

Defining Creativity E23: Michael Sammis transcript

Debbi: Hi, everyone. Thank you for joining me for this episode of Defining Creativity, a podcast that explores where and how creativity is found. I'm your host, Debbi Ponella, a creativity researcher, cultivator, and devotee. On today's episode, I'm joined by...

Mike: Hello, my name is Michael Sammis. I am currently Chair of the Music Business program at Indiana University, which is a partnership between the Jacobs School of Music and the Kelley School of Business, and this follows an almost 40-year career, largely in the music industry, twenty-seven of those at Universal Music Publishing, where I was Executive Vice President of Operations and Chief Financial Officer Worldwide.

Debbi: Welcome, Mike. Thank you for being here. So, one thing I love about this podcast is that I get to talk to guests who often help me understand creativity. And finding it in places that are unexpected or in ways that are unexpected. So, one of the things I noticed as I was preparing for this conversation, was that you found your way into the music industry through accounting. Most people probably don't immediately associate accounting with creativity. So how about we just start there and you tell me a little bit about how creativity fits into that part of your journey.

Mike: Wow, that's great! Thank you so much for that. You know, look, I had a visceral, a lifelong visceral relationship with music, and as a young man, I was a musician. I was a singer. I was in All-State Choir. I was in bands. I wanted to be a rock star. And back then, back in the covered wagon days I like to say, there were no music business programs. You had to pick a lane, and then hope you kind of wound up in an industry that you had a passion for.

So, when I was going to school, I was certainly exploring my creative roots, if you will, as a lot of us are when we're undergrads at university. But I decided at some point, I go, "You know, I better take something that's going to allow me to be gainfully employed." So, I after switching my major a bunch of times—I was a music major, I was a theater major for one forgettable semester; I was a communications major. All of this to me, I think, becomes part of your DNA, and I think all of them creative in their own right—but I wound up as a business major, and I took some business courses.

And when I took accounting and finance, I thought they were easy. I guess this is how you find your calling. So, I switched my major, went to school for a fifth year, and graduated with a with an accounting degree and wound up working for a big accounting firm in New York City, Ernst & Young. They happened to have a boatload of entertainment clients, which of course excited me to no end, and I just made it my challenge, or my vision, or my goal to get those clients and to work on those clients, so that I could not only feel my passion for the music industry but utilize my business skills.

So, I personally think that, you know, my background, being as a musician and moving around so much through school to kind of find where I was, it kind of helps you stimulate your creative thinking. Because how am I going to follow my passion? How am I going to be able to translate everything I've done early in my career into a profession?

And in many ways, there's luck involved, but a lot of it is part of your personal DNA. And my DNA was left side of the brain, right side of the brain. I mean, I had to be, you know, a little bit more left side of the brain when you're talking about taking accounting and science and math and number skills

and that sort of thing. But on the other hand, because of my music background, you know, I had a creative side and an imaginative side, and a lot of insight into you know being solution oriented, and I think that all played a big part in helping me find the marriage, if you will, between creativity and business.

Debbi: And so, as far as your day-to-day activities in that world, what is a way that creativity you've developed through all these different ways, being open to different possibilities, exploring, and then making these connections ... How do all of those come together in your creative process for some of what you do?

Mike: Yeah, I would honestly say, you know, and this probably goes for any profession, if you will, but, financial stewardship or operational excellence, whatever you want to call it, when you're in the business world, those are really very deeply creative acts. I mean, there is no formula that works for everybody. There is no formula that works for any one profession or any one business. You know, I'm a big, big fan, or a you know a believer, if you will, in the first hundred days.

You know, they say you start a job. What do you do for the first hundred days? You got to. Really, pick apart the business. You have to be intimate with it. You have to be able to understand it from the bottom up. Otherwise, how can you excel in your job? How can you propose solutions that are not, you know, cookie cutter for every company but unique to yours? So, you know, I would basically use all of that. And I believe that like I said, operational excellence is a creative skill. You have to be able to take a specific situation, and make it work for that particular company.

I once had a guy who was working for me. He like, he changed the way I thought, and he worked for me. And why did he change the way I thought? Because I had that creative streak in me, and I always was trying to be that way and utilize that skill in everything I did, but whenever I went to him and said, you know, hey, can we do this, or can you do this for me, or why are we doing it this way, he would never say I don't know. He would always say I'll find out.

Debbi: Oh.

