

The Tragic Story of *Rylynn* by Andy McKee

While listening to *Rylynn* it's hard not to close your eyes and let your brain wonder.

Where it flows I'm never sure, but I know there is a connection to someone else's emotions.

Take a listen [here](#) and close your eyes- *feel the music*. That's the beauty of music, isn't it? To make people feel what you feel and sharing the very aspect that makes us human. Andy McKee pours his heart out in this piece. In order to fully understand what Andy is trying to convey on a deeper level I must explain the story behind *Rylynn*.

This story is short and tragic. *Rylynn* was a beautiful baby girl of a close family. Her life was suddenly ripped from her and her families hands when she was struck with an undiagnosed illness. This was a life changing event that Andy was greatly affected by. He wrote on his album "This song is dedicated to Rylynn Coffman, a young girl as lovely and unique as her name. Although she came and went through this world so quickly, she will never be forgotten." Ironically her name is defined as the beauty behind a guitar, the instrument in which Andy uses to convey this story. Andy expresses the emotions of this piece through a story in chronological order: how simple a new life is despite the seeming of complexity, the introduction of a new life and curiosity, the celebration of the new life, how fragile life is, the pain the loss of a life can cause, and the peaceful transition to a better place- whilst expressing his own emotional struggle.

The image shows a musical score for the opening of the piece 'Rylynn'. It consists of three staves. The top staff is a treble clef with a 4/4 time signature, containing standard musical notation. The middle staff is a guitar tablature with six lines labeled T (Treble), A (Acoustic), and B (Bass). It includes a 'Partial capo 5th fret: 6th-3rd strings.' instruction. The bottom staff is another treble clef with a 6/8 time signature, also containing standard musical notation. The tablature uses numbers 0-12 to indicate fret positions and includes triplets and other musical symbols.

Figure 1: The opening few measures of *Rylynn*. This is a tablature, which is a form of writing down string instruments music. It corresponds with fret numbers on the guitar making the actual reading of the notes unnecessary.

This piece is seemingly more difficult than it actually is. As you see in Figure 1 the piece is in C major- the simplest key signature with no sharps or flats. This indicates the simplicity of new life and how beautiful that is. When looking at the tablature there are 0's all over the place. That means that you play the string open- in other word you do not press down the string on any fret making it much simpler than it sounds. This is possible because of the achieved tuning. Guitars are usually tuned E-A-D-G-B-E, however in this piece it is tuned D-AG-D-C-E. Another intriguing aspect about the tuning is that strings one through four (D-A-G-D) are capoed on the fifth fret which brings up their values by a T_5 (each fret brings up the value by T_1). This brings the tuning heard to G-D-C-G-C-E which clearly outlines the major I chord, or C major. It is clear that it is in C major and not a minor because the first chord is a C major chord

and a minor is not outlined by the open strings. This makes sense because at this point in the piece Andy is celebrating the birth of a new life.

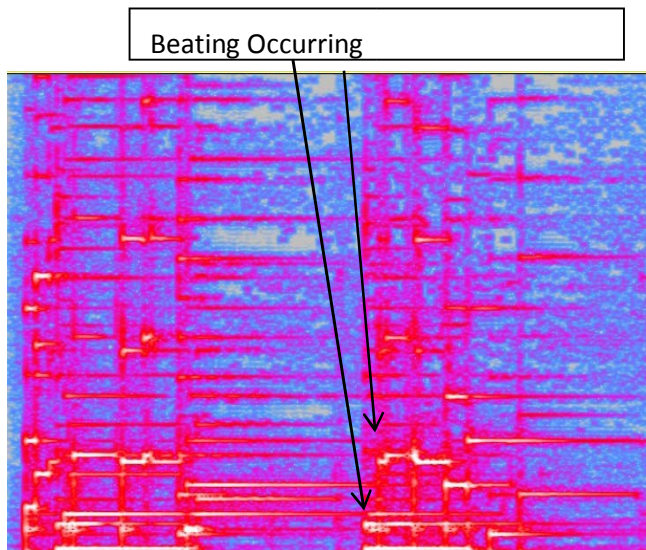


Figure 2: The spectrogram of the opening passage.

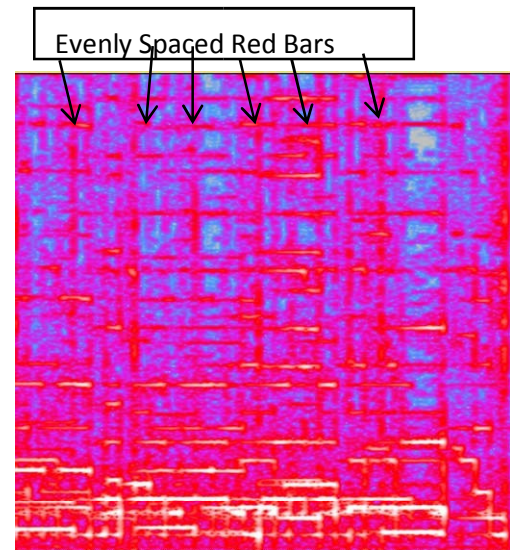


Figure 3: The spectrogram of the second section (43 sec).

