

Guitar Notes by Mary Amato

Interdisciplinary Exploration Unit

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Author Notes

Summary of the Book

When Tripp Broody's mom takes away his guitar, he signs out the school guitar to use in the practice room during his lunch period. But Lyla Marks, the perfect cello player who also uses the room, begins to leave snippy notes about the trash he has left behind. At first, the two seem to have nothing in common: she is a goal-oriented, straight-A perfectionist, and he is an odd loner. But when they begin writing and singing songs, the music gives them an intense feeling of joy and connection, a feeling that Tripp calls the "thrum." As their friendship develops, so does their musical partnership; but just when they begin to perform as a duo—calling themselves "The Thrum Society"—events conspire to take their music from them and tear them apart.

Inspiration for the Book

Where do story ideas come from?

Sometimes ideas come from a specific character or from an event that inspires a plot. In the case of *Guitar Notes*, I was inspired by a feeling: the feeling I get when I sing. I didn't have a name for this feeling, but I knew that I wanted to explore the story of a boy and a girl who connect through this feeling. In the process of writing, I decided to give the feeling a name: the thrum.

"That's what I mean by thrumming. When the vibrations of the music make your soul vibrate, you feel the thrum. It's like you're perfectly in tune with the song, as if you are the music and the music is you." (Guitar Notes, page 73)

I first remember experiencing this feeling when I was a young girl. My father loved to sing, and we often sang as a family on car rides. At times—especially when we were singing in harmony—I began to feel this joyful vibration inside of me that seemed to connect to everyone else. It was incredibly peaceful and exciting at the same time.

I would experience this joy often when singing in harmony with others. I sang in school choruses and church choirs and also with friends in high school.

In eighth grade, I began to develop an interest in songwriting. One day my English teacher, Mr. McCauley, brought in a record: Paul Simon's "I am a Rock." He encouraged us to analyze the lyrics as poetry; and as soon as he played the song and we read the lyrics, my soul began to thrum. I knew that I wanted to write songs and began to try...shyly and tentatively at first, and then more confidently. I've been writing and singing ever since.

On a basic level, I think all of my books are about the need for people to connect with one another. Moments of deep connection make us feel complete, yet much of every day is spent on superficial details and interactions. Music provides opportunities for deep connections.

How did you come up with the plot?

Most stories (as Aristotle noted so many years ago) have the same basic formula: There is a character who wants something, an obstacle gets in the way, and the character either wins or loses in the end. The obstacles need to be natural possibilities in the lives of my characters. In this case, the story began with the obstacles in place. The boy's mom has taken away his guitar and the girl is being pressured to play an instrument that she didn't really choose.

Where did you get the term *thrumming*?

In the first several drafts I didn't name the feeling that music was giving to my main characters. It wasn't until I was about a year into the writing process that I decided to call it thrumming. I was reading *From Where You Dream: The Process of Writing Fiction* (Grove Press, 2005) by Robert Olen Butler and Janet Burroway. In this book, Robert Olen Butler talks about a feeling he gets when he is reading a draft and he knows he has nailed it: "...the primary and only necessary way of experiencing a work of literary art is not by 'understanding' it in analytical terms; it is by *thrumming* to the work of art. Like the string of a stringed instrument you vibrate inside, a harmonic is set up." I read that and it hit me: that's the word I want to use to describe the feeling.

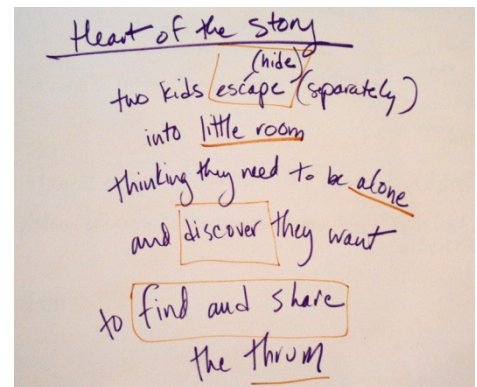
About the Writing and Revision Process

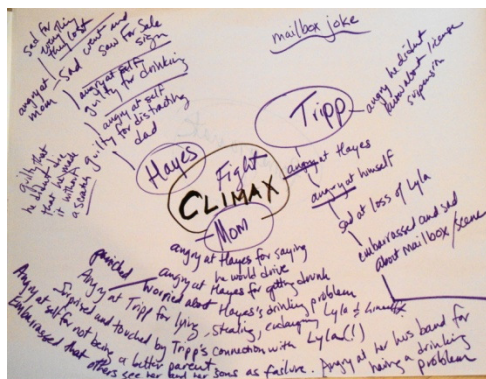
What is your process for writing and revising?

