

## James Humberstone – ‘Changing Your Tune On Music’

**Moderator:** Welcome to the podcast series of *Raising The Bar Sydney*. Raising The Bar in 2016 saw 20 University of Sydney academics take their research out of the lecture theatre and into 20 bars across Sydney; all on one night. In this podcast you will here James Humberstone's talk *Changing Your Tune on Music*. Enjoy the talk.

**James Humberstone:** Thank you, thank you. Hello everybody. This is exciting, isn't it? I have a prop. Girls are taught to see Shakespearean heroines such as Cleopatra as positive roles models to supplant social media superstars such as Kim Kardashian in a program being launched at a London secondary school. Jane Lunnon, head teacher of Wimbledon High School said she devised the program after discovering that many pupils at the £17,000 a year independent school (that's 27 Australian grand) named Kardashian and singer Taylor Swift as their role models. Students will be given classes introducing them to Shakespearean female characters such as Cleopatra, Viola from *Twelfth Night* and Beatrice from *Much Ado About Nothing*, given a contemporary makeover.

"My school is full of really aspirational, delightful young women, but they are just as likely to cite Taylor Swift or Kim Kardashian as a role model as Malala or Michelle Obama, in fact, slightly more likely and quite passionately defend them as being great business women. It's well documented that there is a porosity of female role models who are speaking to the girls at the moment, certainly in western society. It made me think, where else can we look for them?"

*(Taylor Swift - Singing)*

Welcome, intelligentsia of Cleveland Street to Venue 505 on Old School Funk and Groove Night. I came to this a month ago thinking, "I'll just check out what it's like at 6:30 before the show goes off, so I can get a bit of a feel." I've been to lots of gigs here over the years. It's one of my favourite venues in Sydney. I rocked up here and it was 6:30 and it was me and Cameron and a friend who I'd brought with me and got to 7:30 and there was still no one else. Thinking, "Man, it's going to be a really quiet gig, I don't need to do much prep for that," but here you all are, so thank you so much for coming. I think this is maybe a little bit of an easy gig for me, the so-called provocateur of the Music Education Unit at the Con, because I think I've probably got a fairly safe crowd. If you're here at Venue 505 and you're sticking around to hear the funk, if you're here actually, here at Venue 505 and you're not sticking around to hear the funk, seriously, you need your head sorted, because it's really, really cool.

I think, just with the message that I wanted to talk about tonight, funk is like the perfect background to the ideas that I wanted to share, because it's such a fusion genre itself and such an influential genre. Knowing that you're here, supposedly being educated by me for half an hour, then you're probably fairly open minded people and I'm probably not going to be massively provoking to any of you amazing people, but you know, at the worst case, let's say I just give you maybe a few citations to back up what you already think. Next time you are at a dinner party and going on a rant you can say, "I know this, because that dude from the Sydney Con said it."

This is just to help you. At Raising The Bar you're not allowed to have a slideshow because it's at a bar and I was already breaking a rule because I said, "I want to do some music and some DJ stuff." They said, "Oh, okay, yeah, you can do a bit of that." You're not allowed slides, but they didn't say you can't have audience prompts. You know, because lectures generally are really hilarious, peppered with dad jokes and all that kind of stuff. No, I'm not actually going to ask you to laugh, but I am going to make some passionate calls for advocacy for quality music education for every child and for us to understand the sophistication of young people's cultures and embed them in education. So I will need that.

The other thing I thought was, maybe because this is like a little bit of an easy gig, because you guys are all going to be so amazing and intelligent and accepting of the ideas that I'm going to throw up, is that I should make sure this is a proper Uni lecture. The idea is that I'm teaching you some of the content that I give in my lectures at Sydney Con, so I am citing the hell out of this talk. You're going to hear some strange names and years the whole way through it, and so you need to respond appropriately. That's very good, because I was thinking, "How are they going to do intellectual law?" Just in case you didn't know, I had an "Ooh" for you and a little parentheses to remind you why you're oohing. That's very good, thanks very much. Okay, so we can get going now.

