Sharing Lyrics in Singalong Groups

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Abstract

According to Joseph Pine and James Gilmore (1998), the first economy was agrarian-based. We then moved through an industrial economy and are now in a service economy. They argue that today some customers are more interested in buying experiences than products and recommend that companies focus on creating memorable events instead of trying to sell more products. They predict that the next step in the evolution of businesses will be charging for transformational experiences such as education.

One direction that the music industry could take in a post-industrial economy would be to serve amateur music makers who want to play music themselves instead of just listening to professionals entertain them. The music retail products industry benefits when people buy musical instruments, and then there are opportunities to support customers with instruction on how to play them and to provide them with visual representations of popular songs for them to perform. Customers grow and are transformed through this process.

There are many amateur groups around the world whose members meet regularly to sing songs while accompanying themselves on guitars and ukuleles, and many more individuals who play alone or with their friends and families. They usually play from paper copies of arrangements derived from accessing unauthorized websites that post lyrics and/or tabs. Time is spent searching for acceptable arrangements, and many are in the wrong key or have mistakes in the chords. In the process, lyricists are not paid for their work. A survey of popular unauthorized sites will be made, along with information about legal sites that license the rights from publishers, such as Fender Songs in partnership with Apple Music.

A proposal for a new model is presented here, designed to help people find high-quality lyric sheets, share them legally, and sing together in groups. Progress is demonstrated on a phone app under development by the author that will allow leaders of singalong sessions to select songs and control the scrolling of lyrics and chord symbols, and to share their screens with their followers. A library of popular songs is under development.

Singalong leaders will subscribe to the service, and their followers will be able to join sessions they host for free. The income from subscriptions will go into a pool from which publishers will be paid in proportion to the number of times lyrics are displayed, in a similar way to how performance rights organizations distribute money based on how many times a song is performed. Hal Leonard will provide access to its database to match song titles and handle the distribution of money to publishers.

Keywords: singalong, amateur singing, ukulele, nostalgia, ChordPro, forScore, Hal Leonard

As blue-collar labor is replaced by technical and professional work, and artificial intelligence and robots take over manufacturing and middle management, many individuals will find themselves with no clearly defined social role. Assuming that our masters see it in their best interest to provide a basic guaranteed income, the sixty million American amateur musicians will have more time for leisure activities. Music will also be a relaxing way to pass the time as we become an interplanetary species and spend more time in confined spaces. As we move from a services-based economy to one that provides experiences and transformation, one avenue the music industry could take is to serve amateur music makers who want to play music themselves instead of having professionals entertain them.

One way that amateurs enjoy making music is to participate in singalong groups accompanied by guitars, ukuleles, and other instruments. Members are typically in the fifty-to-seventy age range. Many don't read music but can sing along with a leader performing familiar songs. Groups of ten to fifty members around the world meet once to four times a month.

Members have a variety of motivations in addition to the desire to have fun. One of the enjoyable aspects is singing songs that were popular when they were younger in the

1950s to the 1970s. In *The Science of Timing*, Daniel Pink writes that nostalgia has many benefits:

> Nostalgia delivers two ingredients essential to well-being: a sense of meaning and a connection to others...can foster positive mood, protect against anxiety and stress...boost creativity...heighten optimism, deepen empathy...alleviate boredom... increase physiological feelings of comfort and warmth...Nostalgia (makes) people more tolerant of cold and perceive the temperature to be higher... It is a bittersweet but predominantly positive and fundamentally social emotion...offers a portal to who we really are. It makes the present meaningful. (Daniel Pink, *When: The Scientific Secrets of Perfect TIming*)

Pink reports additional benefits:

- Enhances one's sense of purpose and meaning
- Members synchronize their heartbeats
- Strengthens feeling of togetherness and sense of purpose
- Increases sensitivity to others and feelings of social well-being
- Emotional, cognitive, and physical benefits from making music and learning a new skill
- Increases the production of immunoglobulin and immune response
- Boosts positive mood
- Lifts self-esteem
- Reduces feelings of stress and symptoms of depression, Parkinson's, and lung disease
- Increases life expectancy

