

Music is Seth's medicine



As with others who have Williams syndrome, Muse is better than morphine

By SYLVIA SLAUGHTER
Staff Writer

Seth has written a poem, "Peaces of Me." He hopes you like it; you can tell. He leans toward you, waiting for a little critique, a kind word, recognition.

Seth Link, 17, plays the "air drums" while he waits.

"I love it," you say.

Seth forgets his air drumming, runs and gives you, almost a total stranger, a bear hug.

Seth wants you to have the poem. You take it. Then he begins to play the real drums in his room, a set of skins larger than some cars.

First he plays jazz with his brushes, then he picks up his sticks and plays blast-the-windows-out rock.

Seth is just being Seth, a kid with a kinship to music typical of all kids with Williams syndrome. Williams syndrome is a little-known genetic disorder that steals away a piece of the brain yet leaves behind a love affair with music.

That's the plus side of the syndrome.

There's a negative side. Though Seth can play enough instruments to be a one-man band, he can't tie his shoes. In the world of so-called

normal teens, Seth is developmentally delayed. Unless a cure comes, he will never catch up.

But Seth doesn't fret much.

Listen to one line from "Peaces of Me," which says that "worry only lets the mind grow thin." Seth knows his disorder's origin -- his mind.

And his heart.

That organ led his mom, Becky Link, and his dad, Chris Link, to the discovery that to their tiny son, music was medicine.

Seth was 9 months old when he had open-heart surgery. Morphine couldn't deaden the pain in Seth's chest then. The only thing that seemed to ease his pain was a little tape of lullabies his parents always played for him.

"The nurses were amazed," Becky remembers. "I was amazed. . . . I had never heard of Williams syndrome."

Becky wouldn't hear of the disorder until Seth was in the second grade when he was diagnosed with Williams. And she learned that her son's heart condition was another characteristic of Williams. That and his aching knees and back and his little pixie face with its button nose.

Somewhere in the recesses of her own mind, Becky couldn't bring herself to admit her instincts. She felt, deep down, that something might be wrong.

Firstborn son Ethan, now 20, was always ahead of the curve. He sat alone at 4 months. Seth didn't walk until he was 14 months.

After the couple digested the diagnosis, they remembered that one of Seth's favorite toys as a baby was a little plastic drum.

Now their son has the real thing in his bedroom. He plays at full volume, but it doesn't send his parents screaming. "We've heard it for so long that we don't hear it," Chris says.

Besides, the Links are charmed with their handsome son. He was the one who talked his mom into taking tap-dancing lessons with him when he was maybe 12.

He was the one who had his father coaching T-ball and other sports.

He was so cute, he was the one the crowd cheered, even when Seth was so thrilled to hit the ball in one game that he ran to third base instead of first.

They loved him after the mix-up even more.

As with most Williams children, Seth is eager to please. But there's nothing in the medical journal about parents reciprocating as much as the Links, his older brother and little sister Sarah do.

"Seth . . . what can I say?" Becky asks. "He's the son who loves so openly and freely. Anybody. Strangers."

Sometimes Becky fears that someone could easily take advantage of him because of the generous spirit characteristic of Seth and other Williams people.

There are competing factors in raising a challenged son, both parents say. They want him equally functional with the other kids in his junior class at Gallatin High School, yet they wouldn't change one curly lock on his head.

Recently, at the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center Music Camp for people with Williams syndrome, Seth spent his first night away from home. And at camp, Seth's love of song was like that of the other campers. In music, they made magic, many playing and singing by ear. Some couldn't read music. Others had never had a single lesson. All, though, made the music of angels.

When they sang onstage at the "Grand Ole Opry" the last night of camp, life had never been finer. Seth played the tambourine and the maracas. He and the other campers received a standing ovation.

And for a moment, Seth didn't care that his mom still has to tie his shoes and that the kids he meets in the hall at school too often look right through him.

Seth Link knows far more about himself than they probably do about themselves.

Never forget that in the first lines of "Peaces of Me," he's the kid who poses the question, "Can't you tell I'm broken / and why my felings are skattered everywhere?"

Drum roll, please. There's a young man who really knows who he is. ■

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Music Row pitches in for Williams camp

Nashville's Music Row community opened its heart to people with Williams syndrome, a genetic disorder that causes developmental disabilities, among other problems. A music camp was held recently at Vanderbilt University for children and young adults who have Williams. During the week, the campers interacted with several country music artists and others in the industry, including:

Dann Huff is one of Music Row's most in-demand producers. His resume lists Faith Hill, Keith Urban, Lonestar and Carrie Underwood. Huff's session work appears on albums by artists ranging from Madonna to Amy Grant to Michael Jackson. Huff produced the campers' 2006 camp song.