During the writing process, I try to find "the heart" of the story, i.e., what the story is really about. I write it on big paper and tape it to my wall so that I can continually look at it.

I began writing this book on June 1, 2009 and essentially finished it March 21, 2011. The writing process for me often involves radical revision. By radical revision, I mean that I'm not just improving a sentence here or there, but rather that I am changing the plot or point of view or voice in a major way.

In earlier drafts, Tripp had an older brother named Hayes who was troubled, and it was Hayes, not Lyla, who ended up in the coma. Tripp's grandfather and the memories of his father played a strong role in the earlier drafts, too. All of these issues created a story that was too complex. After talking it over with my editor, I simplified the story.





To revise a scene or a climax, first I write out what each character in the scene is really feeling. Then I look at this “map” of emotions and try to figure out what makes sense. In this case, I realized that the entire climax (which was a fight between Tripp, Hayes, and their mom) wasn’t a good climax for the book for two reasons: it didn’t involve Lyla and didn’t involve music. The climax of a book should always revolve around the heart of the story.

I often make what I call a mirror image of the book. On the left side of a piece of paper, I jot down what is going on in the first half of the novel and on the right side of the paper I try to discover if the opposite has happened by the end of the book. This helps me to see what might be missing or what I could choose to sharpen. Stories don't have to have perfect symmetry, but it helps me to look at what is and isn't symmetrical. For example, in the first half of the book, Tripp has no guitar. By the end, he should have his guitar back if I want a true sense of satisfaction. The word *Play* is in the center because that was the working title of the book for a while.

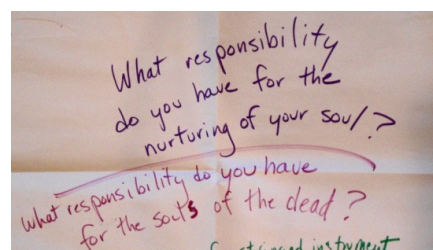


Essential questions, the questions that the action of the novel is asking, are important considerations for me. I think about these questions during the entire writing process.

About the Title

How did you choose the title?

Authors don't have complete control over titles. I propose a title and then the publishing house (the editor, the art director, the marketing director, etc.) discuss that title and others. Before landing on the title, I tried out several working titles: *The Sound of Odd and Even*, *Odd + Even*, *Play, Just Play*, and *Thrum*. My publisher liked *Guitar Notes* because guitar was in the title.



About the Songs

Did you plan to have songs in the book?

From the start, I knew that I wanted the characters to write their own songs. In each case, I pretended to be the main character and tried to get into his or her head to write whatever he or she would be thinking. I wrote all the songs, and then I shared them with a fellow musician and friend, Bill Williams. We worked on each song together. After the songs were “done,” I had them critiqued by two music producers. We took their feedback into consideration and revised a few of the songs. I “field-tested” the songs with students and brought their comments back, too. When we felt ready, we recorded the songs. You can hear all the songs at <http://thrumsociety.com/>.

Mary Amato's Videos

See the following videos on the thrumsociety.com website:

Writing Guitar Notes <http://thrumsociety.com/the-novel/behind-the-scenes-video-writing-the-novel/>

Writing the Songs for Guitar Notes <http://thrumsociety.com/the-songs/behind-the-scenes/>

Language Arts

General Discussion Questions:

Tripp and Lyla struggle with guilt. What do Tripp and Lyla each feel guilty about?

Discuss mistakes that you feel were made by the major characters.

How are Tripp and Lyla different? How are they alike? How do they help one another other?

Symbolism

Author Mary Amato often chooses symbolic names and/or nicknames in her work. In this book, Tripp calls Lyla "Ms. Even" and Lyla calls Tripp "Mr. Odd." Discuss the symbolism of these nicknames.

