UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

November 10, 2022
Debra Herrick

Where Songs Begin

It’s that song you feel down to the bone marrow, the lyric that swells inside your thorax, the hook that makes your head bob — and every anthem, aria and jingle in between. Whether pulled from thin air, inspired by a muse or pinpointed like a crossword puzzle, how artists write songs can teach us not only about music, but about storytelling, collaboration and the labor of creativity.

UC Santa Barbara is offering a unique opportunity to peer inside the songwriter’s mind in a series of intimate conversations with seasoned and highly acclaimed artists, courtesy of the music department and UCSB Arts & Lectures (A&L). The two have teamed up on the Songwriting Initiative, a free public series of workshops — held on campus in the Music Bowl — featuring guest artists from A&L’s concert series.

“At the very core of music making and composition lies the ‘song,’” said Benjamin Brecher, who spearheaded the program and is the chair of music. “Across genres, it is the basis for most of the music we listen to today. A word, a beat, a melody, a riff, a poem … how does it begin?”

Music and A&L frequently partner on programming — from master classes to concerts — however the song writing series is new, offering a chance for the community to hear directly from artists about their song-making process. At each workshop, Brecher will lead a conversation with the artist along with a Q&A with the public.

Kicking off the program, Grammy-nominated artist Allison Russell's songwriting workshop in the Music Bowl came just hours before her A&L concert at Campbell Hall A&L.

“We are excited to have an artist of this magnitude for our first session,” Brecher said. “Her music is incredibly diverse, gritty and beautiful, being influenced by multi-cultural lineage and well documented struggles growing up in Montreal. I look forward to asking her about her relationships with other country music and classic artists as well.”

At the workshop, participants will listen to a few songs from Russell’s discography, opening a conversation about her songwriting process, how she makes decisions and comes up with ideas. “I’m a fan of her music and style and I’m really looking forward to picking her brain in front of students. And that’s where we begin — with curiosity,” Brecher said.

A&L Miller McCune Executive Director Celesta M. Billeci said that Russell’s breakout solo album “Outside Child” demonstrates her particular gift at transforming lived experience into a universal story of empowerment. Billeci noted, “Allison has said this about working with other songwriters: 'I hope they feel seen and loved and uplifted and connected. I hope they feel worthy and powerful and capable of being the change they wish to see.' I know that she will deliver an unforgettable experience for the UCSB students who are developing their songwriting craft.”

Across the series, different types of musicians will be featured, providing a wide lens on the songwriting experience. For students interested in songwriting, this is a unique opportunity to get insight into the practice from successful artists. However, the Songwriting Initiative is not just for song writers.

Brecher, who has performed over 50 operatic roles at many of the world’s most prestigious venues and has sung with over 50 orchestras from New York to Tel Aviv, noted that while he has a successful career as a singer, he has no idea how to write a good song. “When I was in a band as a kid, I could never write songs. But I’m fascinated by people who can,” he said. “I know that there are likely many students who share that curiosity, as I did back in my youth, and still do today.”

It's not just about the writing process; it’s also about bringing many different students to the music department, Brecher said, in hopes of engaging students from various disciplines — who have varying relationships with music. “We want our

students to engage and explore music they might not know, artists they might not know," Brecher said, "for students to expand their canon and what music is out there."

For the full schedule of Songwriting Initiative workshops, visit music.ucsb.edu.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.