



Erica Cao // The hallway opens up to a room where trophies and boomboxes line a fireplace mantel which emits a warm blanket-glow covering histories of unspoken trauma: abuse, violence, deaths. Children's Aid and Family Services of NJ houses girls who are an average age of nine years old. There's about eight girls in each home. We're in the one with Mia,* who is bursting to share her song, "I Want To Be Myself" ("I came up with the title!" she exclaims). The song was created as a pairing between two first-time songwriters: Will, a public health student at Columbia University, and Mia.

One by one, the girls pass around a boombox, sharing the songs, and Mia can't wait, her energy bouncing in her two pigtails. It's her turn. She closes her eyes. The music fills the room. Then, we notice Mia is moving—she is dancing! Her arms move in synchronous punches to the blasts of bass, and she sings aloud, to everyone enchantment. She has memorized every word and choreographed her own dance, as she sings the opening verse:

*Used to run and hide
Too afraid to speak my mind
Always thought I was shy
Didn't think that I could fly
But I hear a small voice whispering
Whispering to me*

Created through a freely accessible online music production platform, the song's regular beats and reaching voice are in the style of Mia's favorite song, Neil Young's "Heart of Gold." The beats pick up pace as the chorus begins:

You've got to love yourself

You've got to be yourself

Be loud be proud

You've got that champion's belt

Those lyrics that open the chorus—indeed, the very title, “I Want to Be Myself,” seem at first glance individualistic—to each her own, in Emersonian self-reliance: “suffer no man and no wisdom, no mode of thinking to intrude upon you and bereave you of your infinitude,” or, of Whitman celebration in “Song of Myself, 51”: “I contain multitudes.” In a strand of American individualism, the individual disconnects from webs of interconnection in favor of the grandeur of the self. This is a self-reliance that draws us in with its sense of control, yet also is one linked with a myth of Westward expansion and abundance—Manifest Destiny!

Yet in Mia and Will’s song, the “you” in “you’ve got to be yourself” is not a first-person “you” to the self. The *you* is particular: to the girl in foster care with the public health student; and it is expansive: to the impersonal third-person “you” including Will, and—*you*—the reading and listening *you*’s. The lyrics and song, by nature of its collaboration, encompasses more than one self but multiple selves: a relationship, unique to a bond that occurred between two people, Will and Mia. For Mia, as she shared with us around the circle, it was less of a message of self-reliance than to have a *reliance*, a friend you could depend on.

Here, then, is the understanding that to be oneself—to love, thrive, and flourish—recognizes that there are others who care for you, and for whom you care for. As if Will was in the song itself as a presence of a friend present, we learned that Mia would ask her therapist to play the song with her every session as her “calming down song.” Our reliance on each other is its own form of calming down for the collective “we”—our participation, whether through music or caregiving or politics, a kind of collective commitment to each other against insecurity. To be oneself without the web to others or to the world assumes abundance of resource. But we live in a world with limited resources that we share, and what we have—and ultimately how we live with meaning, dignity, and agency—relies on shared infrastructure and decision-making. Their quality and accessibility depends on our collective choices.

In these choices we recognize that even our deep need to “be myself” isn’t separate from other selves. When we create and participate together, we’re part of that collective reckoning, even in the everyday medium of music—perhaps, especially in this medium. The wondrous thing about music is that it, like poetry, has the ease of capacity to be internalized, memorized—more likely to become a part of the self, because one can recite it over and over again so that it, as Mary Oliver describes, “goes all the way through you.” But also, collaborative music-making like “I Want to Be Myself” can be an internalization of a link to another, who wrote a song with you, a friend, a reliance, representing care and connection. This music is ours, and we are like resonant bands beating on interweaving frequencies in this home and future we share.

**name changed for confidentiality*

