Chapter 14
The Kindie Movement: Independent Children's Music in the United States Since 2000

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Introduction

Scholarly studies of children's music-making have emerged as a growing field of study in recent years, establishing that children around the world are important participants in musical production and consumption (Bickford, 2017; Campbell, 2010; Emberly & Davhula, 2016; Marsh, 2008; Minks, 2013; Young, 2012). But in many large-scale societies with commercial culture industries, and certainly in the United States, music made by adults is a dominant form of children's music. While research in music education and ethnomusicology has established that children are important social and musical agents, it is equally important to understand how adults actively define and circumscribe that agency in their interactions with and ideologies about children—a problem that has received significant attention in children's literature studies (e.g., Nodelman, 2008; Rose, 1984). To better understand the ideologies that inform adult music-making for children, this chapter examines the growth of independent children's music in the United States over the last two decades, in a movement widely referred to as "kindie." I focus especially on the aesthetic values advocated by kindie musicians and others involved in the kindie movement, which reveal interesting and at times contradictory conceptions of the relationships between children, adults, and musical quality. Specifically, kindie music practitioners widely share a strong explicit commitment to making "good" music for children, while musical quality is ultimately defined in terms of adult tastes and preferences. In kindie music, then, the pursuit of musical value continually appears as a movement away from child listeners, while adults are established as the legitimate arbiters of taste, and children's preferences are repeatedly marginalized from

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music nominally created for them. This is interesting not just for what it says about the historical development of a highly visible and influential form of contemporary children's music in the United States, but also for what it reveals about the underlying tension between musical values and ideological conceptions of childhood.

My goal in this chapter is to identify some of the fault-lines that emerge when adult US children's musicians talk about their music and their audience. In particular I am focused on music that falls under the umbrella term "kindie," a portmanteau of "kid" and "indie" (or "kinder" and "indie"). People involved in kids music often describe kindie as a "movement" rather than a scene or genre, and I'll follow that usage for the most part here. The "kid" of kindie highlights pre-school and elementary aged children, generally younger than 7 or 8 years old. "Indie" highlights both the kindie movements' investment in "independent" production and distribution, and in musical values that emphasize rock authenticity and sophisticated musical taste (e.g. Hesmondhalgh, 1999).

The accepted history of kindie music starts in the late 1990s, when New York artists Laurie Berkner, Dan Zanes, and David Weinstone all independently started making music for young children. But the developments in children's music that preceded them are important for understanding the context into which they emerged. These artists started making kids music at the tail end of a tumultuous decade for children's music. Following the dramatic success of independent children's singer-songwriter Raffi in the 1980s (who followed a long tradition of folk-revivalists who recorded children's music, including Pete Seeger, Peter, Paul, and Mary, and Woody Guthrie), in 1990 several major record labels, including Sony Wonder, Warner Bros' Kid Rhino, and Walt Disney Records, began to make significant new investments in original children's music, signing independent artists and developing original new acts internally (McCormick, LaFollette, & Stasi, 1991). But by 1994 these companies had largely given up on selling children's records, as home video emerged as the dominant format for children's media—helped along by the new dominance of big box retail stores that heavily favored video sales over traditional music recordings (McCormick, 1994). The dominant figures in this new period of mass market home video dominance were Disney's reinvigorated animated musicals and the ubiquitous purple dinosaur Barney, whose saccharine performances of public-domain nursery rhymes inspired widespread adult antipathy.[1] The independent children's musicians, such as Bill Harley, Trout Fishing in America, or Cathy Fink and Marcy Marxer, who had thrived in the 1980s, continued to make music independently, but it was harder to escape the shadow of these mass media juggernauts.