All right, just before I start on my rant, let's just see whether this idea that I've got is correct. My idea is that, as well as being extremely well educated, debonair, attractive, yada, yada, yada, people that you are, that probably a lot of you actually are musically educated. That's my guess. When I say musically educated I don't mean that for a couple of years at high school you sat there and learned some Deep Purple chords, okay? I mean something else, like you actually learned an instrument with a teacher or you did enough to like play in a band or sing in a choir or DJ down the local pub. Can I have a show of hands for anyone who's had that level or higher of musical education? Yeah, see, so that's about three quarters of you. God this is the easiest gig I've ever had. Fantastic.

All right, but there is a problem, there is a problem with all those people who put their hands up, and you can feel smug if you didn't put your hand up now, because the problem is that you're not normal, you are not normal, that's one of the key things that I teach as a ... I have a whole third year course that I could just rename, You Are Not Normal. It's actually called, Junior Secondary Music Education, which is way more dull. I call it, You Are Not Normal. The reason is, because all those amazing students that I get at the Con, they've done their 10,000 hours on their instrument, right, they're really super, super good and they've then not only been really good enough to do music the whole way through high school, but actually they've passed that entrance exam at the Con which is a little bit stressful, and here they are now preparing to become music educators but they're not normal because most people don't get that far, most people don't actually engage with music education. Yes, I will be throwing citations at you any second now.

What happens is that their model for music education, the successful one which involves probably reading traditional notation, probably in a western art music tradition, is then the one that they think they should be then delivering to the next generation, which is actually a problem. The reason that that's a problem is because we totally fail to deliver in music education in this country.

Actually, if you go and have a look at the syllabuses in every single state, we've mandated music for all children until they get to Year 9, in every single state. Isn't that fantastic? It's mandated, but it turns out that in 63% of Australian primary schools there is absolutely no classroom music taught by a qualified music teacher (*Petrova 2012*). That's shocking isn't it, and of that 63%, 88% of that teaching is happening in independent schools and only 23% happening in public schools, so that means that less than a quarter of Australians children in public schools actually get any kind of qualified music education.

Primary school classroom teachers, when you're training to be a primary school classroom teacher, you know, we could train them up to be music teachers and to deliver really, really good music education, but we give them on average between ten and 17 hours across a four year degree of music training. (*Hocking 2013*). You're very good, aren't you? It's a bit crap really. Naturally, we advocate for proper music education in primary schools. Lord Richard Gill, as I call him, has been out there doing a lot of work trying to actually improve the state of that at the moment. That would of course raise the standard of and participation in high schools (*Pascoe et al 2005*). When we finally get them in Year 7 and 8 where we do have a much closer to 100% number of qualified specialist music teachers to get these kids, they haven't had any kind of exposure generally to good music education and that's where the vicious circle kicks in.

If we actually go and look at the literature, and there's a lot of it out there, if we look at, funnily enough, 13, 14, 15, 16 year olds report that they love music. What percentage report that they love music; 100% in all of the papers, and I mean it (*Volpelleres and Hargreaves 2001*); (*Northen 2000*); (*Roberts, Hendrickson and Infer 2004*); (*Zillman and Gan 1997*) and of those 100% who love music, how many of them actually stick with it through high school - 7%, so we're dropping 93% of kids.

Now, I'm not here for a second, saying, every single kid should study music the whole way through high school that would be mental. Every school kid should report that they love music, and according to music class as opposed to music itself, and according to (*The Data King 2004*), (*10:17 McQueen 2011*), and (*Humberstone 2014*), get my Google ratings up by citing myself, correct, thank you for that one. That's how we get that problem, so we end up with this vicious cycle. There's five citations here I can't be bothered to read.

'To have a positive impact on disaffected and at risk young people, the musical activities need to be in a genre with which they can relate' (*Hallam 2015*). What does that actually mean? Well, I'm going to come to that, and you're going to imagine, that's where TayTay's going to come in, right? First, I do want to establish, just for maybe a few of you are kind of going, "Well, you know, really, we've got NAPLAN, we should be really worried about numeracy and literacy. What is the value of actually teaching kids quality music education?" It's super important we get this right. There's a great book, I mentioned Susan Hallam before, she's a professor at University College London in the UK, she has an MBE, she just published a book called *Power Of Music*, and if you Google '*Power Of Music PDF*' you can download a free copy of it because it was funded by a music education group over there in the UK and what she's done is she's done this research synthesis of all of the research around music and learning.