I grew up associating the ukulele with the kitsch of Tiny Tim, who appeared frequently on the Tonight Show with flowing curly locks, clutching his instrument, and warbling in a high falsetto. I have lately come around to viewing it as the noblest of instruments and respect its role in Hawaiian culture. It is a fun instrument to play, relatively inexpensive to purchase and easy to learn, doesn't drown out untrained voices, and is ideally suited to playing in a group where one's mistakes are masked by the herd. I joined the ukulele tribe after visiting Santa Cruz, California where I was introduced to the Ukulele Club of Santa Cruz whose philosophy is encapsulated by their welcome message: "The first rule of Ukulele Club of Santa Cruz is, 'there are no rules,' and that rule has served the club well. There's no formality, no dues, no by-laws, no roster, you just show up with your ukulele at any of the places ukulele players gather in Santa Cruz, join in the fun, and you are a member." The community is

perhaps the most active per capita and participants gather for some type of activity almost every day of the week. It is a lovely experience to be at the beach singing and playing ukulele with fifty other friendly people.

The instrument seems to inspire positive feelings and levity wherever it is picked up. The High Desert Sand Fleas Ukulele Club of Albuquerque, New Mexico describes themselves as "a bi-monthly gathering of uke minded people whose family and friends really got sick of us playing around the house. We mean no harm…Each club meeting reeks of anarchy. Put a bunch of ukulele players in a room; lock the door and the last one still singing wins." The JustUke Strummers in Yishun, Singapore "are a group of fun-loving ukulele enthusiasts with the spirit of sharing the joy of singing and strumming the ukuleles. We gather weekly to enjoy our happy moment and sharpen our singing and strumming techniques with new songs." The Nihon Ukulele Association, established in 1959 in Tokyo, hosts lectures and workshops provided by experienced members, followed by group activities. "We enjoy playing ukulele, steel guitar, dancing hula and singing songs."

Some groups have locally-produced songbooks. A series of four volumes coalesced around the Santa Cruz group, each page numbered and lovingly produced in a different style. This made it easy to spontaneously pick songs during sessions as someone called out the volume and song number.

Leaders received a threatening letter in 2018 informing

Figure 1. Covers from the Ukulele Club of Santa Cruz's four songbooks.

them that they must stop distributing copies of the books due to copyright violation. Some other groups have PDF collections posted on their websites. There are several free websites created as a labor of love by their organizer, such as Jim's Ukulele Songbook, which includes chord charts for almost 3,000 songs (Figure 2):
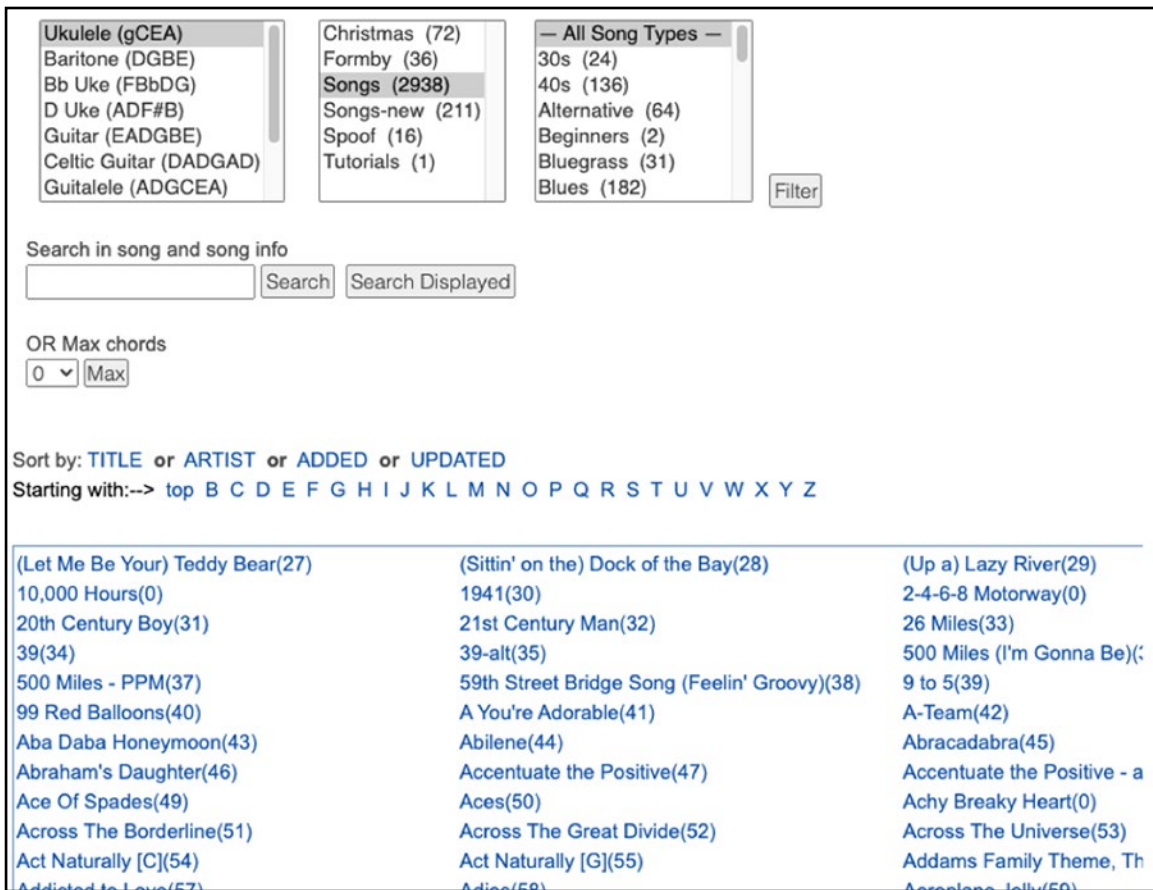
Figure 2. Jim's Songbook website offers good tools for searching.