By the end of the 1990s, then, children's music was widely understood to mean highly corporatized multimedia mass market productions, and the once-vibrant and highly visible independent children's music movement had been largely overshadowed. This is the environment in which Berkner, Zanes, and Weinstone developed

[1] I'm grateful to David Pierce, who was Executive Vice President and General Manager of Sony Music Distribution in the 1900s and later headed Sony Wonder, for explaining the centrality of retail home video to the children's music market during that period, in an interview conducted by phone in May 2014.

their new children's acts. Zanes and Weinstone were both former rock musicians who were inspired to create music for kids after becoming parents. Berkner had been teaching music at a preschool and developed material for her classes, and then began recording and performing her songs more widely. A local music scene developed quickly, with parents circulating recordings and bringing their kids from show to show. Berkner says about that period that "there was a joke for a long time about people who would come to my shows like they were Dead Heads, or sleep outside before a concert or get there hours before to get their tickets" (interview August 15, 2012). At the same time the internet was providing new opportunities for exposure and retail websites like Amazon were making it easier for independent artists to distribute their recordings nationally without having to sign with major labels, which Berkner describes as a key development (interview August 15, 2012). All three artists got a lot of attention, first from the New York press and then nationally. Berkner appeared on the *Today Show* in 2001, and by 2004 all three had music videos running as interstitials on Nickelodeon's morning preschool block, Nick Jr. Throughout the 1990s the Grammy for Best Musical Album for Children had been awarded to video-based recordings like Disney film soundtracks or TV spinoffs (*Elmopalooza!*), with occasional wins for mainstream artists like Linda Rondstadt making one-off kids records, but in the 2000s the nominees and winners began to consistently include kids-first recording artists like Cathy Fink and Marcy Marxer, Bill Harley, Dan Zanes, and the Okee Dokee Brothers. In 2005 the Lollapallooza music festival spun off Kidzapalooza, which has run continuously since, and 2007 saw the first of a series of annual showcases and conventions that would become Kindiefest and KindieComm. By this point many more acts had emerged, and bands like Ralph's World and Recess Monkey reflected a dominant indie-rock sound and culture. After 2009 Nickelodeon had shifted to investing in its own music acts and using interstitial time for ads and promotions rather than music videos, removing a significant source of visibility for independent children's musicians, but the number of new acts continued to increase, encompassing a growing range of styles and genres.

Since 2012 I have interviewed several dozen children's musicians, producers, radio hosts, and public relations professionals, and attended and spoken at the national children's music conventions, Kindiefest and the Children's Music Network. There is a lot that is interesting about this world, especially in its similarities and differences from conventional/adult music scenes and genres. In this chapter I primarily focus on evaluative discourses among kindie practitioners, especially those that emphasize adult listeners as the arbiters of musical taste.

Discourses around kindie, position it as a solution to widespread adult dislike of kids music, focused especially on Raffi and Barney—two of the most highly visible children's music acts from the 1980s to 1990s. Magazine and newspaper profiles of kindie acts from the 2000s frequently opened with a ritual disavowal of Raffi or Barney, who were then contrasted with kindie music, which was seen to be more tolerable to adults, and perhaps even enjoyable. For example, in 2000 the *New York Times* profiled David Weinstone's Music for Aardvarks and Other Mammals with the jokey headline "Songs for Children That Won't Make the Adults Fwow Up"

(Kelly, 2000). The story quoted Weinstone joking about specifically trying not to sound like Raffi: "I would say, 'I'm thinking of putting a kazoo in that part.' And [my producer] says, 'Raffi would put a kazoo on there.' And I say, 'Whew, thanks.'" The same article quoted parents and teachers emphasizing adult enjoyment: "I love that David pulls from so many different musical influences from the Beatles, to reggae to 70's and 80's hits … Instead of going down in the music he's going up. The true secret to Aardvarks' popularity is that adults like it," and "Parents need to be not bored and not insulted" (Kelly, 2000, p. CY3). The same themes were repeated over the next decade. In 2006 the web magazine *Salon* profiled "kindie rock"—focusing on Zanes, Berkner, Justin Roberts, and They Might Be Giants (kid-friendly grown-up indie musicians who had recently begun releasing records explicitly for kids)—with the kicker, "Roll over, Raffi! A new wave of kids artists, most of them former grown-up rockers, are making music for 5-year-olds that the rest of us can listen to without wanting to die" (Lamb, 2006). As late as 2010, *Time Magazine* headed an article about kindie music with, "Parents! Are You Ready for Kindie Rock? Desperate for a break from Barney? Need a Raffi respite? Try the new crop of parent-friendly kindie bands" (Barovick, 2010).