Discuss the importance and symbolism of Tripp's guitar pick.

Imagery

Two wedding scenes occur in the book. Compare and contrast the two scenes. What images are used in each scene to show the mood and to amplify Tripp's emotional state at the time of each scene?

Character Development

Compare and contrast the relationships between Lyla and her dad and Tripp and his mom at the beginning of the book. How and why do these relationships change at the end?

The Role of Secondary Characters

Secondary characters often propel a story forward and/or create obstacles for the main character. What does Annie Win want? Describe how Annie's desires conflict with Lyla's desires. Describe how Annie's actions influence Lyla.

Tripp's father and Lyla's mother are both deceased. Even though neither is physically present during the time frame of the story, how do these characters influence Tripp and Lyla?

Vocabulary

Define the following:

Addicted	Cilia	Inanimate
Isolate	Frequency	Wily
Peregrinating	Confiscated	Tedious
Polyphonic	Ode	Sitar
Meanderer	Morbid	Resonance

Figures of Speech

Discuss the following figures of speech that appear in the book. How effective is each?

The clock-radio alarm drills into Tripp Broody's ears.

Your voice is like hot chocolate.

She storms back into the kitchen.

I'm a graph without coordinates.

My face looks like a mask.

It's as if a tiny wind chime is suspended inside her soul, she thinks, and his words are the wind that makes it ring.

This room is the size of a Pop-tart box.

...her voice sliding into the room, picking up confidence and strength.

Her voice is clipped with anger.

Her voice opens up and envelopes him.

Tense

Why do you think the author chose to write the novel in the present tense? Discuss the pros and cons of present tense vs. past tense in fiction-writing.

Song Lyrics as Poetry

How are songs and poems alike? Are all song lyrics poetic? Could any poem be set to music and work as a song? What makes a song lyric "work" effectively?

Read the lyrics (below) for the final song that Tripp writes for Lyla in *Guitar Notes*. You can listen to the song on <http://thrumsociety.com/>

1. Discuss the imagery, metaphors, and rhythm.
2. What is the rhyme scheme? Does the rhyme scheme stay the same in both verses? How does this affect the poem?
3. Notice that most of the rhymes are imperfect rhymes (e.g., mops and locks). She uses one perfect rhyme (be and me) in the bridge. Discuss why you think the writer made these choices.
4. Notice the repetition in the chorus. Why is repetition often used in choruses?

Lucky Me

VERSE

The sun was tied up in clouds
And the moon wrung out of its songs
Up on Twelfth Street the trees were just trees
Holding nothing but leaves in their arms
All my days were locked in a closet with the
Rags and the brooms and the mops
Nothing to feel but the feel of nothing
Slipping through keyholes and locks

CHORUS

But you know what I need
You strum against my strings
And make me sing
Sing lucky lucky me
Sing lucky lucky me

VERSE

You were telling your little white lie
Making everybody happy, crying inside
Staying so long with what they chose
You almost missed what you needed most
All your days were stuck in a rhythm
That you couldn't change or stop
Nothing to say cause your words and emotions
Were twisted and chained into knots

CHORUS

But I know what you need
I strum against your strings
And make you sing
Sing lucky lucky me

Sing lucky lucky me

BRIDGE

We can't let this pass us by

Can't let it go without a fight

We are who we're meant to be

Singing lucky lucky me

REPEAT CHORUS

Creative Writing Prompts

Both Tripp and Lyla like to write letters and songs. Choose one of the following:

1. You are Lyla. Write a letter or a song to Annie Win, expressing how you feel about your friendship.
2. You are Tripp. Write a letter or a song to your deceased father about what you're going through and how you feel about him.
3. You are the school guitar. Write a song from the guitar's point of view.
4. Choose someone in your life who you can't communicate with for some reason (perhaps someone who has passed away or a friend who has moved away). Write a letter or song to this person, expressing what you wish you could say if you had the chance.
5. Some songs tell a story. Write a song that tells the story of Tripp and/or Lyla.