Mike: And to me, I was like, wow, this guy's really incredibly creative, because he's not only saying, okay, first let me research this and figure it out, and then I'm going to come up with a unique, creative solution for this particular problem, given everything I've learned about it. So, you know, to me, that was a very, very... that was a great little microcosm of kind of how creativity can play into the most basic or perfunctory of operations.

Debbi: (7:12) There is a discussion within creativity research about the value of process versus product, and we were just talking a little bit about creative process, but in the music industry world, so much has to do with trying to get that product. And when I ask people about this, often people who are teachers or who are in certain areas find that the process is where the learning and the living exists, and that's where their focus is.

I've also spoken to people who are, for instance, on Broadway producing, directing, or in places where people come in and you have an audience that you want to satisfy. So, there is the reality that product that has got to be at a certain level. You sort of seem like you're kind of living in both worlds of that, where it's people creating, but also how to then make that successful, and honestly, there has to be a product. So, where do you find the value in that process versus product discussion?

Mike: Well, you know, I mean, I think this is an interesting microcosm of the music business program that is now at IU, and you know the structure of that program is really what brought me to Bloomington, Indiana, and that is that it wasn't entirely Jacobs School of Music; it's a music business program. It was Jacobs in partnership with Kelley, two completely different... Well, outwardly completely different focuses, cultures, you know, things that they drill into your head. Very left side of the brain, right side of the brain.

But you know, I've always felt that we're trying to develop holistic thinkers, right? I mean, people who can... you know, you want to push the leaders of tomorrow to view business strategies through a creative lens, because otherwise you're just doing what everybody else is doing. And so, you know, to me, you know, continuous, adaptive problem solving and creative reinvention, that's at the very heart of what makes businesses successful.

And so, wanted to build that into the program that we're doing at IU. And you know, there are a lot of great music business programs out there, just as an aside, but I thought, well, this is a unique one because it really does seem to marry creativity and commerce in a way that I don't see anywhere else. And given my background, I wanted to pass that along to people because I really believe that's the recipe for success of a business and the recipe for success as an individual in a career.

Debbi: So then, when working with the students, often times, they're trying to find where they fit in and so many times, they want to make it. And lots of times, it feels like it should be a formula. You've already spoken a little bit to that. But where is that line? How do you help them find how their voice can both be their voice and important as their unique voice and ideas, but finding where they may need to give, or where they may need to be flexible, in order to make things work.

Mike: That's a great point because yeah, we'll have students in our program that are when they come into the program, they're infinitely more music side. They're a singer. They're a cellist. There are any number of people who play piano or whatever. And then there are those students that are not. They're more on the business side. They're more... I'll call them fans. They're more audiophiles. I mean, all young people. I mean, even people our age. I mean, they love music, and they want to try to see if they can work that in their passion. But they're not as musically inclined.

So, you have people coming into the program who are left leaning—when we're talking about left side of the brain, right side of the brain—they're left leaning or they're right leaning. I think part of our responsibility as educators is to drive them all to the middle, because if you're not using both sides of your brain, then you're only using part of your brain, and that's what I tell them all the time.

And then I also talk to students... I'll put it this way. I'll talk to students that are more musically inclined, that are more right side of the brain, “Yeah, that's great. You've got that. How do you think you will handle, you know, the business side? How do you think you will handle the different culture at Kelley?” It takes a special type of person who can go from music theory to foundations of accounting. It's anathema to most educational programs. It's funny, but you know, to me, I'll say to that person, that is your challenge. That is what you have to do.

And by the way, same conversation on the other side, have people coming in who have very little, you know, right side of the brain. I mean, we all have right side of the brain, but they don't play an instrument, or they, other than listening to music and being a fan of Taylor Swift or whoever is the flavor of the month, you know, other than being a fanatic about music and really connecting with it,

they don't understand it from the inside. So, I'll say to them, the flip side and go, "You have to embrace that because that's what's going to stimulate the right side of your brain and drive you to the middle," where I say getting us directly at the intersection of commerce and creativity.

Creativity, you know, and this is something that people have to... I guess they have to learn for themselves is a good way to put it. But creativity isn't reserved for somebody who writes a hit song. Of course, that's a very creative act. But a lot of people think of that. Oh, I'm not creative. I don't write songs. Well, that doesn't mean you're not creative. I mean, guess what? Creativity, as I have felt in my career, that'll show up in operational problem solving, teaching, daily decision making. You need to you know have that side of your brain just as active, because to me this is what differentiates what I'll call a prototypical student of the eighties from the students that we need to build today, ready for today's environment.