While in 2000 Weinstone himself was putting forward the anti-Raffi line, by 2010 this framing primarily elicited groans of embarrassment from insiders, who often express the desire to normalize their work and move past this need to constantly justify performing for kids. But nonetheless, many continued to position themselves in contrast to particular traditions in children's music, and identifying and disavowing bad kids music is a central discursive move. The most common characterization of bad kids music is that it is patronizing. In a common refrain, Keith Grimwood of Trout Fishing in America said, "we try to never talk down to kids, play down to kids" (interview May 7, 2014). Overly cute or childish lyrics are also disapproved of, in favor of claims to lyrical realism and sophistication. In interviews, Sandra Velasquez of Moona Loona dismissed "river duckies and rainbows" (interview February 24, 2014), Dan Zanes mentioned "adults singing about riding a school bus or … learning to use a fork" (interview September 4, 2012), and Grimwood described the "sickeningly sweet stuff" that dominated kids music when he and Ezra Idlet started Trout Fishing in America in the later 1970s (interview May 7, 2014). When David Weinstone described his own motivation to make music for his kids while living in New York he said, "there were no bunnies or ponies hopping down in front of my kid's apartment, and if most of the world was satisfied with farm animal songs and things that they really had no physical exposure to, then people that didn't live in urban areas could suffer through my songs about subways, taxis, skyscrapers, and bagels" (interview February 21, 2014). Kindie music also shares a general disposition against didacticism: Mindy Thomas, who hosted Sirius XM's Kids Place Live said about that show's programming decisions, "We stay away from the songs that are teachable, like the educational songs or the songs that tell kids what to do or teach them a lesson" (interview August 20, 2014).

In kindie discourse, "don't talk down to kids" suggests that the default for most music and media for kids, especially older children's music and corporate children's media, is to be patronizing. Notably, though, similar sentiments are common even

in the corporate, highly commercialized contexts to which kindie musicians commonly oppose themselves. For example, Rynda Laurel, who did A&R at Sony Wonder while that label was still making original kids recordings, spent much of her time trying to convince mainstream artists to make novelty one-off kids albums, chasing the successes of Kenny Loggins and Linda Rondstadt, in a model that is largely anathema in the kindie movement. But in describing her own approach, her language strongly echoed the "don't talk down to kids" ethos of kindie: "I approach it from a different way of treating the kids and the children as already smart and already intelligent and just bringing out that intelligence, no dumbing down" (interview May 23, 2014).

If "don't talk down to kids" is a negative mandate, the positive content of good kids music is mostly left unstated. Instead, artists are admonished to make "quality," "good," or "real" music. But ultimately the test of musical quality emphasizes adult listeners. When Grimwood said, "we try to never talk down to kids, play down the kids," he immediately paired that idea with, "we tried to get kids real music, so parents could hear it and go hey, that's real music" (interview May 7, 2014). There is a double movement here, in which not playing *down* to kids often means playing *up* to their parents. That theme is explicit in the many journalistic accounts, which highlight "parent-friendly" music (Barovick, 2010) that "won't make the adults fwow up" (Kelly, 2000), and it is also emphasized by kindie music insiders. For example Robert Drake, the longtime producer of Philadelphia NPR affiliate WXPN's daily children's show Kids Corner, said onstage at Kindiefest in 2013 that, "the point is to make quality music for kids," and, "you know the success of a CD by how many times you hear from parents that they listen even when their kids are not in the car with them." The line about parents listening even when the kids are not in the car is so common as to be almost a cliché in the kindie world. This prioritization of adult evaluation in the kindie movement is widespread, to the point that it can be difficult to express the possibility that music that kids like and adults do not can also be good music. The influential blogger Jeff Bogle, who runs the website *Out With the Kids* and is a forceful advocate for the aesthetic value of children's recordings, used an ecstatic review of the Okee Dokee Brothers' excellent Grammy-winning 2012 album *Can You Canoe?* to argue that there "doesn't need to be a 'kids music' moniker any longer." He proposed "kids music—not just for kids anymore" as a slogan for the kindie movement (2012). So while "don't talk down to children" expresses a laudable aspiration of respect toward children's critical abilities, in practice this discourse shifts quickly to a focus on adult tastes. Not talking down to children often means talking to adults instead.