It's really important for me to state at this point that this is not about the Mozart affect, because as soon as you start reading this stuff it's really easy to jump to that, if we all listened to Mozart we'd all be cleverer. That's been debunked quite a long time ago, but there are very, very specific things that research shows us and more than one study, so we've actually got patterns now that we can synthesise. Establishing causality is problematic but we can point out when we can establish it and when we can't. I think it is important to review this because if we're not providing this, if 23% of our children get this in the public system, then we need to know what they're missing out on.

So what are they missing out on? I'm going to quote from her book. 'Increased listening and oral perception skills including the faster learning of language and auditory memory. Children with musical training have significantly better verbal learning and retention abilities, improved spatial reasoning, especially for children who have musical training early in life and with a focus on rhythm.' I love this next bullet point because it just goes through a bunch of different kind of surveys with these different kinds of behaviour and self personality stuff, so here we go: 'Better attention, self regulation, executive functioning behaviour, self efficacy, self esteem, self concept, self belief, mood, reduced anger, increased motivation, and heightened aspirations.' That's all right; we should do a bit of that, shouldn't we?

'Enhanced creativity, again, not a causal relationship, but the evidence from correlation studies suggests that children who experience musical training have advantages across all school subjects, except sport'. Just saying! After general intelligence is controlled for. It goes on, I'm not going to read all of that out because I want to get back to playing Taylor. What can we do? At the moment we're failing students in the primary system, we need to fix that, we need to actually hammer on the table and demand that governments, since they've written this in their syllabus, "You're supposed to be teaching all children this," it's there, the schools are supposed ... the teachers don't exist, so we need to actually ask our State governments to provide the training and to provide the teachers to do that, and we know that that's going to be good for our children. Okay, so, tick, easy.

What about this problem with secondary schools? I have a super interesting interview that I did about this with Lord Richard Gill in a MOOC that I released recently, that stands for Massively Open Online Course, which is like free Uni learning you can do, so if you're interested in learning more about this then there's five weeks of it online. What can we do to actually engage with students' love of music in the teenage years? That's the big question. Ethan Hein, 2013, wrote, 'We must ask why so many young people are so alienated by their music education experience. And the answer? Classroom music is alien.' The Music Academy continually laments students lack of interest in legitimate art music and their preference for supposedly vacuous pop. From the students' perspective however, there are valid reasons to find it difficult to connect to the music that they encounter in most classrooms.

This is why I love that I'm speaking at a funk night, we're actually talking about, we're here for a night where we're going to have this music which comes from a fusion of things like soul and jazz and rhythm and blues, and it influences so many different genres nowadays, whether it's like west coast funk rock or whether it's funk of the more uptown kind. Oh man, that was a dad joke!

All right, but there are problems because of the vicious cycle and the fact that most of us, including me, I'm not normal either, have had kind of like a western art music approach to our music education.

Let's get back to the TayTay and Kim issue. This is really embarrassing to have to go and buy this newspaper just as a prop this morning. I do not read *The Express*, just so you know. All right, Mrs Lunnon, Headmistress of Wimbledon Private School said 'She had nothing against Taylor Swift or Kim Kardashian, but that she wondered if their existence (existence is misspelled, I just want to mention that), whether their existence as a role model' "Is a lot to do with inches, either column or physical." Come on, boo that, come on. She went on to say, "I would like the pool to be a bit wider and have role models who are speaking not just by the size of their diamonds." She goes on to suggest that students speech should be studying Cleopatra. We'll come back to that when I get to the heavy reading for the last quote. The Elle commentary is really, really good.

All right, so, we're going to have to work out then, aren't we, how to find out what the sophistication is, in "vacuous pop". If it's vacuous, how can it be sophisticated? Or is the problem that we're considering these women as vacuous because they're associated with a vacuous art form? I don't think so. I think that our job is to actually understand the sophistication in those music's and to accept it. Here's the French DJ, Madeon, remixing some of his own songs and some others on the BBC.

*(DJ Madeon - Singing)*

If you don't find that exciting, you might be thinking, "Okay, we've just had two minutes, one minute of pop rubbish," I'm going to leave the second minute playing behind it. If you actually analyse that through our western art music lens, we discover parallel modulation from A flat Aeoli into A flat Phrygian and back, then to D minor, several transposed samples to match those modes, three accelerandi, two metric modulations, further tonal transposition, and that's just the harmonic and rhythmic construct over which dozens of production techniques such as filters, EQing, delays, choruses and reverbs are performed live. Now I love the story of Madeon because Madeon hated classroom music and Madeon just generally actually hated most of what happened at school, but he taught himself to do electronic music programming and he uploaded some of his stuff to YouTube and it went viral, and by the age of 19 he was producing for Lady Gaga - I believe that's how you pronounce her name. Joking! I'm not that bad. Oh! That's good.