Debbi: Well, another thing that I see, is that even when I'm working with students, they might come in and be from Kelley School Business or the Arts Admin program. They might not be a musician per se, but they've learned guitar on YouTube or somewhere online. And you were talking about students from the 80s, but now there's this whole democratization of music because people are putting stuff out there all the time at every level. They can. They can produce a song. They can have almost a recording studio of some level in their phone and on their computer. And so, what do you think? Where do you see the advantages of that, and where do you see that maybe the challenges?

Mike: Well, one of the advan... and by the way, I didn't mean to disparage students of the eighties.

Debbi: Oh no.

Mike: ...especially since I'm a student of the eighties.

Debbi: Me, too.

Mike: It's just a different time, and you know, and I don't think this is disparaging to say, and possibly a bit more rigid. A little bit more rigid in the way people thought and the application of that thought to you know a common business problem. Whereas today, you know, I think you know we're trying to create or cultivate, if you will, individuals to have a you know a relationship with creativity that gives them purpose, you know, for a lot of especially young people. If they feel like they're being creative, they feel like they're really building something. So, this is why I say drive to the middle.

But you know, to my way of thinking, we're all the same. We're still 18- to 22-year-old young people, and their brains are still in that formative space. But now music's everywhere. Back in the... let's even go back to 80s, you had vinyl and radio. And if you and of course, if you went to a movie or a TV show, you heard music in it. But if you're walking around town or whatever, and you just you don't have a transistor radio with you—boy, am I a dinosaur, right? If you don't have a transistor radio with you, you got to wait till you get home to absorb that creative element, if you will, and see if it motivates you to something. But now, it's everywhere. You're carrying a phone with you. Most students have earbuds. You see them walking through campus. They don't even hear you. They're listening to something, and I think a lot of it's music. Right?

Debbi: Right.

Mike: So it's ever present. It's omnipresent, right? It's film, television, commercials, TikTok, Pandora, all these businesses. It's a four trillion dollar entertainment media business worldwide. All these businesses need music. They fall to the ground without music. Even Spotify. I mean, I call Spotify is a technology company. They don't own any content. They don't own any music. They have to license it from and agree to pay for the use of it. But it's just great technology, and that goes for all the DSPs. You know, even YouTube. YouTube is a great technology without video content, ninety percent of which is music. So now it's like omnipresent. It's everywhere.

So like you've got this... Let's call it the primary creative force in all our lives is everywhere we are. It's literally in everything we do, from the moment we wake up till the moment we get to sleep, and you know maybe with a few short pauses for family dinners or whatever, taking a test in school. But literally it's in everything we do. So I think what that does is it stimulates more of a... let's call it a creative element, and puts that vitality, if you will, into every facet of life and profession.

Debbi: Which I think is good, and

Mike: So do I.

Debbi: Yeah, of course. So, with that, with it being everywhere, thinking more into the music industry part of your profession again... Getting something heard, because everything's out there being heard. Again, I hear these students talking about they just need to do something so unique and go viral, but where is that line between originality and functionality? I feel like maybe in this world that music is everywhere and accessible, that maybe it makes it both easier and harder.

So, thinking about that creativity element, what about the originality versus functionality, and how a song endures or gets heard amongst the multitude? Does that makes sense?

Mike: Yeah, yeah, no, no, no, absolutely. But I'm going to do it in two in two pieces. You know, first of all, you know, when you talk about uniqueness, that's inherently creativity, right? You're trying to solve a problem, or let's put it a different way. There are a lot of businesses out there that are commodities. They all do the same thing. What do they try to do? To set themselves apart. They try to differentiate. How do they differentiate? They have to get creative.

What happens when you have ten businesses that all do the same thing, and they all meet the same needs of the consumer? Guess what happens? Price goes down because I can buy any one of these. So, you know, how do you get away from that? Differentiate your product. How do you differentiate your product? Creativity. Think of creative ways to do something that nobody else does, and it's not always easy, but it certainly stimulates the right side of your brain to try to think about, okay, I have this great idea for a new, you know, a competitor of Spotify. What can I possibly do that they don't already do?

Now, by the way, there are about ten. To use that as an example, there are about ten different DSPs and some of them, you know, compete purely on price. Some of them compete because they say, oh, better sound quality for the audiophiles out there, and some of them compete because they have the better ancillary things like podcasts or things like that.