Dr. Uke kindly offers audio demonstration tracks in the key that the charts are written in, since often chord charts are written in keys that are easy to play on the ukulele rather than the ones used on the hit record recordings (Figure 3).

Chord charts found on the internet are generally in either PDF or ChordPro format. PDF is a popular and widely recognized file format but does not adapt well to different screen sizes (Figure 4).
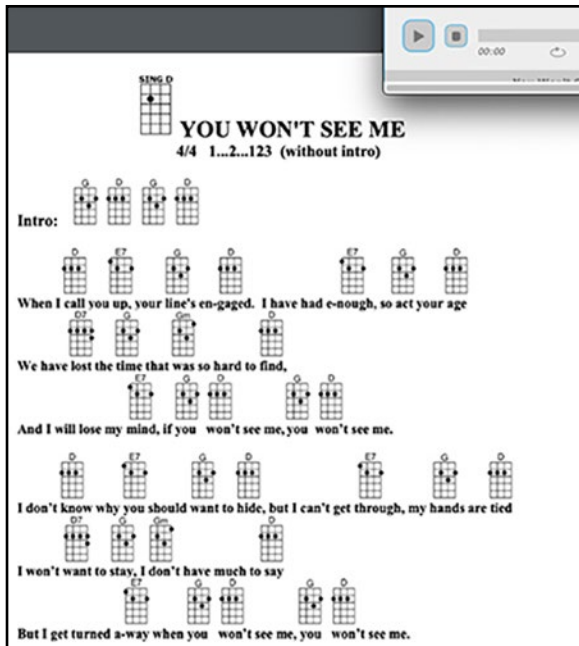

Figure 3. The audio player makes it easy to learn the song on your own.
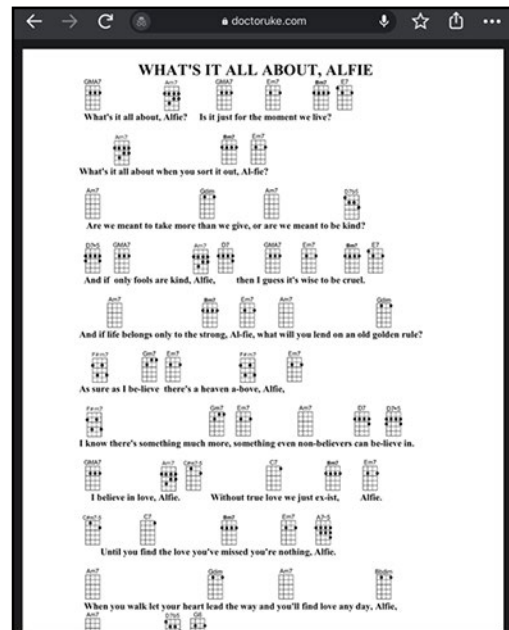
Figure 4. A zoomed-out, full screen PDF is hard to read on a small device