In fact, many artists have already moved away from the "'kids music' moniker" as Bogle suggests, in favor of the increasingly common "family music." For many artists and publicists, "family music" crystalizes the common emphasis on parents' musical enjoyment and implies distance from lower quality kids-only music. For some artists, like Dan Zanes, terms like "family music" and "all ages music" reflect a more sophisticated worldview that is less focused on adult tastes than the traditional folk-revival value of community participation in music making and listening. As Zanes puts it, "there were always people doing children's music … But I didn't

find a lot of all-ages music, [where] it would be as important that music had meaning to an adult as it was there were meaning to a child, because the shared experience is really the thing" (interview September 4, 2012). Weinstone makes a similar point about shared experience in describing his early concerns about mainstream children's music: "I always felt like they had to have these inside jokes for parents in order to make it valuable and I always thought that was kind of rip off for the kids that they should have to listen to music that kind of had these inside jokes so the parents could be like, 'isn't that witty.' I was like, why can't the parents go one level and the kids appreciate it on another level and then there also be a middle ground where they both appreciate on the same level, without having to have these kind of clunkers over the head for the kids" (interview February 21, 2014). Zanes's project is conscientiously political: he uses the term "segregation" to describe the separation of children from adults, which takes on more pointed meaning in light of his longstanding commitment to using his music in service of anti-racist politics. Nonetheless, an important upshot of this emphasis on family or all-ages music is to shift the emphasis from child listeners to adults who had not previously been addressed by "children's music." And while Zanes himself has a strong commitment to valuing communities as important social units, in its wider use the moniker "family music" strongly prioritizes parents and the nuclear family. Despite claims to respect children and break down barriers with adults, in important ways this language of "family music" is a literally domesticating move that encloses children within the family and works against alternative conceptions of children as members of communities that extend beyond the home. By contrast, highly commercial "tween" music—to which kindie music more recently is frequently contrasted (e.g. Bream, 2015)—is heavily invested in envisioning children as members of public group beyond their households (Bickford, 2012).

To some extent these discourses create impossible and contradictory demands, and they lead to escalating standards and criticism for acts that are seen to fall short. Josh Shriber of the Boston-based ska-punk band Josh and the Jamtones said, "I think my main beef with kindie is everybody says they're doing it for the parents and the whole family, everybody says they're not dumbing it down. But, you know, if you listen to some of the music it's not necessarily true" (interview February 25, 2014). Zanes, who is a bit more reflective, said "I still don't think that many are doing family music or all-ages music. But everybody says they are doing it, though they aren't." Laughing, he adds, "Maybe we're *all* doing children's music, and we're just deluding ourselves" (interview September 4, 2012). Truly all-ages music is a continually receding target.

These escalating standards lead to a dynamic of close attention to inclusion and exclusion that may be similar to authenticity discourses in adult indie scenes (which also became much more visible during the 2000s), in which too much success can be viewed skeptically as selling out, while at the same time new entrants can be criticized for jumping on a bandwagon (Hesmondhalgh, 1999). Just as a fully independent, ideologically committed, and explicitly anti-commercial artist like Raffi could be later rejected by anti-commercial independent artists as exactly what they aspired to move past, more recently the emphasis on adult taste has made it possible to cre-

ate rhetorical distance even from foundational kindie figures such as Laurie Berkner. Berkner is easily the most successful independent children's artist of the 2000s, and along with Zanes she is one of the two most prominent figures in every discussion of kindie. But, ironically, her music is seen by many as excessively oriented toward children. For example, Stephanie Mayer, who runs Zanes's label and organized the Kindiefest convention for several years, mentioned Berkner in the same disavowing breath as Raffi: "I think Dan's style is a little bit more for everybody than Raffi was. Sure a lot of parents probably love Raffi just like a lot of parents really love Laurie Berkner, but some other parents probably feel that Laurie Berkner is for the kids and they don't enjoy it as much. I think someone like Dan is a little more all-friendly maybe because Dan was a grown-up musician … Laurie was never really a grown-up musician" (interview January 9, 2013). Similarly, Tor Hyams, a prominent producer and long-time organizer of the Kidzapalooza festival, said about Berkner: "I'm not even sure I would say she's a kindie artist. I would say she's a kids artist … She is the least kindie of any artist, I would say. I love her, she's great and she is a good person too but she doesn't have a lyric that needs to make you think. She talks about you get up in the morning and she has something for breakfast, etc. etc. I'm putting a hat on my head, I have a dog on my head, what do you have on your head, you know, it's mindless but the kids love it" (interview July 5, 2013).