But by and large, it's really trying to take the business leaders, the future leaders, and have them view our business strategy through a creative lens. And if you can't do that, then you're just a commodity, and the only thing you can do is try to fight against the eight hundred pound gorilla, which is usually a

lose. On the business side, I wanted to say that because that's where creativity comes in. You know, everybody wants to build a better mousetrap. How do you do that? Well, it's got to be different than every other mousetrap out there. How do I do that? I got to get creative. I got to put on my thinking cap, right?

And then there's, you know, the flip side of that was you have to kind of take care of business, right? In order for you to exercise that creative element, that is either alive or resting in your brain, because we all have it, you start with what you know, and you start with what you know, and this is why I talked earlier about the first hundred days because you can't be unique and creative and think about ways to differentiate your product without being intimate with your product and every other product out there, and literally be able to recite them side by side. Now that's a little bit more left side brain because it's analytical, right? So, you do that, you get all the analytics together, you line them all up side by side, then you get creative, then you stimulate the other side of your brain to say, okay, here's what I know. Where do I take this? How do I get next level?

It's not an easy thing to do, but as professors, I think it's our obligation, among other things, to encourage people to explore that part of their thinking. There are a lot of great accountants out there, but... there are a lot of there are a lot of great songwriters out there. How am I going to be different? How am I going to be unique? That is the missing link. If you will, between really above average and superior.

Debbi: So, as we're talking about a goal to be unique and original, how do you decide, or help your students or even clients to decide when it's too much; that maybe they're going down a path that isn't feasible on some levels, in some ways—yes it's unique, but maybe there's a reason it hasn't been done exactly this way and they need to pivot. How do you help navigate that?

Mike: Well, I think as a lot of the students in my program know, I'm all about networking. And why do I hammer that into their heads? Because the worst thing you can do, you can do the analytics or the analytical side of the transaction on your own. Because that's what students are trained to do, and that's what they do in school. Oh, okay, I gotta research this project, and I wanna research it on my own. This is why I go for you know networking and group projects because, you are only as good as what you have and the limitations of what you know, and so you need to network with people who are a little bit different than you, and then you collectively can, you know, think about innovative ways.

I have another great example of that, if you'll indulge me.

Debbi: Of course.

Mike: You know, when I was in my first part of my career at Ernst & Young, you know, yeah, I had great, I had all the great music clients, it was great, but they also gave me clients that I wasn't as passionate about. I mean, Japanese trading companies, book publishers, real estate investment trusts, and again, I tell people all the time, and I tell students this all the time. I go... all fantastic experiences. There have been dozens of times in my career where I'm working on a music industry project, trying to help a songwriter, trying to help an artist, trying to help the company, trying to get operationally efficient, and I would sit back and go, you know, I used to have this Japanese trading company, and this is what they did.

So even though it has nothing to do with music or a music company, or I used to have a real estate company, and this is the way they did it. I was a sponge for all of that type of knowledge, and that type of knowledge is still in there waiting to be exploited, and this is how, you know, that type of let's say background, if you will, comes from networking. It comes through being diverse and understanding diverse industries because it's all part of your professional and personal DNA, and it'll basically all come out when it needs to come out, and in order for you to, you know, break through that glass ceiling, sometimes, you know, I hate to use the Phrase outside the box because it's an overused phrase by everybody, but you need to be outside the box. And in order for you to be outside the box, you need a network of people who think differently than you.

You need background or information of companies that do business differently than the way you do business. You need different personalities, some of which are more left side of the brain, more right side of the brain. All of that you throw into a blender, and you should be able to come out with something unique, or creative.

Trying to do it alone is, I think, one of the, you know, the biggest mistakes that people make. Doing the doing the foundational research, that's okay, but once you get to the creative side, you need to be able to explore that network to see, "Hmm. Who can I bounce this off of that can really be helpful to kind of make me think about this in a different way?" And to me, that's creativity.

Debbi: Absolutely, collaboration is inherently creative. It is creativity, a subset of it.

Mike: Agree, a hundred percent. Yep.

Debbi: So much of what creativity is, is connecting dots, expanding on those experiences you have and finding new and interesting ways to connect those. In fact, you can have essentially the same experiences as other people, but still, who you are is going to experience it differently anyway, so, for you to find those dots to connect... You're making a great case for creativity for me. Thank you.

