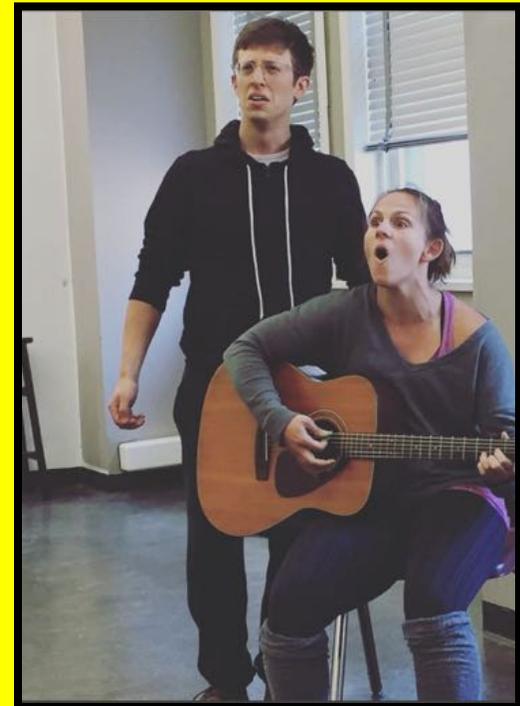


# **TWISTING THE FAMILIAR: How to Devise a Musical with Lightning Rod Special and Alex Bechtel**

Lightning Rod Special has been collaborating with composer Alex Bechtel on the creation of a new, ensemble-devised musical called “Unformed Consent” about the state of the abortion debate in America. Whereas Alex has expertise in writing music, his process is generally a solitary one. Lightning Rod Special’s creation methods are all-hands-on-deck but generally text- or body-based and never involved writing music. A shared interest, however, is in innovation and never resting on the laurels of what has worked before. Our goals in this exchange were twofold: first, that each of us (Alex and LRS) would be stretched beyond our creative comfort zones and second, that we would come out the other side with a toolkit for making music as an ensemble.

Over several weeks of development in 2017, we tried many different methods for approaching group-writing. By taking techniques and tools that each of us use in our separate practices, bending and reshaping them into something wholly new, we came up with a series of exercises that resulted in the creation of several songs for “Unformed Consent.” On top of that, we were able to find a process that could be distilled into a communicable workshop format. Herein you’ll find a teaching guide for that workshop.



Alia here!  
I'll be popping in with  
extra bits of info here  
and there....

From the first songwriting  
workshop we did. Katie &  
Mason wrote a song <sup>as Mason</sup> called  
“Death, Dying, NO!” We hadn't  
really done much songwriting yet,  
and those were the only words  
to that song!

This workshop is all about backdoor or roundabout approaches to generation of music. Given that most of us in Lightning Rod Special are not songwriters, we were looking for ways we could use the skills we do have--physical technique, improvisational writing, character building--as alternate points of entry to music writing. We wanted to surprise ourselves into songwriting. As such, our process begins far from pen and paper. It begins instead with the body.



## SEE IT/HEAR IT

First, select a mover and a player.

In this exercise, the mover will respond in real time to music only they are hearing through headphones. When they are finished, a player will improvise a musical reflection of their movement.

Choose a song in the three-minute range with some interesting dynamics, maybe it begins soft and melodic but increases in tempo and ends with loud crashing cacophony. Maybe it has a slow, pulsing rhythm and incongruous lyrics. The mover and, most importantly, the player should not know what the song is beforehand. It's important that the movers free themselves from the constraints of "social dance." They are not here to show us their best moves. Instead, they are trying to communicate to the player and to the audience, the soul of the music they are hearing, to get us to see what they are hearing.

*\* If you can  
videotape the  
dances and the  
songs for later  
reference.\**

When the mover has finished, the player will have an equal amount of time to respond. In this exercise, the player is trying to transpose the mover's "dance" into music. A player does not need deep musical experience to respond-- a piano, for example, can create many sounds beyond melodies with the keys. Observation and imagination are most important here. If the mover's dance was frequently punctuated by a flurry of high kicks, what is the musical equivalent? The player will need to have been paying close attention to the arc of the dance, its rises and falls, for their job now is to let us *hear* what they were seeing.

Perform this exercise a few times. Let both musicians and non-musicians be the player. Let dancers and non-dancers be the mover. In the next exercise you will be working with one of the musical themes generated, so it's a good idea to have a few to choose from.



Once someone's headphones fell out as they were dancing and they had to rush to grab them - ~~watching~~ the musician trying to mirror that flub was the kind of response that really makes this exercise exciting.