There is a distinct irony in repudiating one of the widely acknowledged founders of the kindie movement for not living up to its adult-centered values. The kindie movement seems to have left itself with no room for manoeuvre due to evaluative standards based on an underlying contradiction, in which the child audiences who make this music possible must be disavowed in favor of the discernment and taste of adults (who would not be listening to this music at all, were it not for the children in their lives). At some extreme this standard would suggest simply not making music for children at all. There is also a sense in which the "indie" aspects of kindie music lead to skepticism about commercial success and visibility like that achieved by Raffi and Berkner, both of whom blazed new trails for children's music while over decades maintaining their commercial and creative independence.

But there is also some truth to the suggestion that Berkner is especially focused on children. Unlike many of her peers, Berkner is a rare kindie musician who admits to not focusing very much on parents' tastes. She acknowledges that parents' desire to participate in activities like music listening with their kids is part of the reason for her success. But in my conversation with her the closest she came to addressing adult listeners was to say, "I wouldn't want to write something that I would hate to listen to, and I just always hoped that that would be in line with other parents" (interview August 15, 2012). But otherwise she consistently centered young children's taste and experience. She said, "I like the idea that as a four-year-old you can feel ownership around your music too." When describing her composition process she focused almost entirely on children, and their pleasures, their needs, and their desires: "When I am thinking about topics, there's really only two or three things that I do. One is that I listen to what kids say or talk about … noticing what kids find interesting and funny at that age. That's part of what I think also helps to make it feel like it's theirs" (interview August 15, 2012). She related in some detail a story about

watching two toddlers on a subway platform laugh at each other making nonsense sounds, and thinking about how to turn that into a song that they'd feel excitement and ownership of.

Then she talked about the particular demands placed on preschool kids, and explained that she would try to remember her own feelings as a child. She described the origins of the song "We Are the Dinosaurs" this way:

> *I was in this setting where I am working with kids in a preschool. They are not allowed to, they can't hit each other—and have it be okay. They can, and they wished that could and they want to and they try to. And they can't have a tantrums but I mean again of course they do. You are not supposed to scratch or scream or be really loud or get really mad or hit each other. They're supposed to use their words. They are supposed to talk about it with a teacher and keep their bodies to themselves. And all these things are completely the opposite of what you want to do when you're two-three-four-five. So, when I asked the kids one day what do you want to sing about. And one boy said dinosaurs. And then we got up and started stomping around, and I was like, oh this is it. They can roar when the music tells him to and its okay. They can put out their claws. They can stomp and show their teeth. They can do all these things that isn't usually okay. And I wanted to able to do that when I was a kid but I felt like it was bad … The music gives them a chance to have those feelings. (Interview August 15, 2012)*

If most kindie discourses prioritize adult listeners, Berkner is unapologetic about foregrounding children's unique experiences. "We Are the Dinosaurs" is not the sort of kids song that parents are likely to play in the car without their kids. In some sense Berkner *is* talking down to kids—at least she's treating them as though they have different experiences than adults, different emotions, different senses of humor. And she's basing a lot of those ideas on half-formed intuition and uncertain memories of her own childhood, as well, of course, as trial and error and a lot experience playing music for and with kids.