Jay DeMarcus is bass player for Rascal Flatts. The harmonizing trio has seen hit after hit on the charts including their latest, "Me and My Gang." In addition to being a vocalist and bass player for the band, DeMarcus plays guitar, keyboard and mandolin. DeMarcus spent several hours with the campers in the recording studio.

Lee Ann Womack was a big winner at this year's Country Music Association awards. She won single of the year with "I May Hate Myself in the Morning," album of the year for "There's More Where That Came From" and best musical event for her duet with George Strait. She surprised the campers with a visit to sign autographs.

Joe Nichols exploded onto the country music scene with two multi-week No. 1 singles, "The Impossible" and "Brokenheartsville." Nichols was named CMT's Breakthrough Artist and ACM's top new male vocalist. His latest album, III, has already gone gold. Nichols signed autographs for the campers.

Mindy Smith appeared with a list of superstars on the Lifetime Network's "Women Rock" special, and she had the lead-off single on the acclaimed Dolly Parton tribute album, Just Because I'm a Woman. Smith is most known for her recordings of "Jolene" and "Come to Jesus." Smith participated in songwriters' night.

Jedd Hughes has penned many songs and served as the guitar player for artists such as Patty Loveless and Rodney Crowell. He spent several hours in the recording studio with the campers and played guitar for the camp song track.

Odie Blackmon's work has been recorded by Martina McBride ("Learning to Fall"), George Strait ("She'll Leave You With a Smile") and Lee Ann Womack ("I May Hate Myself in the Morning"). Blackmon helped the campers write this year's camp song.

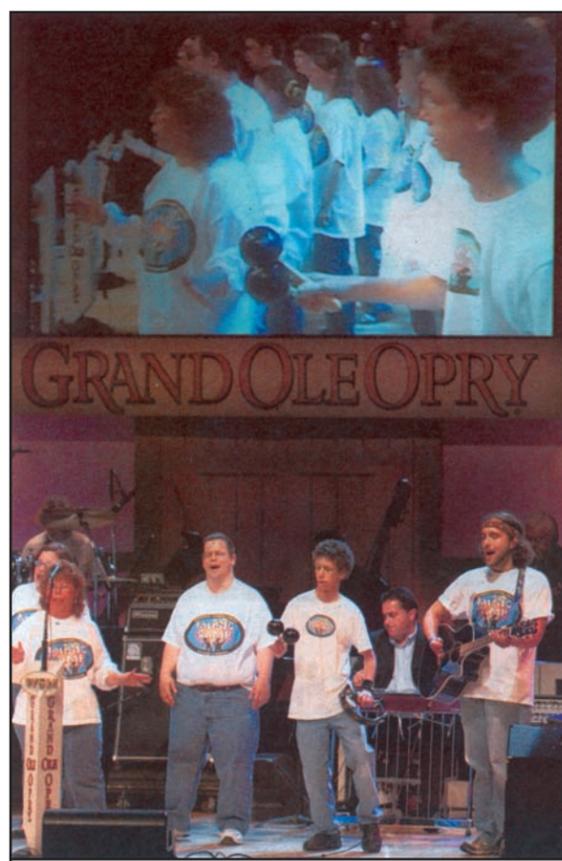
Jay Knowles' writing credits include George Strait, Chris LeDoux, Montgomery Gentry, Billy Ray Cyrus and Charlie Robison. Knowles co-led the songwriting workshop for campers and helped write this year's camp song.

Shawn Camp has written material for artists ranging from Ricky Skaggs to Garth Brooks. He is also a multi-instrumentalist who's played with artists, including Alan Jackson, the Osborne Brothers and John Prine. Camp participated in the songwriters' night.

Scooter Carusoe is most known for the hit "Anything But Mine," recorded by Kenny Chesney. Carusoe also has penned songs for Montgomery Gentry, among others. Carusoe participated in the songwriter's night.

Sam and Annie Tate, a husband and wife songwriting team, have written for Randy Travis, Collin Raye, Gary Allan, Joe Nichols, Reba McEntire, Mark Wills, Montgomery Gentry and Chely Wright. They gave Chely her first hit single with the song "Shut Up and Drive" and were co-writers on Kershaw's recent hit, "I Want My Money Back." The Tates participated in the campers' songwriter's night.

— SYLVIA SLAUGHTER, STAFF WRITER



The highlight of music camp for Seth Link, second from right, and other campers was performing on the "Grand Ole Opry." The campers received a standing ovation and were invited back to perform on the "Opry" next year.

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