# BE IT

Next you will select one of the musical themes as the provocation for improvisation. If you and your ensemble have a generative method that works for you, go ahead and use that. We use a tool called Open Canvas, which is an extended, open improvisation where scenes, songs, movement flow in and out of each other the way a dream does: sometimes there are hard breaks, but more often one thing just becomes another without you even realizing it. Use the musical theme you selected as your provocation for improvisation. Consider its tone, tempo, and shifts as inspiration for movement, scenes, or songs. You are now trying to *be* the music we heard.

Allow your improv to grow into itself and take its time. Sometimes an Open Canvas lasts 20 minutes and the juicy stuff almost always happens at the end. Remember that it is a tool toward performance and not the performance itself.



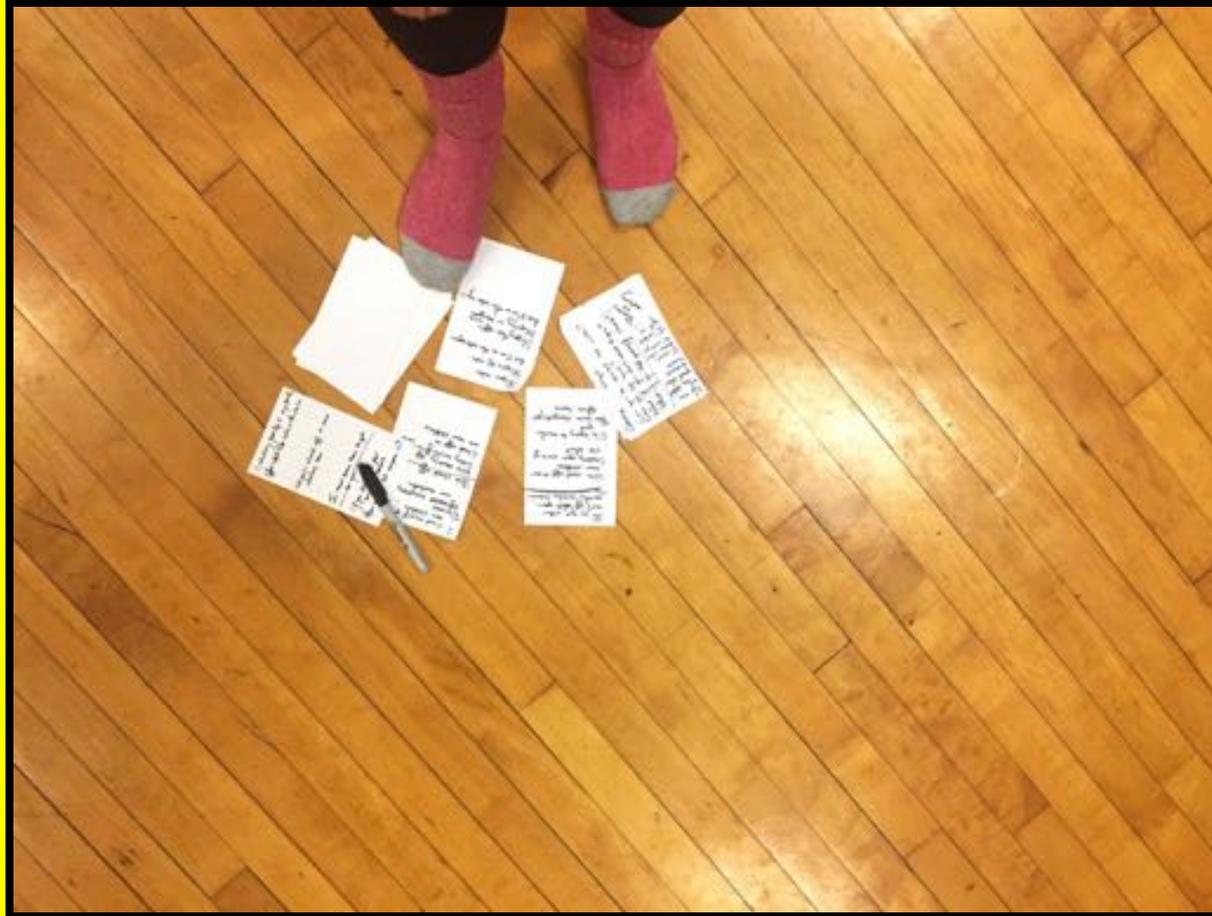
# MAKE IT

At the end of your improvisation, discuss with your ensemble exciting moments you saw or were in. Look for things that maybe didn't entirely make sense but were still intriguing. Once you've identified a few moments that the group is interested in, distill them into a sentence or phrase. That sentence could be something evocative that was said during improvisation, or a natural theme that started to arise.