He also was busy doing stuff like teaching himself to speak English, because he was going to need to be able to go and promote his work around America and other English speaking countries. Amazing! When I made my MOOC ... I don't have time to tell all these amazing stories from the MOOC that I've got written down here because I'm looking at my clock, but there's some fantastic stories, if you want to hear some more examples of this, including the Australian DJ who I did a few interviews with, Francis Xavier, amazing guy, owns a record label in Sydney still. He was one of the synth players in Infusion. Some of you who were fans of the electronic scene in the 1990s and early 2000s might remember their stuff. He was telling me his stories, which included the day that he was ... he loved music and he wanted to learn to play the piano and he was learning at the local convent.

So there's the day when the nun from the local convent actually walks from the convent to his house before his music lesson to knock on the door and tell his parents to stop wasting money. And then he drops out of high school music because his form of music that he was interested in, synthesizer pop, wasn't valued in the classroom, and people laughed at him and he got bullied and so he went to Uni and studied doing engineering which he didn't really like, but he did enjoy building synthesizers and fixing them in his spare time.

So on weekends he's fixing synthesizers in a synths shop in the city and some guys come in and say, "Can you fix our synth?" He does a bit of soldering and fixes it. Anyway, long story short, he ends up having a jam with them the following weekend and they write a whole load of new tracks, these guys he'd just met. They say to him, "We've actually got another gig in Sydney." They were down in Wollongong. "We've got another gig in Sydney this weekend. You live up there, why don't you play with us?" He's like, "Yeah, okay, I'll play. Where is it? What do I have to do? What do I need to bring?" They're like, "Yeah, it's a bit of a bummer actually this one, because we're not on till six but we've got a sound check that morning at like ten or something, so, sorry, if you don't want to do it it's okay." He was like, "Yeah, what is it? Where is it?" They're like, "Well, it's the Big Day Out." That's the first time he performed in public, absolutely incredible story.

What do I mean about production? Just for those of you who've got the kind of background that I do, and I'm not going to pretend for a second to be an expert in this, most of the composition that I do nowadays, well no, always, is writing dots on a score, all the kind of proper traditional stuff! Because I consider it my responsibility to understand all music and to find the sophistication in all music, I've spent a lot of time studying sound design and things like that and work collaborating with people who are actually expert in this. So I'm just going to program a simple beat here. That's just what we call a four to the floor. Use that terminology there, make yourself sound really hip going to the pub, "Oh, listen to that four to the floor."

This is just the base drum at the moment; it's a 909 base drum sample. What I can do is, if I go in here I can just muck around with the compression and maybe the pitch and, see, you can already hear hopefully some little changes happening in that. We'll put a back beat on with just a 909 snare, and again, I can muck around with pitch, I can muck around with compression, I can muck around with a bit of filtering to really tune that and make that pop a little bit, and then we need the ubiquitous off beat high hat, so add that, and of course we need to filter that with a little bit of coming out of the swimming pool there with a low pass filter. I can turn off all those effects and we can just go to straight, or I can go back to the automation that I just recorded.

Okay, so the basic idea is that you're not just thinking about the overall drum beat, which maybe we do when we're training music, we think of a bar and notes and a phrase and we play them, but you're actually thinking about exactly how much you want to change the individual sound of an instrument to fit that space, but also how you're going to then perform those changes to that sound. I found out five minutes before I did this talk that there's an Emmy Award winning producer in the room, so he's probably just going to try and have me sacked from the University of Sydney now for that extremely simplistic explanation but that just gives you an idea, like even that, how much sophistication there is there on the understanding of sound.

Extremely important work done by an ex-Sydneysider, Alexis Callao, 2016, is on censorship of music in music education, and one of the most censored musics, and what she proves is that teachers self censor, they censor their own music, is Hip Hop. I've been lucky enough, the way I decided to challenge my own lack of understanding about hip hop was to actually get together and work with Luka Lesson, who is a spoken word artist, he's won the Australian Poetry Slam back in 2012, I think, great Hip Hop performer. I've had him in at the Con recently where we actually put an album together with students. He did guest writing, we brought in his producer from Florida, and performed a live show too. Here's a little bit of it.