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Zooming in so that you can read the words and chord symbols will cause parts to go off the edges, and when your hands are busy playing an instrument you can't drag the view around to see them (Figure 5).
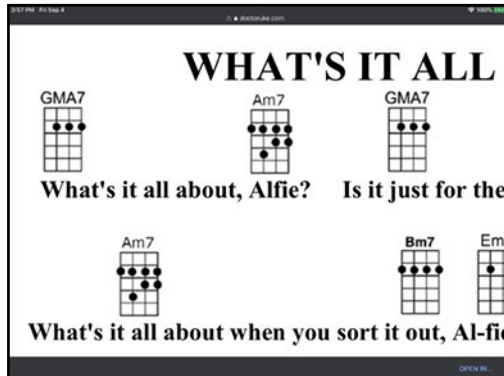

Figure 5. Zooming in on a PDF causes parts to go off the edges.

[ChordPro](#) is another popular file format for chords and lyrics. It was created in 1992 by Martin Leclerc and Mario Dorion for the Chord program, which is no longer available or under development. However, a large user base has grown and there are a number of programs that can create, edit, and display ChordPro files. The [Songbook](#) program is an editor that makes it easy to create ChordPro. You enter the lyrics and chord symbols on the right side of the screen with tags between square brackets and curly braces to indicate the title, composer's name, and on which words the chords change. On the left side you see how the file that you output will appear when displayed by a viewer program (Figure 6).
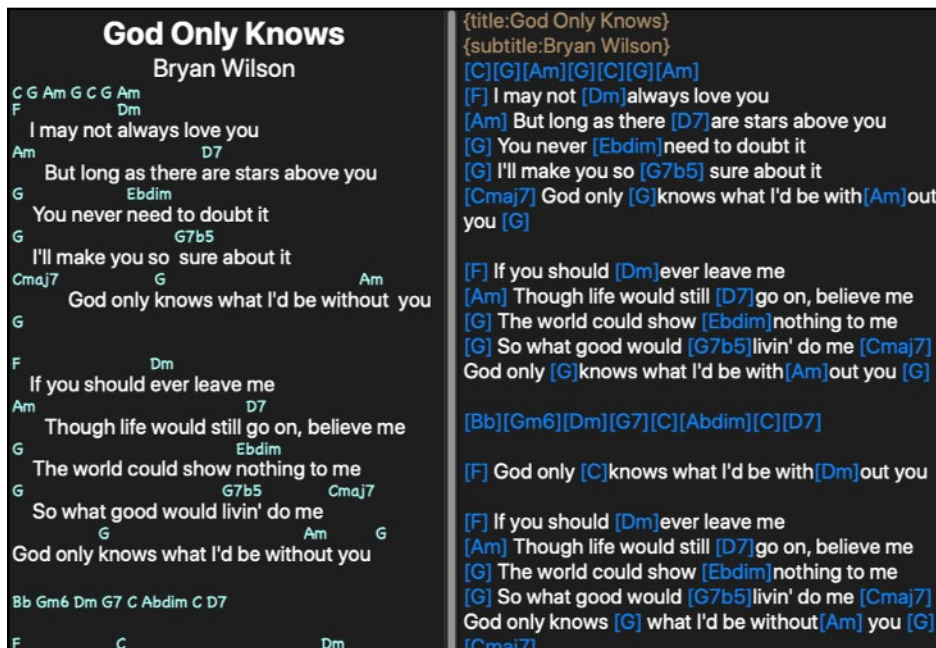
When the ChordPro file is displayed on a device the chord symbols are drawn above the lyrics that they go with (Figure 7).
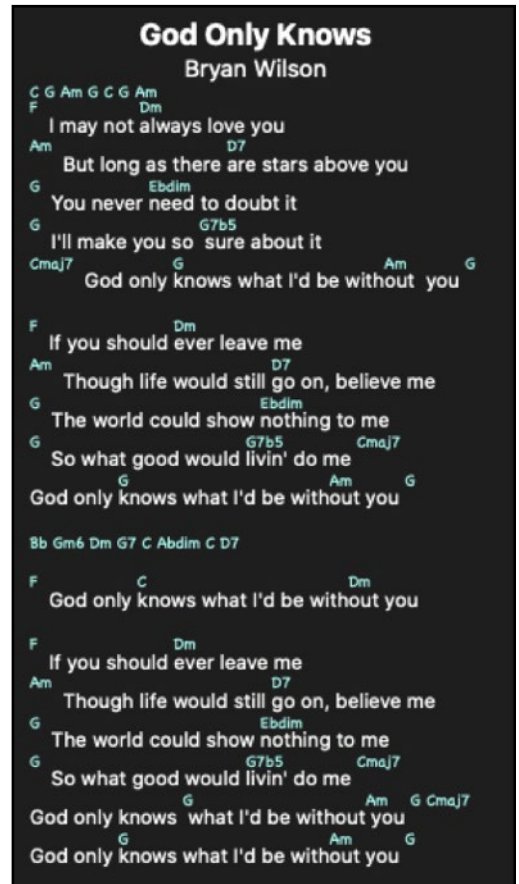

