



Episode #204

**Musician Laurie Berkner on Connecting with
Differently Wired Kids Through Music**

April 14, 2020

Debbie: Hello, Laurie, welcome to the podcast.

Laurie: Hi. So good to be here.

Debbie: Happy to have you on the show. I was really excited to do this conversation and I will just have to 'fess up that I have a 15 year old and even he was impressed that I was gonna have you on the show. So I've kind of hit the big time, I think having you on.

Laurie: I'm honored.

Debbie: Well, so I actually would love for...I'm sure that listeners are familiar with your music, but I'd love to hear a little bit about your origin story. I was thinking about this. If you were a superhero, which I think you are to so many kids, you would have an origin story. So can you tell us how you got into doing this work that you've been doing for so many years now?

Laurie: Sure. When I first graduated from college, I was performing and singing my own original songs in cafes around New York City and I ended up getting a job as a preschool music teacher. And I wasn't sure what I was doing at all. And I ended up deciding that the way I was writing music for my evening performances, I thought, well, I could try and do that with the kids since I don't know what to sing with them. Like they're essentially stumping me. I would come in having like, gone to the library and listened to a lot of music and thinking, Oh, these will be fun songs. And they would just say, Oh, that's boring. That's a baby song. They didn't pay any attention to me. And so finally, I just started saying, Well, what do you guys want to sing about? And actually, one of the very first songs I wrote was, we are the dinosaurs because some kid said dinosaurs and all the rest of the kids said, Yeah, and I said, Great. Stand up, and let's be dinosaurs. We're marching! And then I started playing a minor chord. And I kind of took it from there. That song in particular is a song that I felt like I really learned from them. They marched around, everybody got a little crazy. So I said, Stop, I need some food on the ground. And that's what they did. And I started to write more songs by just asking the kids what they wanted. I also got direction from my predecessor in that job, who basically said, you know, don't talk to the kids -- say it through the music. And so that was hugely helpful. And then I kind of took what I had written there...it seemed to work and it grew and after I recorded the music, and then found myself trying to sell it and see if other people besides the kids who were in my classes, actually wanted to hear it which turned out to be the case. That actually happened a lot through just playing at birthday parties, being asked by the parents of my students to come and sing at their birthday parties. Oh, and you recorded those songs that you're doing in the class that they all come home singing? Can you give me 10 of your cassette tapes? I'll put them in goodie bags and give them out. And then I would get a call from a kid from another school who was at that party. And can you come to my kid's birthday party because we're listening to this tape all the time? And it was very organic in that way in the beginning.

Debbie: I love that we're talking about cassette tapes too, like, this is a while ago, right?

Laurie: It was a while ago.

Debbie: I'm just wondering, and, forgive the reference, but we just finished streaming all of Parks and Rec. I don't know if you've seen that show.

Laurie: Oh, I'm still making my way through *The Office*.

Debbie: Okay. Yeah, *Parks and Rec* is what you do after *The Office*. That's what we did. But there is a character on there who has a similar journey with regards to the birthday parties and starting music that way and I just wonder if I mean, obviously, you couldn't have anticipated what would happen. You know, how long ago was that? And tell us what have been some of the highlights over the years because you've been, you know, you've had a show on Nickelodeon. You write children's books, like you've just become this huge voice and brand in this space. And I'm just curious about what that has been like for you?

Laurie: It's been great. I mean, it's so funny, because some of in some ways, some of the things that I did felt a little bit overnight, you know, that sort of the cliché of the overnight success, and yet, I don't think any of them would have happened if I hadn't been working with kids and listening to them and spending time with them making up songs and thinking about them for years before the thing happened overnight. So I think it was just a long process and a long journey. So that was the first question you asked. When that was so, a year out of college for me was, I'm trying to just put the numbers together.

Debbie: You don't have to divulge too much if you don't want to.

Laurie: That's okay. It was, well, I graduated in '91. So, you know, almost 30 years ago and I started writing probably in that first year or two I think of being a preschool music teacher and then I didn't actually record any of the songs until 1997. So that cassette tape I was talking about is the album *What Do You Think of That*, and the first song is "We Are the Dinosaurs." And that album came out in 1997. And came out meant that I went to a recording studio of a friend of a friend lived in Hoboken and had a space in his is a little brownstone apartment and we recorded it over a weekend on; I don't know if anyone who's listening is actually like thinking about how recordings used to be done, but it was on reel to reel tape, one inch wide, not on a computer or Pro Tools or anything like that. And, you know, it's basically like I sat down in front of a mic and held my guitar and played the songs and then I asked some friends to come in and put some piano on that was Susie Lambert, who ended up in the band still. And actually, I had Adam Bernstein play bass on there, mostly stand up bass, I think. And he ended up being a bass player in the band for a while. And also my husband, Brian Mueller, I think he played some electric guitar on it. And I think the engineer played a little piano and we did some things like, I don't know, hand drums and I mean, it was very low budget. Very old school and that was that was the first one.