With five minutes on a timer, everyone will free write individually on the chosen sentence/theme. Don't worry about form or clarity or continuity of thought; just write. When the timer is up, go over your writing and pick out three phrases you like. With five more minutes on the clock, begin to turn those phrases into couplets. Maybe you end up with three couplets, maybe at the end of five minutes you only have one. Maybe the couplets rhyme or match meter. Maybe neither is true but you really like the sound of them back to back.

Now put ten minutes on the clock. Take the couplets and turn them into a verse and a chorus. You will likely have to add lines and edit what you've already written. Though you are crafting now, challenge yourself to remain as loose and unburdened as you were during the freewriting. Just see what comes together.

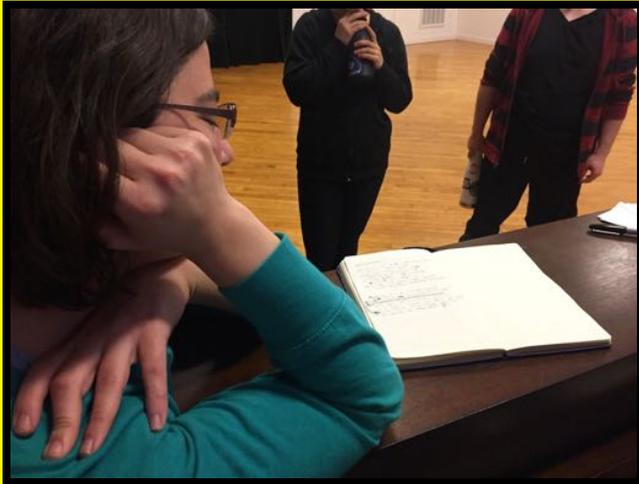


# PLAY IT

Once the time is up, gather your group and have everyone share their writing. Ask each writer to share what the musical feeling of their work is-- did they write a rock ballad or a sweeping 11th hour number or a pop song best sung by Katy Perry? This will encourage both the writer and the rest of the group to put themselves in the mindset of listening for musicality. Encourage everyone to share fearlessly; don't just read the songs, sing them.

*Or more if you can!*

Once everyone has shared, choose one song to put to music. Have the writer sing through it once and have the musician play along. As the writer and the musician improvise through the music, the ensemble acts as a sounding board--reflecting whether the music shares the tone the writer was suggesting--and as a writers room, beginning to scratch out second verses to the song at hand or even seeing if any of their verses could be shifted and grafted on.



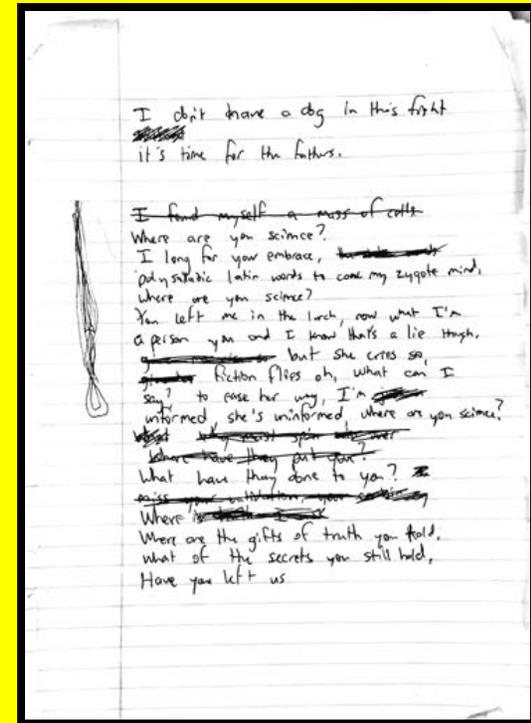
And just like that, you've done it!

The key in this work is to lose preciousness and trust the process. Your work is part of a whole. Ensemble members must be willing to throw themselves fearlessly into something that might scare them, and know that they will catch each other.

In Lightning Rod Special we are always trying to find ways to surprise ourselves, to jolt ourselves out of our ordinary processes and habits in order to find something we couldn't have possibly expected. This method was created in ruthless creative pursuit of something we've never done before, by opening ourselves to the heat of the creative moment and always pushing to see what else is possible. Devising is not about efficiency; this workshop, and our work in general, is the result of many hours of failed experiments. The trick is to view all of that failure as fertile ground for future success.

For more information on our exchange, please visit [www.lightningrodspecial.com/musical-devising](http://www.lightningrodspecial.com/musical-devising)

Want to know more? Email us! [info@lightningrodspecial.com](mailto:info@lightningrodspecial.com)



A quick story: I once accidentally ~~typed~~ typed Alex's title as "Composter" instead of "Composer." Typo it may be, but we've come to find it a rather apt descriptor for his-and-our-work-in-this-process.

These are Scott's lyrics for a song he called "Where Are You Science?" I think it was the second song he ever wrote.