

# Getting the group together

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## Songwriter Don Freed is still working lyrical magic with young northern students

Sometimes, the best ideas come down to something very simple.

For Don Freed, that means a piece of chalk, a cluster of eager children, and a question: "What do you want to write a song about?"

Last December, the musician's dream of inspiring northern kids to capture their life experiences in song culminated in the release of a songbook, a website and a two-CD set, all called "Our Very Own Songs". The CDs' 44 songs were selected from hundreds of songs written by Freed and his young musical collaborators starting in 1993, and then re-recorded last year — sometimes by their original creators, other times by younger students from the same school.

Since its launch, "Our Very Own Songs" has received airplay on CBC and private radio stations, and been named one of the top five children's music recordings of 2001 by the Prairie Music Awards.

Freed has yet to find a distributor willing to take on his next goal — getting the CDs into elementary schools and libraries across the country — but he knows that if he succeeds, kids everywhere will be singing those songs.

The proof? Just listen to the kids — during Freed's recent tour of northern schools to write, yes, more songs, slower moments in the workshops were peppered with requests for the kids' favorites, especially the giggle-inducing "Me and My Skunk".

"I try to do this (visit the schools) at least once a year, just to maintain contact with the kids," said Freed, who has recently re-located to Winnipeg from his native Saskatoon. "It's important for them to be able to put a body on it (the music on the CD)... But I always remind them that the songs were written by the kids; I just helped."

That process — helping the kids create their own songs — is what Freed loves best, and that's why he's on the road again. This latest songwriting tour began in La Loche on Nov. 12, and will wrap up in Cumberland House on Dec. 13. On Dec. 5 and 6, children at Air Ronge's Gordon Denny Com-

munity School had their chance, including Tammy Graas's Gr. 2 class.

After a quick round of brainstorming on the blackboard, Freed and the Gr. 2's had a long list of ideas to choose from. Passing by "Things to do on Lac

wolves and sharks weed out the weak animals and make sure that the both predator and prey species stay strong.

"They're not mean," said Kiara — but, said Freed, "if you bother them, they'll bite you." Oh, and sharks have a strong

the parts have to fit together in ways that make sense. Freed checked through his rhyming dictionary (hard to find at the bookstore, he admitted — apparently they're kept under the counter, because budding rap musicians tend to steal them),



Photo by Carmen Pauls

**Don Freed is surrounded by a class of friendly sharks (with fins over their heads) at Gordon Denny Community School, where Freed visited to collaborate on more songs. In a song about sharks, the students wrote: "We're all good underneath, neath, neath / Even though we have sharp teeth, teeth, teeth!"**

la Ronge", "Sunshine and clouds", and the generic "Animals", the kids rattled off a collection of creatures they could write about. "Wolves" was an option, but most everyone wanted to do a song about some sort of fish.

A seven-year-old shark expert soon had everyone enthralled ("Great whites have a second row of teeth!"), and there was a chorus of "shark kissing noises". Another child announced that "most people are scared of sharks... because they eat people!" Freed had a tale to tell about swimming with "nurse sharks", especially the little ones who like to have their bellies scratched and who follow you around like puppies. That garnered a chorus of affectionate "awwws", especially from the girls in the class.

A few growly noises in opposition to the voted-on shark theme earned a scrunchy mad face from Freed, who then leaned down on the low desk in front of his pupils to listen to ideas from Kiara, the resident shark enthusiast. "Are you going to be a marine biologist someday?" he inquired of her. More discussion followed on the merits of sharks, including a mini-lesson on how both

sense of smell, for, said the class together, "Blood!"

"I'm going to pick up the guitar," Freed said. "Let's see what'll evolve."

The next step was to pick a key to sing in — minor at first, since sharks can seem scary. Even Kiara admitted that when she opens her shark book, she sometimes gets scared. With help from Freed, the kids decided that they would "be" sharks (an easy call — several were already gyrating with their hands raised like shark fins), and the words were soon flowing out. Graas served as class scribe, keeping track of the lines.

Musical ideas popped from the kids' mouths as the song evolved. The concept of rhythm was stressed, as was rhyming. "Ocean" was easy: "motion!" came from a girl named Eden. What kind of motion?, asked Freed. Silent, of course — "People don't know they're there!" called out someone, as several small bodies half-lunged forward, with shark teeth snapping.

As the kids and Freed struggled for words for verse two, someone recalled an earlier visit from musicians, when they learned that making a song is like building a house and all

and eventually the rhymes were found.

The words done, it was time to sing — loudly, a little off-key, but full of enthusiasm. A tape recorder was pulled in, the song was sung ("Thank you, thank you," added one boy, sticking his fingers up in a peace sign) and then, with young bodies clustered close to Freed and his machine, listened to and applauded by the singers.

Here is the result:

"We're a bunch of sharks swimming in the ocean / People think we're mean but we're not, not, not! / We glide through the water with a silent motion / Hoping that we don't get caught, caught, caught! / If we do, we'll end up in a pot, pot, pot!"

"We're under the waves, looking in caves / Looking for a place to sleep, sleep, sleep! / We lay our head, on the sea bed / We never ever, ever make a peep, peep, peep / We're always down in the deep, deep, deep!"

"We're all good underneath, neath, neath / Even though we have sharp teeth, teeth, teeth! / We swim around in a bunch, bunch, bunch / Looking for some lunch — munch, munch, munch!"