Figure 7. A ChordPro file read on a phone.

Since the file is interpreted and rendered by the program that displays it, the text is redrawn to fit whatever size of the screen it is displayed on. Unlike zooming in on a PDF file, text in a ChordPro file will be redrawn and the lines will wrap around (Figure 8).
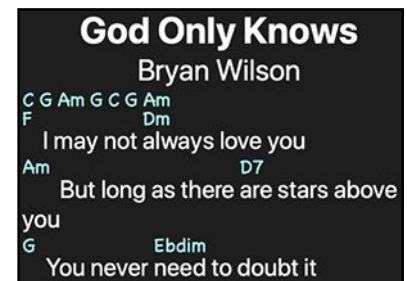

Figure 8. Zooming in on a ChordPro files causes the text to wrap around instead of flowing off the edge.

Figure 6. The Songbook editor. Chord charts found in the wild on the internet contain mistakes, like the spelling of this composer's name

Users need programs to display chord charts that have been created in either PDF or ChordPro format. One of the most popular for iOS devices is forScore. Songs can be tagged with a variety of characteristics which can then be used in searches (Figure 9).
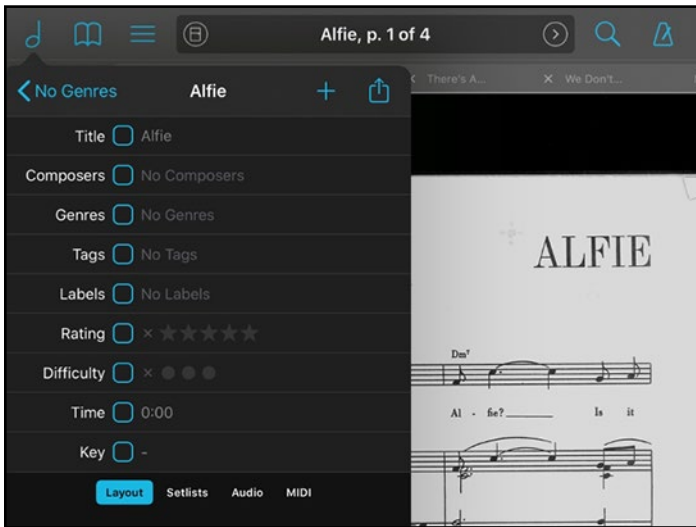

Figure 9. Songs can be searched by title, composer, genre, rating, level of difficulty, duration, or key.

Setlists can be created from songs in the library, which make it easy to go from one song to the next during singalong sessions (Figure 10).
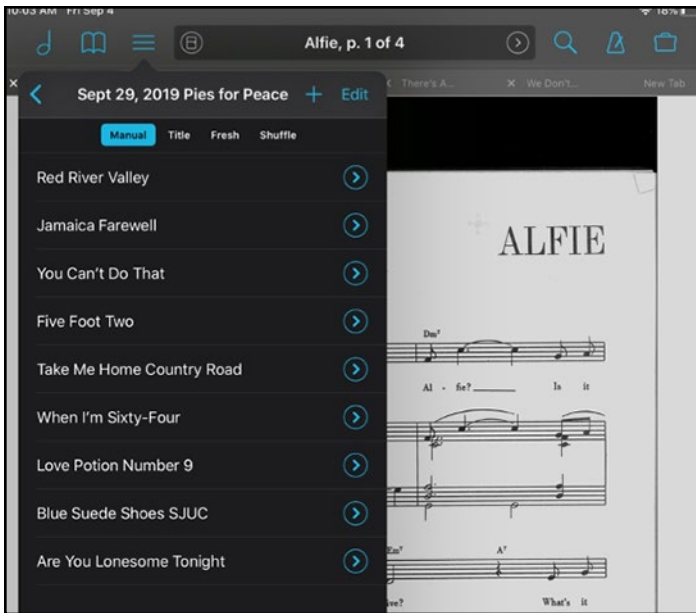

Figure 10. A setlist in forScore. Leaders try to create a flow and maintain interest, like DJs used to do on their radio programs.