Mike: No problem. I mean, you know, look, experiencing creativity is half the battle. You know, what do they say? Ideas are great. Execution is everything. We all have that creative element in our brain, and like I said, us as educators and individual students, and people in the business world, it's their responsibility to draw on that experience and that creativity in in their day-to-day profession.

Debbi: (27:11) So, as I was preparing for this conversation, I was looking at all the things out there, living online—you have tons of interviews, and even some lectures—and I encourage people to find them, because they're fascinating. One of the things I noticed you talk about quite a bit is how you help bring a song into the world and live there—even across different lifetimes. Yet you talk about the process in different ways and almost having different roles within the same process that you're describing. So, sticking with that creativity perspective here, I was wondering how you think about your own role or roles within that world. Do you see yourself as supporting creativity, managing creativity, protecting creativity, amplifying creativity, along with how you're being creative yourself?

Mike: Well, at the risk of sounding like this is a prepackaged answer, all the above. I mean... You know, look. I just created a new syllabus for a class, which hopefully will get approved. But it was really just you know more of a labor of love for me, but it goes to the issue of a creativity. I call it. It's an introduction to progressive rock. And why did I do this? I said because you know there are people

who are classical. You know, I mean, Jacobs School of Music is a conservatory. They're classical music people. They're jazz people. They're people who like rock music or pop music or singer-songwriter stuff. What does progressive music do? Throws it all into a blender, and says let's have no boundaries.

You know and I grew up as a hopeless audiophile, I mean I spent every penny I had buying music back in the day. I never had a penny in my pocket, but I had the best music collection of any of my friends. And to me, being a hopeless audiophile, it means kind of experiencing creativity through a commitment to listening closely to nuance in different kinds of music, you know, understanding technical proficiency in music, quality of musicianship, that sort of thing. To me, progressive music, if you will, or progressive rock, it kind of took all those elements and said, well, let's make no boundaries. Boy, to me, there was nothing more inherently creative than that. Let's throw out, you know the institutional genres that we know, or just throw them all in a blender and just see what we come up with and be creative about it.

So to me, you know, that's a great example I think of kind of how you embrace creativity, support it, educate people through it. You know, it's not just a class... if it gets, moves forward. It wouldn't be just a class where I get to sit down and play people my favorite music. It would be able to get them to view it through the same creative lens that I did, and I found in my career, like I said, application of that creativity to the business world. You know, I mean, I think I said before it's not you know creativity. A lot of people think, well, I don't play guitar, I'm not creative.

You know, creativity shows up in financial forecasting. I mean, operational problem solving, everything. It just does. So, you know, you've just got to keep stimulating... make sure all the pistons are firing, and keep stimulating the brain activity, and it all will become part of who you are, and it becomes part of any kind of decision making.

Of course, I still make music. You can see my guitar right back there. I have a keyboard, two keyboards downstairs. I have a music room, so I still make music. I create music. I still work with musicians, so I'm supporting creativity. I still teach classes and encourage people to be creative in their projects or in their group decision making and their networking. That's kind of trying to have make people embrace creativity and uniqueness. And so I think it's all the above. I don't think you can live in any one channel of that. I think you have to basically walk the walk and, you know, and embrace creativity from the minute you wake up till the minute you go to sleep.

Debbi: So

Mike: ...and beyond.

Debbi: Exactly. That's exactly the question I was just going to ask you is, all of this you're doing in your professional life... I can't imagine that it doesn't bleed out into how you live life beyond just the professional world. So what do you see of these skills and of creativity in your life outside of work or outside of this, how do those things apply?

Mike: Yeah, that's a great question. I wouldn't know a hundred percent exactly how to answer that. It's just that it's all part of who you are, and I like to think that you know when I'm doing anything around the house or whatever, I'm constantly thinking of a better way. You know, is that the best way to do that? And that's just because of that's how I've evolved as a human being, and part of that is my

upbringing, my introduction to music, a very formative time, my desire to follow my passion, and then my ability to apply that passion to whether it's finance or operations or any number of companies that are not involved in the music industry. I have literally, and you know, I'm not patting myself on the back, but I really have found some success in each of those areas, basically drawing on what's inside of me, and that's basically how I've been built.

So, I don't think I would know how to go into a relationship, or a professional situation, or doing something around the house, I wouldn't know how to do it without using all the skills that are part of me. Let's build that in the younger people. These are the future leaders, and we want them to you know the to view the world through a creative lens.