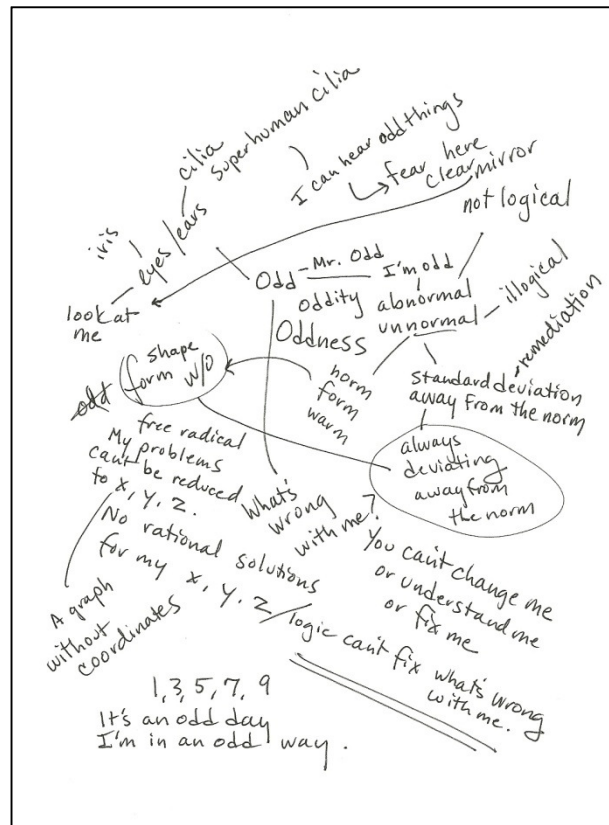
Writing your Own Song Lyrics

Is there a process for songwriting?

There is not one right way to write a song. Every songwriter develops his or her own process. I usually begin by brainstorming. I write a key word or a phrase—what the song is really about—on a piece of paper and jot down everything that comes to mind when I think of the topic. I try to look for and play with rhyming possibilities. Then I see if I can pull a simple phrase that will form the basis of the chorus. I jot down this phrase and then think about how to develop it a little further, either using repetition or adding another lyric line or two. After I have a sense of what my chorus will be, I spend time working on each verse.

Look closely at my original brainstorm for the Mr. Odd Song, then read the lyrics below.

1 Original brainstorm for Mr. Odd Song



Mr. Odd Song

Woke up today, saw my face in the mirror

Eyes don't lie, message is clear

I can hear it. I can see it. I can say it.

I'm odd.

Chorus: I'm a graph without coordinates, a shape without form

Always deviating away from the norm

Logic can't fix what's wrong with me

I'm odd. I'm odd. I'm odd. Indeed.

I've got superhuman cilia in my ear,

which gives me the ability to hear the fears

and lies that people hide behind and what's more

I can hear which crayon's happy in a box of sixty-four

Repeat Chorus

Study in Song Revision

Did you revise the songs in *Guitar Notes*?

Yes! I always try to write the best possible song on the first try, but it's extremely rare to nail it. I usually try out my songs by singing them to friends or other songwriters. I also record a rough version and listen to it over and over. Usually I find something about the song that needs to be improved. Sometimes it's the whole song that needs to be improved. I'll show you an example.

After Tripp and Lyla have a fun night stealing a colorful rug from his mom's store and delivering it to a little kid who really wanted it (and whose mom bought a boring, brown rug), they write a song about their adventure. What they do could be seen as a crime, but also as a good deed, depending on your point of view. Here are my first and second drafts:

Stealing DRAFT 1

Steal the snow outta the sky
Steal the frost outta the bite
Steal a joke and let it fly
Go on a magic carpet ride
Oh ride, Oh ride
Go on a magic carpet ride.

Steal the search from the light
Steal the private from the eye
Steal the Bonnie from the Clyde
Go on a magic carpet ride
Oh ride, Oh ride
Go on a magic carpet ride.

Steal the troll off of your lawn
Steal the tired from your yawn
Steal the going from your gone

Steal the lulla from the bye
Steal the longing from your sigh
Steal the wrong and make it right
Go on a magic carpet ride
Oh ride, Oh ride
Go on a magic carpet ride.

Stealing DRAFT 2

Steal the snow out of the sky
You be Bonnie; I'll be Clyde
Steal a joke and let it fly
Hijack a magic carpet ride
Oh ride, Oh ride
hijack a magic carpet ride.

