boards to provide students with a multisensory experience of music. It was originally developed by Bobbie Stormont and Hilary Wainer (co-creators of the multi-sensory programme ‘TacPac’) to encourage teachers and staff, no matter what their musical background, to make music with their students with special needs. Unlike TacPac there is no ‘set’ programme, accompanying CD’s or specific way to run the session. Instead Beat That provides a framework whereby people of any age or ability can listen, feel, compose and create music spontaneously, both individually and within a relaxed group atmosphere. It primarily focusses on the use of clapping and ‘drumming’ on resonance boards; chanting and call-and-response; imitating those sounds that the students offer as well as creating silence.

In 1999, Megan Conroy, the then music teacher at the Wilson School and currently working at Parkside School, invited Bobbie Stormont to present a workshop on Beat That. Through this successful workshop many involved in special needs were introduced to the idea of making music with their students.

When I joined the therapy team at Parkside School (South Auckland) it was to focus on those students with high needs who attend our base school. Megan had historically worked with all the students in the school, those at the base and those scattered throughout our 11 satellite classes. By default I ‘inherited’ the group music sessions which were already established, one of which was Beat That. The programme was offered to those students with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD). I had never heard of Beat That but being a passionate percussionist the programme naturally resonated with me.

Initially I was unsure as to my role as a music therapist in a programme which was historically conceived and designed to be effectively implemented by any and all staff members. Despite these misgivings I immersed myself in the programme and set out to find as much information about Beat That as I could. Many of Beat That’s fundamental concepts and principals were familiar to me as a music therapist, for example:

- Giving the experience of non-competitive music making
- Giving the experience of creatively improvising in the moment
- Providing a sense of how an atmosphere of freedom in music can be beneficial to everyone in that environment, whether they are active listeners or passive participants
- Emphasising the silence between the sounds
- ‘Making’ music together
- Having fun!

Using the basic structure of Beat That I began redesigning the sessions so as to include a wider variety of musical experiences. Rather than focussing exclusively on the chanting and rhythmic tapping on the boards I wanted incorporate more complex rhythmic experiences; provide the students with the opportunity to experience different instruments (such as the Hang; Udu drum; Kalimba; Darbuka Drum) as well as an increase in the use of song (acapella and instrumental accompaniment). I also spent time with the staff group explaining what we were doing, why we were doing things in certain ways and provided a theoretical framework for them to understand the session in greater detail.
I currently run one Beat That programme in a class of five PMLD students. The session runs for approximately 50 minutes. Each student has a ‘Beat That Buddy’ who taps out the rhythms on the board while I lead the music. Sessions typically begin with a greeting song which is then followed by a name chant. When students are individually addressed (throughout the session) their ‘Buddy’ will touch them or gently beat directly on their body. Songs with rhythmic accompaniment; improvised percussive pieces; experiential instrumental pieces and known songs (such as “You are my Sunshine”) form the basis for the rest of the session. We then conclude with the goodbye song.

Between each piece of music there is a period of silence which is referred to as “Fruitful Silence”. The silence frames the sounds and music, it creates a ‘background’ against which the music can be contrasted. “Fruitful Silence” is crucial to the ‘Beat That’ session as it provides the students with an opportunity to respond to the music. Within the silence the student’s responses are acknowledged and highlighted. The ‘Buddy’ is encouraged to engage with the students during these periods, incorporating principles from Intensive Interaction. In addition the ‘Buddy’ records the student’s behaviour following each piece. This may include the student’s movements, vocalisations, eye contact, facial expressions and overall demeanour. At the end of the year I review each of the students’ session notes, look for themes and trends and compile a report based on the team’s collective observations.

Beat That allows the team working with these students an opportunity to engage with them in an alternate way. It provides an additional forum for the team to listen to the students and begin to learn their subtle language. An example of this is one student who began raising her hands and clasping them in front of her face following each song. This was observed and recorded in the session notes. We subsequently realised that this was her sign for ‘more’ and have effectively used it in other areas of her daily school life. It is been included in her gesture dictionary.

‘Beat That’ has been an effective way to include this class of complex needs students in a group session where each individual’s contribution can be acknowledged and celebrated. It has been an exciting journey for all involved and rewarding as we have been witness to the students continued growth. It has provided us with the opportunity to truly BE with our students in a mutually enjoyable and beneficial group experience.

It is encouraging that there appears to be a renewed interest in Beat That and that music therapists are beginning to explore this approach as an additional music therapy session that they can offer those students they work with. Helen McGann has been running two Beat That sessions at Kaka Street Special School in Tauranga for over a year now. She writes:

"We have found it is not just the music that has been most powerful, it is the extended period of silence in between the music. Our staff closely observe one student throughout the session and their reactions and responses. We have vocalisations, smiles, excitement, movement, interactions between students and other lovely responses."

Helen and I have been fortunate to share ideas, songs and approaches with one another so as to further develop our sessions and are delighted that the ETPP has invited us to present a workshop on Beat That at next year’s Professional Development weekend. We hope to see you all there!