Debbi: Absolutely. I just do think that's so important that these young these young future leaders truly are able to think critically and creatively to address what's coming, and we don't know what it is.

Mike: The last thing I wanted to say, if I can, just one more thing is, you know, even in the business world, a lot of times, like even in music companies, you'll go in and you'll see this divide between these people are the creatives and these are the operators.

Debbi: Right.

Mike: To me, that's crazy.

Debbi: Yeah.

Mike: Right? Because the operators are... Well, if they're good at what they do, they're exercising creativity in what they do, and the creative people, you know, whether they're an A & R person or somebody working with songwriters, they have to basically understand the craft to be able to help them be creative. So, to me, there's kind of like a false divide I think in a lot of businesses between people who, you know, those are the creative people. Sometimes they call them creative. "Oh, I work in creative," and you know, I'll want to be, you know, a complete jerk and say, "Well, so do I." But I'm fine. I work in creative too. You know, anyway. Sorry, I just want to because there is that divide in a lot of companies.

It's a cultural thing. And by the way, experienced that when I first came to IU. I used to joke and say, you know, the first couple of months. I came into this partnership between Jacobs and Kelley, and I used to bring a sledgehammer with me because I had to break down a little bit of that wall every day. Now that was at the beginning; very different now, but you know it's a constant thing you have to look at because there, you have to dispel the notion that there is that divide.

Debbi: Well, and it goes back to something you said early earlier where you were talking about people thinking they're creative or not. It's that same label we're putting labels on people, whether they're creative or not, and everyone is inherently creative. It's just how it manifests for you and those muscles and skills that you develop within those characteristics of creativity.

Mike: I like that a lot of those muscles have atrophied in certain people, and as educators or people in the business world, we try to bring that back to life.

Debbi: Yeah, and a lot of times it's external. It's extrinsic. Where somebody has told you, you're not good at X, Y, or Z, and then you self-limit. It's stifling. And that's... Actually let me ask you that. Is there anything particularly, for you, that stifles your creativity?

Mike: People who blindly are... this is going to sound wrong... I was going to say rule followers, because there's nothing wrong with following rules. But yes or no can't be the end. Yes, we can do that. No, we can't do that. This goes to my point about the guy I worked with.

Debbi: Yeah.

Mike: Let me find out a way we can do that. That's the answer. If the answer, if you're predisposed to know, because the rule is this, then okay, we're not trying to break rules here, but find me a creative solution. So, you know what stifles creativity is people who rigidly live in black or white. I like to function in the gray. I believe the creative mind is stimulated in the gray. I don't want to say yes, and I don't want to say no, but let's find a way to work that out. You know, let's be solution-oriented, which is one of my favorite phrases. You know, so people who are not solution-oriented stifle creativity, unknowingly a lot of the time because it's just how they're built. And this is why I say it becomes our responsibility to make sure that the leaders of tomorrow are not built that way.

Debbi: And that's back to where you were talking earlier about being adaptive. And speaking of adaptive, we don't really know what this world, especially with AI, what is coming. So, I think there's more a case for creativity right now and being open and to understand and be flexible. How do you see that manifesting? How do you see that affecting what you're doing, what the people you work with are doing, and what your students and these future leaders are going to contend with?

Mike: Yeah, so a lot of the students that have been with me, or even people who have hung around me, I always tell them my new favorite word, and I tell them that when it comes to AI, I am an apocaloptimist. And why is that? And I didn't make that phrase up, so I'm not claiming I did. I heard it somewhere, and I went, well, that describes me. Why am I an apocaloptimist? Because a lot of people on the creative side, if you will, of songwriting, people who are songwriters or musicians or artists, they look at AI as like apocalyptic. Like my gosh, this is going to stifle creativity, and I feel that. I get it. I get that people feel that way.

But on the other hand, I'm an optimist because there are— leaving Gen AI aside and people who are creating songs using machines—there are tools that AI is creating which will allow you to be creative or stimulate that creative side of your brain. So in that respect, I'm an optimist. So again, I talk about driving people to the middle. The whole AI thing. I try to drive people to the middle. Understand the apocalyptic nature of it, but also try to find creatively the tools that you can exist that can take you to the next level, and hope the other side figures out a way to work it out. So you know, to me, the AI thing is a double-edged sword. It's kind of like I can see a lot of students fearful of it, but I try to tell them don't let it scare you away from creativity. Creativity is now going to be even more important on the gen AI side, and on the tool side, you just got to embrace it because it's a steamroller that's not going to stop because you don't like it, you know there are a lot of things that need to be worked out: the environment, copyright enactment legislation, all that stuff has to be worked out, and it will be.