Debbie: I was just wondering even from that point from those origins in a little apartment in Hoboken to what you've created in the year; I'm assuming so much of that must have just been so unexpected and being able to, to create and share your work in so many different mediums. What have been some of the highlights for you, or what's your favorite part of that?

Laurie: Yeah, well, I mean, my favorite part of being able to do all this is it's not even like the things that happened. I think it's actually the meet and greets after my concerts. I feel like I know that there will be kids who come that the music has been a huge part of their lives, and I get to actually interact with them and meet them. So I feel like that is actually really what's super fun for me as well as the actual recording process. I actually really love that. But as far as things that happened over time, I mean, some of the early stuff that was really exciting was like getting on the Today Show. So they like put me in the plaza and we did a performance and to people like screaming and holding up signs and stuff and getting there, whatever four in the morning to set up and having some guy look at me and go, Okay, I'm going to countdown and then we're going live, you know, to like, the world or whatever. You know, he was like, five, four. Okay, I'm singing Buzz buzz, and We Are the Dinosaur. I mean, it was just like, it felt insane. And I thought I'm a music teacher. But that's not totally true. I actually knew that I really loved performing. I mean, I wanted to be on Broadway when I was a kid. I always imagined that I would somehow get to perform music. I just didn't think it would be for this particular group so it was definitely exciting to be able to do that and also look out and see like everybody's having fun...

Debbie: That's so great. So I was poking around your website and just reading what other people have said about you and you have a quote on the homepage of your site, which I loved, which is "Laurie Berkner does what Fred Rogers did—respect, validate and reassure young children." And even in you sharing your story, you talked about how you were almost creating this music in collaboration with kids that you were listening to them. You weren't telling them what it should be. And so I'm just wondering, where does that lens come from? Is that kind of how you inherently connected with children or how did you know to do that?

Laurie: I don't, I'm trying to think I don't really know. I mean, I do feel very aware of that when I think about my own inner child, you know, I guess I imagine that most people have sort of an age that looks like a spirit age, kind of like, where they connect the most and maybe what they think about a lot, and I think mine is four years old. I am not really sure what it is about that time. But I feel like when I'm around kids that age are in the vicinity of that age. I just, I'm so I don't know, I just feel like there's like something very magical about that time. And I feel like I learned so much from them. And I don't know exactly why. But maybe it's also that I feel like when I was younger, one of the things I really wished would happen is that I wish people would really listen to what I had to say and what I was thinking and I did not feel grownups did that very much. And I don't want to be that grown up, like I want to, I want to listen to what they have to say I feel like it's, like, totally selfish for a lot of reasons. One is that I feel like I get so much, but I also don't ever want to be the person who makes a kid feel like that I'm sure

I have without meaning to, but I don't want to consciously ever do that. So maybe I'm just trying to make up for how I felt when I was a kid.

Debbie: That's so interesting, and kind of maybe even healing that part, you know, really, really interesting. So Okay, then let's pivot a little bit or maybe even expand upon this. Because, you know, I know that you are connected with, you know, with my community with kids who are differently wired. I have a friend who years ago had written a blog post. She has an autistic son and you were really her son's hero and taking him to one of your concerts and getting to meet you afterwards was one of the highlights of his life. And I know that you do have a strong connection with this community. And so can you talk a little bit about that? Like, where does that come from? And what is it about connecting with differently wired kids that is so important to you?

Laurie: Well, that's another thing that's sort of like a circle to me. So before I ever did kids music, it's funny, I actually worked with autistic adults. Not that I was trained or taught to do anything. It was just a job that I don't even know how I got it. But I used to work at a place called Amic in Manhattan, like the year after I was I graduated from college, right before I started doing preschool music. And there was something that drew me to, I just, I saw an ad for it and I applied for the job and I got it and I used to bring my guitar in and sing and there was something that really drew me to wanting to work with adults with Autism. And I found myself sometimes writing songs about them and just also having that same sense of it's, it's not just magic. It's like, wondering, how does this person I am sitting with see what is going on or experience what is going on differently from me. And I think there's just something so magnetic about that for me for some reason. So anyway, I just remember I did that. And then I didn't think about it so much, I kind of moved on to doing the preschool music. And then I started noticing that kids have all kinds of different abilities, but actually very prominently kids on the autism spectrum, or were responding to my music in ways that I did not expect or understand frankly, like, I'm not sure that I understand why anyone necessarily connects to my music? I mean that very honestly, like I have written all these songs, I will record them. And I actually remember thinking like, this isn't even a song. Like songs that have become some of my biggest hits. Like, I remember thinking We Are the Dinosaurs. I was like, is this a dumb song? Like, I don't even know what this song is. But I love singing it with the kids. And then people were like, this is the best song! I don't know why they do but I notice when kids respond to something, and I feel like oh, this is this is the kind of thing that I feel like, maybe I would have liked when I was younger, or I see a kid responding to and so I just keep going with it. Like this song I Have a Pig on Her Head, which is just I just wrote it because this kid wouldn't start music class with me and would not take this animal off of his head. And I was like, I can sit here and fight with him or I can just start singing about this and then we'll have class. So I started singing about him having the pig on his head and all the kids ran and got animals and put them on their heads. And I was like, okay, we definitely have a song. So you know, it just kept going with it. And I remember trying to record that song. And I was like, I don't even know if I should put this on. I don't even know if this is a song. But I'm just gonna put it on here. And it grew and it when I do it in concert, we like touch our noses and touch our