Some groups distribute setlists in advance, and may send out emails with two attachments—a PDF of all the songs, and a forScore set file that contains the individual songs (Figure 11).
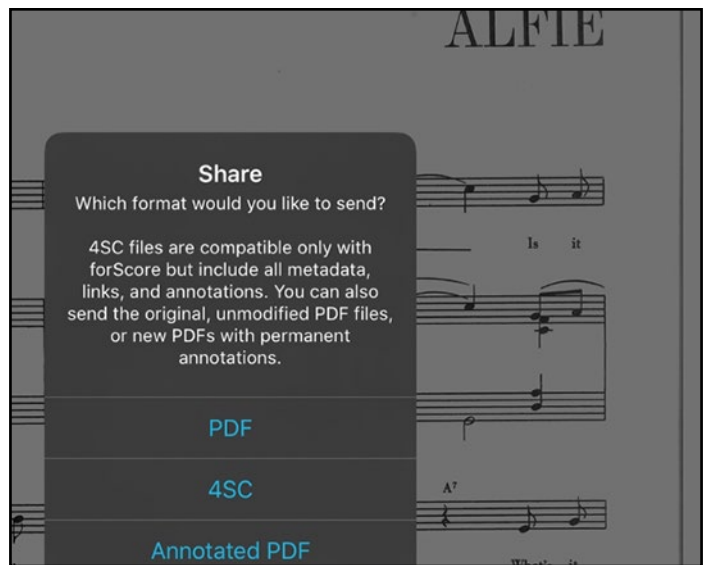

Figure 11. Setlists can be exported from forScore in a variety of ways.

forScore provides a utility to synchronize multiple devices, making it possible for followers to see what is on a leader's screen. Unfortunately, while this works well on iPads, the print is too small on iPhones for seniors without 20/20 vision. Not everyone can afford an iPad, and Android users are left out.

Proposal for a new sharing system

The goal of my current research is to provide an easy and affordable way for people to share lyrics and chord progressions while playing with others. We chose to develop software for phones rather than tablets since those are the devices that most people have, and to make it cross-platform so that everyone can use it.

The system will make it possible to pay royalties to publishers and lyricists, which is not happening today as people share chord charts pulled off unauthorized websites. Buying sheet music legally for the twenty to thirty songs played one time at a singalong session would be prohibitively expensive for participants. They don't need the melody written out, which most don't know how to read, and they would have to stop playing their instruments to turn pages.

I'd like a way to make it easy to transpose the music to accommodate different instruments, capo settings, and vocal ranges, and to only display the chord symbols for chords the user has indicated that they don't yet know how to play.

The plan is to charge leaders a subscription fee and to collect statistics on how many times the lyrics to each song are displayed by their followers. The money that is collected will then be divided among the publishers in a similar fashion to how performance rights organizations like ASCAP and BMI distribute royalties for performances of songs. Hal Leonard will be provided with a breakdown of how many times each song has been displayed and they will send each

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publisher its share from the pool of money collected from subscriptions. Hal Leonard already has many deals in place with publishers and is in the best position to add this revenue stream. I have relayed my request for them to publish an API making it possible for third parties to search their database in order to make it easier to match song titles with the corresponding publisher.

I worked with five computer science students last year who were able to [synchronize follower's phones with the leader's](#) and provide a proof-of-concept. Due to the ambitious goals of the project combined with the disruption of teamwork caused by responses to COVID-19 they were not able to develop it into a product ready for public distribution.

Robert Willey teaches songwriting, computer music, music industry, and senior projects at Ball State University. He has published instructional books on Louisiana Creole fiddle, Brazilian piano, music production, and the music industry, and was the organizer of online centennials for Conlon Nancarrow and Scott Joplin.

Proceedings
of the
2020 International Summit

of the
Music & Entertainment Industry Educators Association

– October 2 & 3, 2020 –