When a baby is born you never see frowns on the families' faces. It is all about celebration and enjoyment. Though this piece is based on the loss of a significant person, the entire work is depicted as a celebration of the opportunities they had together. Figure 4 is a dissonance curve in the most dissonant portion of this piece, about two minutes in (Mourning the loss of Rylynn). Even at this moment the dissonance levels are relatively low, by that I mean over all the levels maintain a low dissonance. Yes, there are some moments with peaks, but that is normal for any music. The point is that it is not above normal- i.e not more dissonant than any other song, regardless of how it is mourning the loss of Rylynn because of conscious effort by McKee to remind himself that this song is in celebration of Rylynn's life over all.

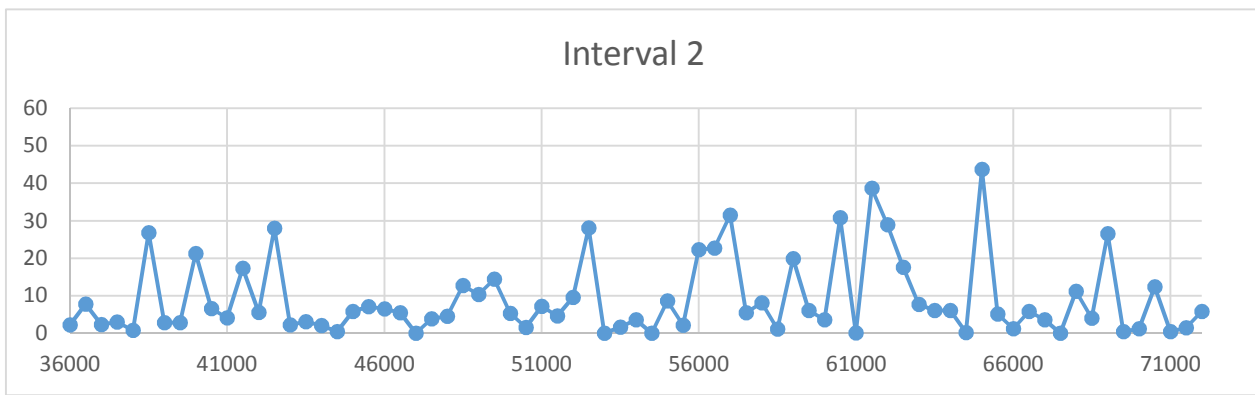


Figure 4

In Figure 1 *Rylynn* is being introduced to conscience existence to the world and everything surrounding her. It's a spark of curiosity with millions of questions to be answered. The spectrogram actually does a good job at visualizing this phenomenon. Notice when comparing the beginning of the piece in Figure 2 to the second section in Figure 3 (the biggest chunk of *Rylynn*) there is a lot less activity. It does two things: show appreciation of new life and demonstrates the characteristics of a child, that being the act of learning. Referring back to Figure 1 the chord progression goes as follows: I-V-I-V-V. Notice the importance of the V chord. After establishing the I chord after the initial cadence the V chord is seemingly more important than the I chord, and it's apparent when listening to it. They never fully resolve. It's the literal form a musical question mark. Once the character of the child is set, Andy continues by demonstrating the feelings of everyone who this child is touching.



Figure 5: A segment of the “celebration” section

The celebration begins at the pickups to measure 14 or at 43 seconds. This is clearly the most important part of the piece. It is repeated numerous times and takes up about 3/4th of the entire work. It is clear for that reason that Andy believes that when a loved one is lost it is most important to focus on the celebration of their life than the loss of it and in return be thankful for their coexistence and affect you share on each other’s lives. This is showed in Figure 45.

Specifically, one of the opening themes dictating the character of a child returns and influences the music. In measure 38 of Figure 5 you see the same theme as in measure 6 of Figure 1.

Suddenly the celebration is interrupted.