toes to our nose. And I mean, it's like, it just became a much bigger thing because of the interaction with kids. And I feel like there's something that happens when all wired kids, like you're saying differently wired kids do...there is this strong connection. It doesn't go away it's like they I so wish I understood it I cannot tell you like years I feel like I've been trying to figure it out. What am I doing that makes these songs so appealing and comforting and attractive to especially kids who think differently than we expect them to? And I find it so amazing and wonderful at the same time.

Debbie: It really is. I mean, first of all, I just have to say that the song is called Pig on Her Head?

Laurie: Yeah.

Debbie: That was one of my all time favorites back when we were consuming your music so I don't know what it is about it either. But it's awesome. But you know, as you're talking about this, I love that what you're creating, you know, you're not consciously saying, Okay, I'm going to write this with, you know, in trying to force something you are creating. And it seems like you're having a conversation with kids and I think it is that honesty that you bring to your work and that respect that you have for all children. And I think so many differently wired kids don't necessarily feel respected in so many environments. They feel separated, they feel like outliers and just really not seen. And I think there's something about the way that you communicate and, you know, your charisma and the way that you show up and your energy that you show up, especially in a live event, but it comes through in videos too, that just feels like you're really seeing who these kids are.

Laurie: That was so nice. I just I just I'll tell you that I just felt very seen in that moment. I'm starting to cry. Cuz the first thing you said was, it's like you're having a conversation with them. And I don't know that I've ever heard anybody put it quite that way. And that felt like, Ah, oh, yes, that is what it feels like. It's like, it's like we can, we're talking to each other. And even though that sounds so weird to say because I'm recording myself and someone goes and listens to it by themselves or, or in a group or however, but I'm not actually there, but somehow it does feel like that. And I think that's part of what I love about the live shows too, I feel like I'm having this experience with the kids who are there you know, and I mean with everybody, but particularly just like this. It's a real exchange of energy between human beings and that idea of a conversation. That just really hit the nail on the head for me. That's like a beautiful way to put it. And I appreciate you hearing that.

Debbie: Well, let's, you know, actually want to hear about your live shows too, because I know that you also do shows that are really designed to support kids who might have sensory issues. Can you talk a little bit about that and how you prepare families to come to your events?

Laurie: Yeah, I mean, it is one of those things where everyone is different, right? And I feel like there are different ways in which the shows can be difficult or exciting,

you know, for the same kids for different kids. But one of the things I have been lucky enough to partner with places that have done like, some places call them sensory friendly shows, sometimes relaxed concerts when at McCarter Theatre in Princeton, that's what they call them there. And so doing shows like that, we can actually get a lot of support from the venue at the show itself where there are people in the lobby offering toys for kids who want to have something to sort of stimulated by stim toys and a quiet place for them to be or a place for in the lobby to run around that when they're at the show. Everyone can move freely, can make as much sound as they want, and can stand up at their seat. The lights are not as dim, we don't use a lot of strobe lights, I usually do them solo, we keep the sound level at a volume that feels like it's not gonna be too much for anyone hopefully, and before they come to the shows. If anyone who wants a setlist I often don't have them ready until a few days before the show, but if they're requested, we'll send them out. We have a place on our website for people to go and take a look and find out information about the shows themselves so that they can prepare their kids since a lot of kids feel just calmer and happier knowing what's coming. So all those things we try to do to make sure that, you know, anyone who comes to a show can have fun. And I want to say that I know a lot of kids are happier at a more sensory friendly show. But there are also so many kids who just come to the regular shows. And it's great, you know, because I'm not asking kids to stay in their seats. And I'm not asking them to not make noise and not move around and not just like be whoever they are out there. Like that's exactly what I want them to do. So I know it can sometimes feel harder because of worry about other family, other families or other people but everyone's kind of doing their own thing. So a lot of times I think there's a lot of crossover in both shows.

