The Human Element in AI Music

A conversation with Serge Belongie, Professor of Computer Science at the University of Copenhagen, musician and BandM8 advisor, and Bob Pfeifer, CEO & Co-Founder of BandM8

What makes music truly original? And what role should artificial intelligence play in helping musicians discover their own sound? In a conversation about BandM8, AI researcher and musician Serge Belongie and musician and BandM8 co-founder Bob Pfeifer explore the difference between technical proficiency and genuine originality, the vulnerability involved in sharing creative ideas, and the potential for AI to become a useful part of the creative process without replacing the human instincts that make music meaningful.

Serge Belongie: When I start hearing positive press about a band, I get suspicious right away. I remember hearing all this talk about how amazing Muse was, and I thought, “Well, I’ll be the judge of that.”

Then I started hearing some of their singles. And I thought, okay, I’m hearing it. This is good musicianship, but that sounds like Queen. That sounds like George Michael. I kept assigning what I was hearing to things I already knew.

But then I realized, wait, there’s something else going on here. Something that doesn’t belong to anybody else.

Bob Pfeifer: I think that’s really the heart of it. There’s a difference between being able to make something that sounds like music you love and actually finding something that’s

your own. Every musician starts with influences. The interesting part is what happens when those influences become something new.

And that's an important distinction when we talk about AI and music. Technology can help you explore possibilities, but recognizing when you've found something special is still a very human experience.

Serge Belongie: I know from my own experience playing music with other people that bringing an idea into the rehearsal room involves a certain amount of vulnerability.

You've been working on something, trying to develop it, and now you're going to bring it to the band. Everyone's time is valuable. You don't want to waste their time. So you hum through the parts, sketch out the idea, and see what happens.

They might hate it. It might just be blah, which is soul-sucking. Or they might really like it.

But one thing you know for sure about modern chatbots is that they'll tell you you're a genius no matter what.

When you're playing with real people, they have opinions. And you should be a little worried before bringing an idea into that environment.

Sometimes that's how solo artists are born. Things don't work out with the band, and you learn that you have to be tenacious. You have to believe in an idea even when others don't immediately hear what you hear.

I mentioned gated reverb before. Phil Collins and Peter Gabriel developed that sound with Hugh Padgham, and it started almost as an accident through a talkback microphone.

Collins was in Genesis at the time, but he was also collecting ideas on the side, ideas that perhaps his bandmates weren't particularly interested in.

And one of those ideas became "In the Air Tonight," which was basically a vehicle for that extraordinary gated-reverb drum sound.

Accounts differ on exactly how all of that happened, but the point is that sometimes you have to defend your ideas.

And that involves vulnerability.

Bob Pfeifer: That's something I think every songwriter recognizes. You can have an idea that feels incredibly exciting when you're alone with it, but the minute you bring it to other musicians, you're exposing yourself to their judgment.

Sometimes they're right, and the idea isn't very good. Sometimes they don't hear what you're hearing yet. And sometimes you need to keep working on something until you can communicate what makes it special.

What's interesting to me is that so much of the creative process happens before you're ready to involve anyone else. That's where I think a tool like BandM8 can make a difference.

Serge Belongie: When you look at the BandM8 experience, it feels more like sitting in that woodshed.

You're in your own little space, trying out ideas, working on them, getting them to the point where you can show other people. You can show your fans. You can show your bandmates.

But those other elements, the vulnerability and the tenacity, those are very human components.

Bob Pfeifer: I really like that woodshed analogy because it gets at what we're trying to accomplish with BandM8.

We're not trying to replace the band, the producer, or the people who challenge you creatively. We're trying to give musicians another way to explore their own ideas before they bring them into that environment.

There are countless musical ideas that never go anywhere. Not necessarily because they're bad ideas, but because the musician doesn't have the time, the resources, or the opportunity to develop them.

Maybe you have a melody, a rhythm, a guitar part, or just the beginning of something. What if you had a way to experiment with that idea, hear different possibilities, and develop it further without losing ownership of the creative process?

For me, that's where AI becomes interesting.

It isn't about asking a machine to make something brilliant for you. It's about helping you discover whether there's something brilliant in the idea you already have.

And ultimately, Serge's point about Muse is exactly right. The technology might help you explore a hundred possibilities, but it can't tell you what makes you unique.

That's still up to the artist.

And that's what we want BandM8 to encourage: not less human creativity, but more of it.

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