From all of this, we can see that childhood and musical taste seem to exist as concepts in a deep-seated opposition. It is quite remarkable that even artists and professionals who dedicate their careers to making high quality music for children find it very difficult to discuss children's musical preferences as valid expressions of aesthetic tastes. This is apparent primarily in the repeated shift to adult listeners when the question of high quality music for children is raised.[2] In a cynical moment, Hyams went further than most of his colleagues and stated plainly: "Children don't care about smart lyrics. They don't care about cool guitar sounds or that the band is playing live. They don't care. They don't care if the music is done on a synthesizer from one person and to tell you the truth they love the purple dinosaur [Barney]" (interview July 5, 2013). Most kindie practitioners would not express such a stark

[2] I think it is interesting and important that kindie practitioners so frequently turn to adult preferences, but I don't intend this point as an especially strong criticism. I think the alternative is legitimately difficult, as I'll discuss. And there are many perfectly good reasons to center adults: they are the primary purchasers of music recordings for young children; musicians are clearly rewarded by journalists who publicize their work for foregrounding adults; there is a widespread and readily available discourse about children's music being unpleasant for adults, which may be the biggest barrier to attracting new audiences; and adult preferences are readily available and easy to talk about with other adults.

sentiment. But their repeated move to foreground adults when questions of musical quality and taste arise suggests that it is, at least, very difficult conceptually to understand children's musical pleasures or interests as legitimate aesthetic preferences or discerning evaluations. Hyams connection back to Barney brings the kindie conversation full-circle. In the late 1990s musicians and parents were reacting against the dominance of Barney, and the kindie movement emerged as an alternative—one that was supposed to be more parent-friendly and would not talk down to kids. But Hyams is suggesting that perhaps kids *want* to be talked down to, and that Barney really does represent the epitome of their musical preferences, and it turns out that kids just do not have good taste. In that view (certainly not one shared explicitly by most kindie practitioners, but which may represent an extreme reduction of more common perspectives), the desire to make good music for kids really is *just* a deferral to adult tastes. Commentary about children's television often produces similar confusion of age and quality. Ellen Seiter (1993) argues that most adult criticisms of commercial children's television, including shows like *Ghostbusters* and *My Little Pony* that were the subjects of widespread opprobrium especially for their emphasis on consumer merchandising, conflate bourgeois aesthetic norms and paternalist efforts to protect vulnerable children from corporate manipulation (see also Davies, Buckingham, & Kelley, 2000). Seiter suggests that more generous and engaged readings can find much more substance in such shows that, while perhaps displeasing to adults, nonetheless express valid and meaningful aesthetic values. If Hyams is right that making "sophisticated" music for children is futile, this may be a matter of differing taste rather than a single measure of quality, but adults struggle not to see differences as deficits. Perhaps Barney is not talking down, but simply talking *to* children rather than to their parents. A more engaged reading of Barney (along with Raffi, The Wiggles, and others who come in for so much criticism) might productively identify some interesting musical values.

Perhaps more fundamentally, cultural production for children raises thorny questions about the challenges of intersubjective communication between children and adults. In a related field, critical theorist Jacqueline Rose influentially argued that children's literature is "impossible," at least insofar as it claims "that it represents the child, speaks to and for children, addresses them as a group which is knowable" (1984, p. 1). Cultural production made by adults for children is always already based on a highly ideological adult imagination of childhood. Rose argued that, "if children's fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp" (1984, p. 2). Certainly the same issues are relevant to music made by adults for child listeners. Neither Berkner nor her critics have escaped the problem Rose lays out so clearly, in which the unending compulsion to produce material *for* children may ultimately be nothing more than an expression of adult ideologies about children. It is interesting that, at least in their discourse about their work, a substantial coterie of children's music professionals are declining to grapple explicitly with the challenges of engaging with children's potentially very different desires and values regarding music. Adult standards are much more knowable. What Perry Nodelman (2008) calls the "hidden adult" in children's literature is here not so

much hidden as explicitly foregrounded. Berkner's approach, on the other hand, is to try to engage with children as we find them, even if their aesthetic values are profoundly different from what adults view as "good." But meeting kids where they are, if where they are is in subordinate positions in institutions like school and the family that actively infantilize them (Bickford, 2017), is not easily disentangled from reproducing that subordination and infantilization (Gubar, 2013). Still, if not talking *down* to kids means talking *over* them to their parents, then in some important ways kindie musicians may be missing the chance to talk *to* children. And that means that independent children's musicians end up ceding a whole arena of intersubjective engagement between adults and children, however fraught or even impossible that engagement may be, to commercial and educational professionals and institutions, rather than musicians and artists.

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