Debbie: Yeah, and you have a What To Expect page for your concerts. I love that you make the setlist available. I mean we've had a lot of crashes and burns at live events that I thought were going to be awesome and they turned out to not be because expectations weren't met or we just didn't prepare properly so even for your regular concerts you give parents a sense of what exactly they can expect so they can prepare their kids.

Laurie: Absolutely Yeah.

Debbie: So okay, I want to pivot to what you're working on right now. As we're recording this, we're pretty early in the Coronavirus days so hopefully by the time I release this things are going to be in a different space. But you have a fantastic YouTube channel and I know so many families are unexpectedly homeschooling right now. Can you tell us about what kind of online resources and tell us what people could find on that channel?

Laurie: Well, I mean, a lot of what I've done in the past is just making music videos, and there are also some more relaxed, we call them fantastic Friday videos, where I've just sung things live. But on there, there are playlists that put together songs that have more of an educational component, songs that are more movement oriented, songs that are bedtime rituals, songs that are lullabies. There are a lot

of different kinds of playlists, you can find a lot of different songs, I definitely have a pretty large catalog.

Debbie: I did want to draw our listeners attention to one video that I think came out maybe two years ago. That song is called, This Is How I Do It. Can you talk a little bit about that? I think it will be of special interest to this community.

Laurie: Oh, yeah. So that song is basically just a song about encouraging kids to move in different ways and do different things and do it in their own way. And when we filmed it, we always made a point of trying to have, you know, a diverse group of kids on every level of diversity, but we wanted to make sure that the kids who watched it could see kids that they could identify with on any level. So we have a girl in a wheelchair, there are definitely a lot of kids on the autism spectrum in that video. And we tried to leave in moments where they were moving in ways that may be sort of more identifiable as someone who is autistic and that I would be able to like, move, like, them. I wanted to be like the kids, I wanted to respond to them. And I wanted to share just any way that any kid could be. And we wanted to sort of make a bigger point about that in that video. So that was part of the idea behind it. It wasn't necessarily when I wrote the song, but I also got, again, a lot of feedback from people across all different kinds of communities that like this is just how well received that song was and I think kids have that feeling of this is me of being you know, empowered to just do things the way that they do them and that that is what is beautiful, you know?

Debbie: Yeah, no, I love it. And I really do think that preschoolers are, it's such a wonderful age to just expose them to difference and to normalize it. So it doesn't seem like it's something unusual, but it's just a different way of moving or of being in the world because preschoolers are so accepting, when they understand things, they notice things, but they don't necessarily think something's good or bad. They're just curious. And that's one of the things I loved about that is just normalizing difference and embracing difference.

Laurie: Yeah, exactly. Exactly. And thank you. I'm glad that that came across that way.

Debbie: So can you tell us before we say goodbye, what is the latest for you? Is there something that listeners should be keeping an eye out for? Or maybe what's next? What are you working on?

Laurie: Well, in the immediate future, I'm actually going to start doing it looks like Facebook lives every day just a little shorty maybe half an hour, because as you said, we're at the beginning of the Coronavirus being part of our everyday lives. So we're doing a lot on social media right now with that. But on bigger levels, I also put out an audio series through Audible called Laurie Berkner Song and Story Kitchen a little while back and I am hoping that I'll be getting another one of those out. I also have a new album coming out in October called Waiting For the Elevator and I am close to being done with another one that if I can still keep getting into the recording studio will also will come out in the not too distant future. So those are some of the things on my plate.

Debbie: Well listeners, as I always do, I'll have a show notes page for this episode and I will include links to all the projects that Laurie just shared with us and her YouTube channel. Also you can check that out and I will personally be checking out your Facebook Lives and I'll share that with my community as well because we got a lot of parents with deer in headlights right now. We're looking for great content to entertain and support their kids right now. So thank you for doing that. That's awesome.

Laurie: Oh, yeah, I think it's gonna be fun. I'll be having conversations.

Debbie: Yeah, exactly. I just think it's so interesting to see what's happening right now and how, you know, I know Mo Williams is doing a storytime and just so many creative people are stepping up to share their gifts. Debbie Allen, the choreographer and dancer is going to be doing Instagram dance classes at four o'clock on weekdays starting today. So I'm like, I'll be doing that. It's just inspiring to me. And I think it's going to end up being one of the gifts that comes out of this experience. So anyway, that's my little soapbox, but I just want to say thanks Thank you so much. It's just been a pleasure to learn more about you and your story and to share your work with this community. And yeah, I just really enjoyed it. Thank you so much.

Laurie: Thank you and thank you for what you do.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- Laurie Berkner's website
- Laurie Berkner's YouTube Channel
- Laurie Berkner on Facebook
- Laurie Berkner on Twitter
- Laurie Berkner on Pinterest
- Laurie Berkner on Instagram