And I always like to give people this last excuse. You know, in the 80s, the music industry came out with this great little product called the drum machine, and everybody was like, "Oh my God, drummers are going to be passé. Nobody's going to need drummers anymore." Guess what? Here we

are, forty years later. Drum machines still exist, and drummers are in high demand. And I've never seen... well, I'm sure they exist, but I've never seen a live concert with a drum machine, there's a drummer.

And the same thing with instruments like the mellotron. "Oh no, nobody's going to use live strings anymore." Guess what? To this day certain music that's made, we have to have live strings. You know, I like to use those as examples for the people who are entirely apocalyptic about AI. Yeah, we got to get our arms around certain things, but it's not going to stop just because we're worried about the environment or whatever. We just have to find a way to corral it and focus more on the optimistic side.

Debbi: You know, and I think, I hope, that it will never come to the point where we aren't still going to concerts. Right, we're going to enjoy live music. There's nothing like physically being there and have those vibrations. Whether you're performing, you're in the audience, whatever it is, just and it's. I think you used the word equalizer earlier, maybe in a different context, but I don't know. Um, it doesn't matter what the political bent of the person next to you is. You know, if I go, you know, to a Billy Joel concert or to a whatever concert, I'm gonna go and be singing along at the top of my lungs with the same songs that may mean something different to me, but with everybody in that hall or that performance venue.

Mike: I agree 100 with that and that is probably why I would say 65 to 70 percent of the students in the music business program when I asked them what they... what area of the business intrigues them the most, they say the live business. Whether they want to work for I don't know Live Nation or AEG, or they just want to be a venue manager or a tour manager. And part of that, I think, and this is a shame... Well, part of it is passion. That's great. Part that's a shame is that I think some of that is fear, and fear of I want to be working in something that I'm passionate about, and I don't see AI really infiltrating the live business. How could they do that? They can't ruin it. AI, Gen AI can't ruin the live business. You know the way it's impacting, you know the creative side of songwriting and artistry. Like I said, I think we got to get our arms around that, but I think some of it—and by the way, nobody said this to me, it's just my guess—is that some of that is because that's their passion, and they want to follow their passion. That's fantastic. And some of it is, I also think that you know maybe, the AI doesn't impact the live business as much, and that's a shame because that would stagnate creativity on other areas of the music industry because everybody wants to float into this. So, we have to... we have to find that balance, and that's what being an apocaloptimist is all about.

Debbi: I love it. I will practice saying that word and then use it.

Mike: Very hard to say the first ten times.

Debbi: You know, democratization killed me earlier, so this word is going to take some practicing. Okay, well, thank you so much. You've been so generous with your time. I do want to ask you before we go, though. This is the *Defining Creativity Podcast*, and I always ask, what is your definition and oftentimes it changes, you know where you are in life and what you're doing, but for you right now, what is your definition of creativity?

Mike: You know, I think I've said it mostly during this, and you know, so this will just be a you know a summary really, but you know, I look at creativity... Well, it's not only a bridge to innovation, right? If you want to be different, if you want differentiation, if you want to think outside the box,

creativity is a bridge to that innovation, but it also it's like the spark, you know, kind of that ignites problem solving. If I want to focus on it from a left side of the brain function, you know, you know, it's a spark that ignites problem solving and enables us to imagine, let's call it a future, that is entirely different than it is now. To me, that's what it is. It ignites innovation and hopefully sparks problem solving that will help us create a better future.

Debbi: I love that.

Mike: A more balanced future too. Yeah.

Debbi: That's great. Well, thank you so much for doing this today. I really appreciate it.

Mike: No problem. I really appreciate you asking me, and I really enjoyed the conversation.

Debbi: That's a wrap for Episode 23, my discussion with Music Industry Leader—Educator, Michael Sammis. I'm so grateful for Mike and for you, the audience, for tuning in. Additional thanks to August Fackler for composing and recording the music. Join me next time as I talk creativity with the Curator of Puzzles for the Lilly Library, Andrew Rhoda. Meanwhile, be open to possibilities, make connections, and embrace your creativity, however it manifests itself in you.