Steal the show with your disguise
Hide away from prying eyes
Steal the fun and say surprise
Hijack a magic carpet ride
Oh ride, Oh ride
hijack a magic carpet ride.

Steal the troll out of your lawn
Steal the tired out of your yawn
Steal the going from your gone, gone, gone

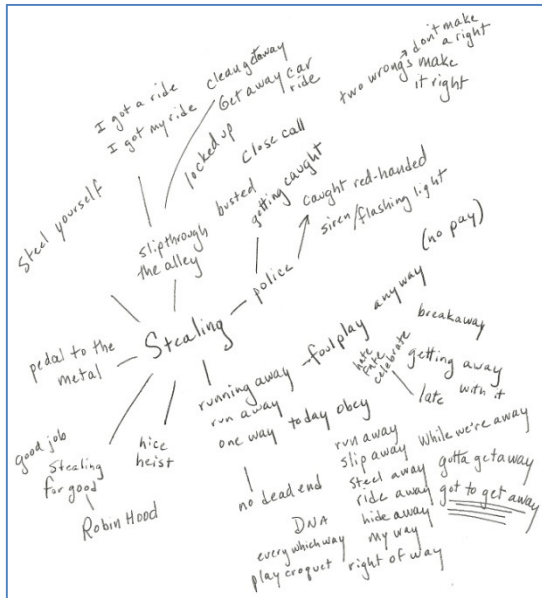
Steal the lulla from your bye
No more longing in your sigh
Steal the wrong and make it right
Hijack a magic carpet ride
Oh ride, Oh ride
hijack a magic carpet ride.

Why didn't this song work?

One friend said that the music wasn't fun enough and that perhaps the key (it was in a minor key) was a problem; another said that it sounded too bluesy. Although neither had a problem with the lyrics, I took a good hard look at the song and noticed something was off. Look at the

title and the chorus. Notice how they don't really connect to each other. Is the song about stealing or is it about a magic carpet ride? It's not clear. An important thing to ask is: What is the song really about? I realized that I didn't want the song to be about stealing or a carpet ride; I wanted the song to be about the fun that Lyla and Tripp have when they're doing this crime/good deed.

So, I sat down with Bill Williams, my music partner. We brainstormed all the stuff we could think of when we thought about the scene from the book and about stealing. We kept playing with



some of the concepts and trying to notice what jumped out. Both of us agreed that the phrase “Got to Get Away” was fun to say (see it underlined in the bottom right corner of the brainstorm). The rhythm and alliteration really made this phrase pop.

Words or phrases that pop often make a great chorus. Often, the best thing you can do as a songwriter is the simplest: repeat a fun phrase. We sang the phrase a number of different ways until we discovered the version we liked the best. We both agreed that the song should be fun and Bill chose a major key.

After this, we went back and re-shaped the original verses to better fit the new song. I kept hearing something musical in my head and described it by singing, “Doom ba-dah dah-dah. Doom Doom ba-da dah-dah” to Bill.

Immediately, Bill played a little riff that sounded just right.

We both liked this and wanted to play with it. Next, we used an online rhyming dictionary to stimulate some rhymes. We jotted these down, too, thinking they might come in useful. They inspired the bridge.

Finally, we came up with what we thought was the finished version. But then we decided to add a modulation up (a key change) to subliminally symbolize that the singers of the song are, in fact, getting away.

Here's the finished song:

Get Away

VERSE

D

A

I'll be Bonnie; you be Clyde

D A
 Steal the snow out of the sky
 D Bm
 Steal a joke and let it fly

G A
 Let it fly
 D A
 Steal the show with your disguise
 D A
 Hide away from prying eyes
 D Bm
 Steal the fun and say surprise
 G
 Say surprise

PRE-CHORUS

Em G/A
 I got to get away somehow
 Em G/A
 I got to get away right now

CHORUS

D A Em
Got to get away Got to get away Got to get away
 G A
 Come on, baby, we can't be late
 G A
 Got a little something to celebrate
 D A Em
Got to get away Got to get away Got to get away
 G A D
 Got to get away

VERSE

D A
 Keep on running til the dawn
 D A
 No more tired in your yawn
 D Bm
 Grab the going from your gone
 G A
 Til it's gone, gone, gone
 D A
 Steal the lulla from your bye
 D A
 No more longing in your sigh
 D Bm
 Steal the wrong and make it right
 G
 Make it right