*(Luka Lesson - Singing)*

This was all recorded at the Con, and as I say, we premiered it as a live show as well. The show has been picked up really, really well, in fact, I just returned from a week in Melbourne where members of the Melbourne symphony orchestra are looking at actually putting on a show down there. It's been a really amazing eye opener for me to be an orchestrator working on that kind of music, but also teaching myself a lot about the subtleties and sophistications of that music at the same time. However, you might be thinking, "You know, some of these genres, I just don't like them." You don't have to like them, you just have to know about them, you just have to value them as musical cultures. For instance, if we take that really boring four to the floor beat that I made before, maybe if you're a funk group, maybe you're like, "Really? Electronics? Can we have that with acoustic drums please?" I'll say, "Yeah, yeah, I can do that. I can change samples."

See what I did there. All right, and then you go, "Yeah, but listen to that boring doof, we don't really like that." I can say, "Yeah, it's all right, I can change that too. We'll just syncopate that bass line a little bit for you. We'll just syncopate that a little bit more. What's that? You don't like the offbeat high hat there? Okay, we'll just put that on the one. What's that? Oh, you want a little bit more syncopation in the bass drum and some hand claps? Okay, yeah, we can do that. Is this funky enough for you now?" It's maybe little bit slow for funk, maybe you should just speed it up and make it a bit more popstastic, I don't know.

*(Taylor Swift – Singing)*

That's enough of that. Right. Actually, this is really well written, I completely love this. This is the critique of the Headmistress's thoughts about TayTay in Elle, 'You only have to look at plays such as Macbeth, Hamlet, and The Taming Of The Shrew, to see Shakespeare's women are often depicted as weak, deceptive, submissive, and often cruelly are also often secondary characters to men. When women are displayed as independent, strong or virtuous, in the cases of Hamlet's Ophelia, Juliet, Capulet, or Lady Macbeth, they often end up being sexualised, killed as a result of lost innocence, raped, depicted as witty but unmarryable, have their tongues cut out, reduced to the archetypal femme fatale, or wrongly accused of adultery.' There's a little bit of a debunk of the Shakespeare idea, and I like Shakespeare and I don't spend a lot of time listening to Taylor Swift, but you get the point I'm making, it's this same disconnect between the cultures of our children, like they're not legitimate, and the cultures of the establishment.

I propose that we actually find these role models for young women, as in this case, in successful, young, brilliant women around the world. The headmistress mentioned a couple herself, Malala, she mentioned Michelle Obama. I've got another one for her, I'm going to suggest, Taylor Swift. Why am I going to suggest Taylor Swift? Taylor Swift has writer's credits on every single one of her albums, she's a completely self-made musician. At the age of 26, which is how old she is now, she is the highest paid celebrity in the world. That compares to film stars, etc, whatever you like. She's scored 22 top 40 singles in the 2000s. No other female artist came close. All the more remarkable since she didn't chart before 2006 when she was 16. She's a ten time Grammy winner, and this is my favourite, she's the first artist since The Beatles, and the only female artist in history, to log six or more weeks of number one with three consecutive studio albums. I reckon she's a pretty amazing role model for young women.

My students are used to me giving these kind of rants about the importance of this stuff. It's quite hard to bring a lot of it together in 30 minutes, but I hope some it made some sense, and I hope that you, the intelligentsia of Cleveland Street, will take it out there. Please do tell your local MPs that our children in our primary schools, especially our public schools, do need funding for properly trained music teachers to give them everything that we know music education can give young children. We need to demand quality and relevant music education as a bare minimum.

For those of use who are actually in the profession, we need to be super open minded, super pluralist, and understand sophistication in all musics. I know that you're going to have no problems doing that because you were very, very good at saying "Ooh" when that said you had to say "Ooh", but also because you're here, and if you're here you already know why music is so fundamental to being human.

**Moderator:** Thank you for listening to the podcast series of *Raising The Bar Sydney*. If you want to hear more Raising the Bar talks, head to [raisingthebarsydney.com.au](http://raisingthebarsydney.com.au).

**End of Recording.**