Repeat PRE-CHORUS

Repeat CHORUS

BRIDGE

Em G/A

--

Em G/A B
I got to get away right now, right now
E B
Run away, ride away (Got to get away)
E B
Steal away in style away (Got to get away)
E B
Me away a mile away (Got to get away)
E B
Do it all my a-way (Got to get away)
A B
We got to fly today
A B
Skid on the sky today
Repeat PRECHORUS in new key (E/B/A)
Repeat CHORUS in new key

Music

Just Play

On pages 83-84, Tripp advises Lyla to experiment with the guitar. "Start with one note and let your fingers find a place to go; and if you like the tune, repeat it until it wants to go somewhere new, then follow it, even if it peregrinates." Either with your own voice or with an instrument, just play until you find a melody you like.

Melody as a Pattern

Try making up a melody by using a pattern. Repeat the pattern. Then vary the pattern to create an element of movement or surprise.

In *Guitar Notes*, the song Tell-Tale Heart follows a common pattern. Listen to the song here:

<http://thrumsociety.com/>.

Use a pattern as a template to create your own four line verse or chorus:

Think of one melodic phrase that lasts for four counts. This will be your line 1.

Repeat this line. This will be your line 2.

Start the melody the same way, but vary the ending slightly, keeping the chords or underlying music the same. This will be your line 3.

Surprise the listener by starting the melody line on a new note (if you started on a low note for lines 1-3, start on a high note for line 4). This will be your line 4.

Harmony

On page 170, Lyla teaches Tripp how to sing in harmony. Record yourself singing a simple song (sing it slowly). Experiment with creating a harmony. Note that many harmonies are created by singing "in thirds" (meaning two whole steps above or below the melody note).

In *Guitar Notes*, The Pomegranate Waltz has a tight harmony, mostly in thirds. Listen to it here:

<http://thrumsociety.com/>.

Here is the harmony for the "oh" in The Pomegranate Waltz. Notice how the harmony line is one third below the melody line.



Sing/Play Tripp and Lyla's Songs

See <http://thrumsociety.com/> to hear the songs from the book, then sing with the karaoke tracks and/or learn the guitar chords.

Science

How We Hear

On page 158, Lyla describes how sound travels into the ear:

"Right now, I'm talking and the sound is coming out of me as a wave of air, each air molecule pushing on the next until it travels all the way to your ear. When the wave reaches your eardrum, your eardrum vibrates, and that's how the sound gets in you. So my voice is literally playing a little drum in your ear."

Read this scene and then research how the ear drum works in more depth (see websites below). Draw a diagram of how the ear works.

Reading Connection: Discuss or write about why the author chose to have her characters working on a physics of sound unit during the course of time that the story takes place.

Vibration

On page 161, Lyla and Tripp discuss how everything vibrates:

"Even dead things. Even pomegranates. This pencil, even though it's perfectly still, is vibrating because all matter is made up of molecules and all molecules are made of atoms and all atoms vibrate all the time."

The Physics Classroom site has great information, videos, and experiments. Check out their lesson #4 Sound Waves and Music. <http://www.physicsclassroom.com/Class/sound/>

What is Resonance?

Tripp and Lyla are studying the physics of sound in their science class. On pages 205-206, Lyla discusses the lab experiment on resonance using tuning forks. As Lyla explains it, "One object vibrating at the same natural frequency of a second object causes that object to vibrate." Read this scene and then recreate the experiment. You will need two tuning forks of the same frequency and a sounding board (such as a box or a guitar). Hold one by the rubber base so that its metal end touches the sounding board, then strike the other against the table and quickly touch its metal base to the sounding board. After you take away the one that's ringing listen to the first one and you should hear it ringing, too, even though it wasn't struck.

Reading Connection: Discuss or write about how this physics experiment serves as a metaphor for how Lyla and Tripp affect one another.

Physics-of-Sound Websites:

<http://www.physicsclassroom.com/class/sound/>

<http://method-behind-the-music.com/mechanics/physics>

Youtube videos

Guitar string vibration <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFXFkggYkck&feature=related>

Vibration: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uK08w-7S8_Q

The effects of high-frequency sound waves on rice <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nO0bSSXmr1A>

Video of tuning fork experiment <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiHOqMOJTH4&feature=related>

Making your own Guitar

Experiment with the physics of sound by making your own guitar. Many videos on youtube show how to make your own simple guitar out of cigar boxes and other materials.

Check out:

Cigar Box Guitars: The Ultimate DIY Guide for the Makers and Players of the Handmade Music Revolution by David Sutton. (Fox Chapel Publishing, 2012)

How to Make a Cigar Box Guitar <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zrt6iTsGi6U&feature=related>

In the opening scene of the Documentary *It Might Get Loud*, Jack White makes an electric guitar with a board, a string, a coke bottle, and a pick-up. Here's a clip that shows only that segment:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCFXeChXfcl&feature=related>

Art

Painting or Drawing

Tripp first describes thrumming this way: "It's when the vibrations of the music I'm playing connect with what I'm feeling on the inside." Draw, paint, sculpt, or create a collage of your representation of thrumming.

Graphic Design

Imagine that Tripp and Lyla have a CD coming out. What would you title the CD? Design the CD cover. Or imagine that you have a CD coming out. Design a cover for your own music. Use the CD Template at the end of this packet or draw your own.

Imagine that you have been hired by a guitar company to design a new guitar, incorporating words and images on the guitar's body. Create your design using the Guitar Template at the end of this packet or draw your own.

Film/Video

Create your own music video for one of Tripp and Lyla's songs. You can find the music at <http://thrumsociety.com/>.

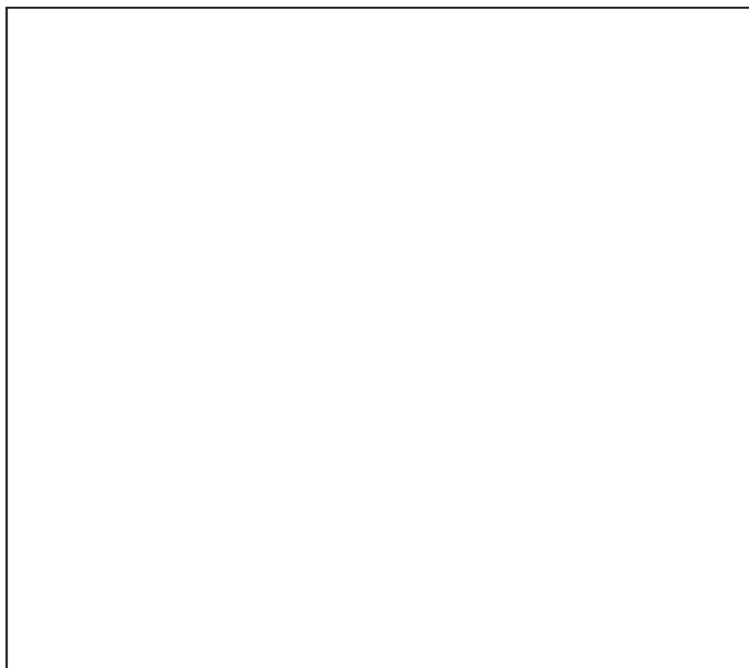
SHARE YOUR CREATIONS by posting them at:

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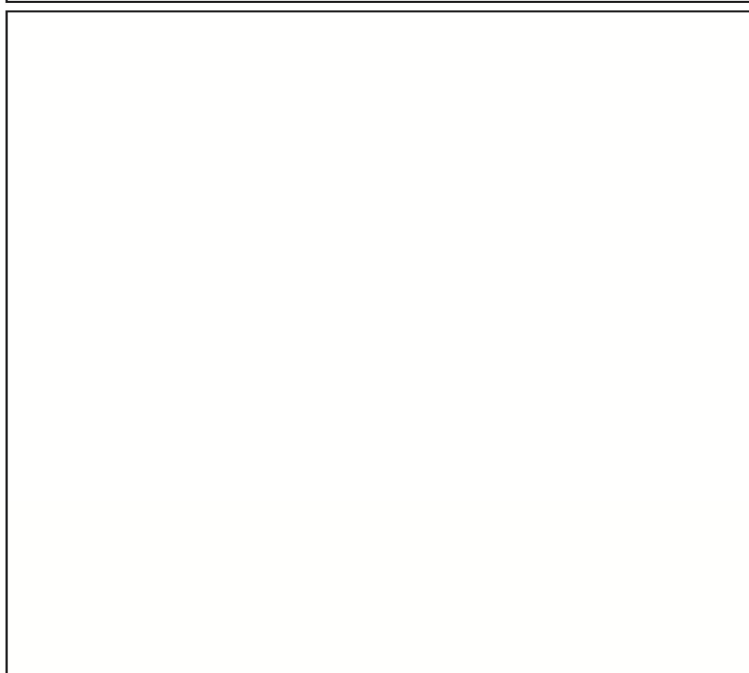
Or by sending your link to the web contact on thrumsociety.com.

CD Template

CD
Template

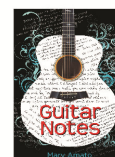


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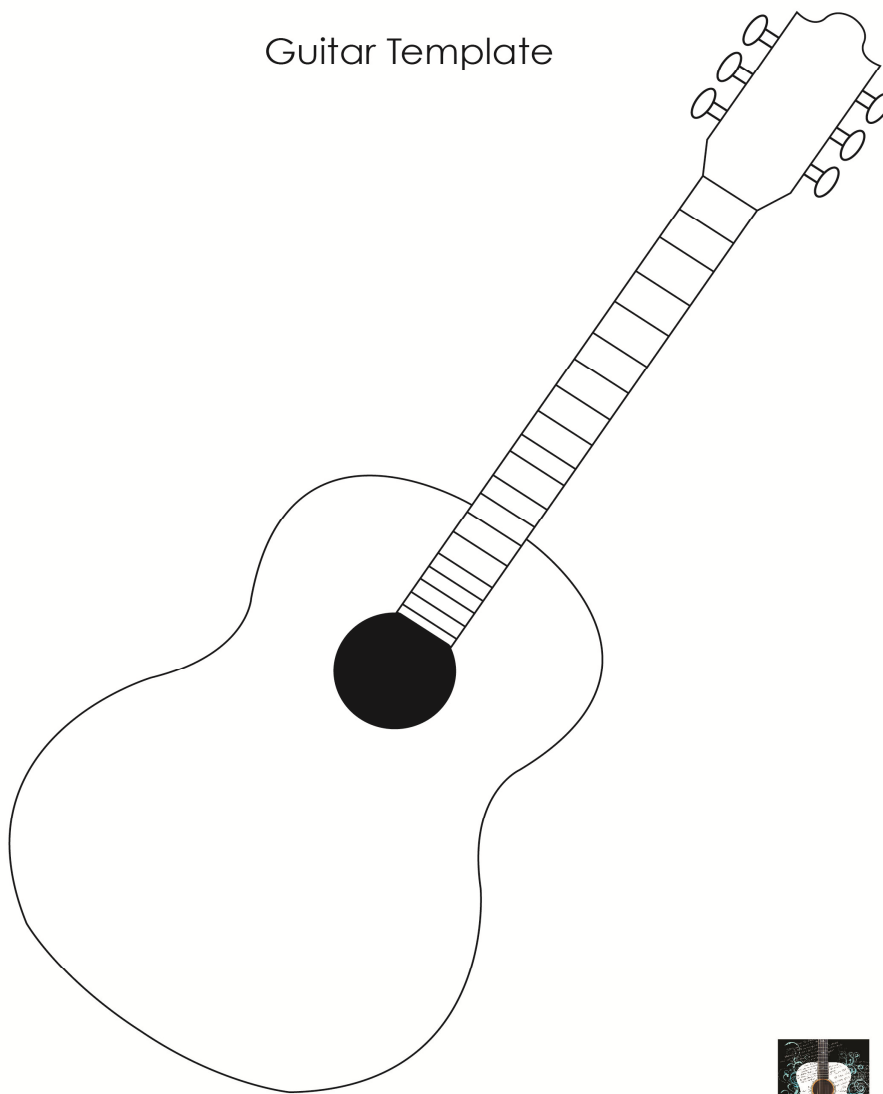


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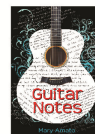
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Guitar Template



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Guitar Template