Notice the increased intensity of the Red bars

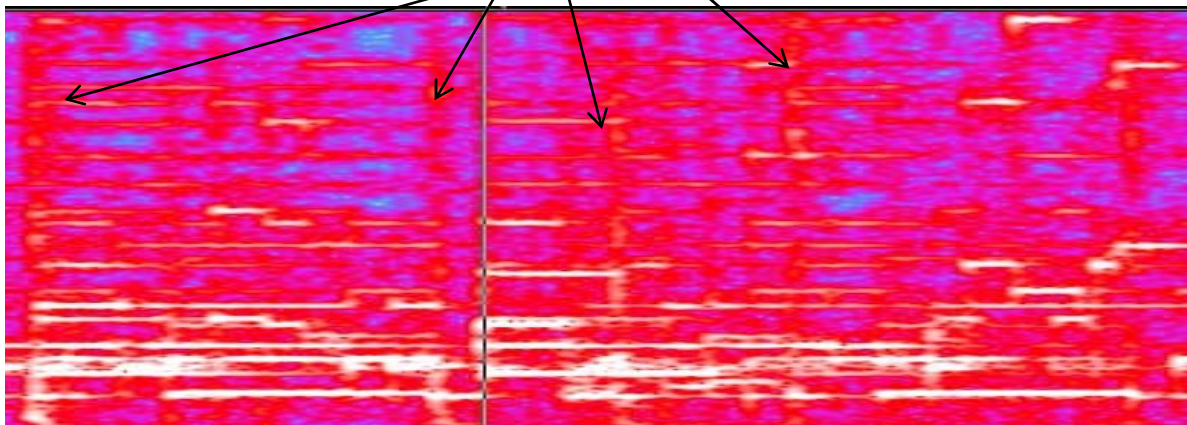


Figure 6: Segment of the “Life is Fragile” Section

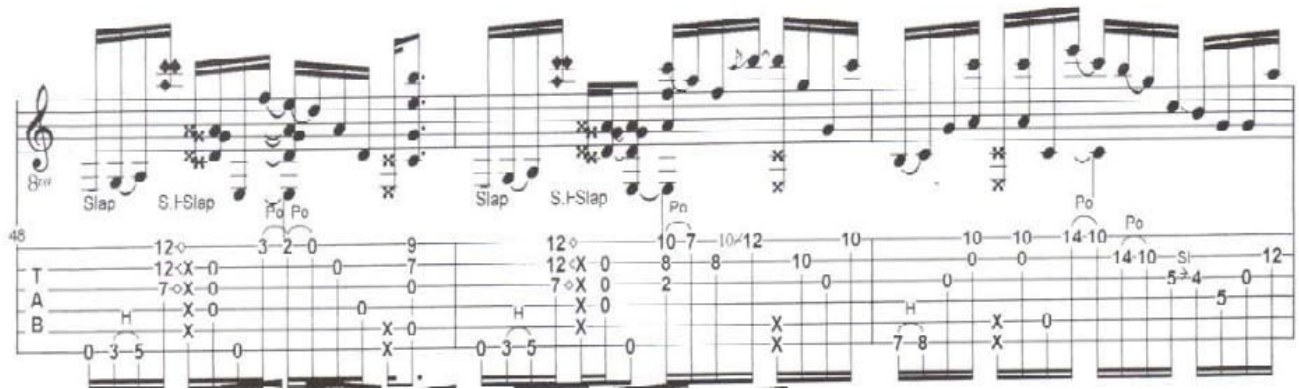


Figure 7: Segment of the “Life is Fragile” Section

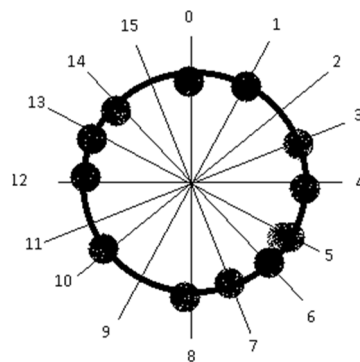


Figure 8: Rhythm Circle of “Life is Fragile” Section

At measure 45 or about 2:15 the song takes a sudden turn. There is a sense of much unsettledness that symbolizes *Rylynn* getting sick. This is achieved through a few different ways. Up to this point, excluding the intro, Andy hits the strings on beats two and four creating a “groove” percussive effect. This is clearly shown in Figure 3 where the spectrogram shows evenly spaced bright red lines going straight up and down. This effect is very subtle and is a background effect, however when compared to measure 45 it becomes much more violent. This is shown in Figure 6. The vertical lines are much thicker and brighter with activity than in Figure 3. The importance of the V chord also comes back, only this time in an unsettling way unlike

previous versions of the “question mark.” This is apparent in Figure 7. The V chord is being outlined a significant amount (G-B-D-A) and not ever feeling resolved because of the rapid motion of the notes and when it is “resolved” it is generally resolved as a I7 chord (C-E-G-B), which really only causes more tension, which is shown in the last beat of measure 48 of Figure 7. The same tension and beating occurs in the harmonics as indicated in Figure 7. It causes more tension because a I chord is considered to be the “home” chord. It’s where there is supposed to be comfort and at ease, however when you make it a 7 chord it has a great affect. It causes the I chord to have pull to the IV chord. However, Andy goes back to the V chord which means the progression goes as follows: V-I7-V. The V chord wants to resolve to the I chord and the I7 chord wants to resolve to the IV chord, neither of which happen. Add that to the constant sixteenth notes, the beating seen in Figure 6, and the increasing intensity of the beat 2 and 4 slaps this segment of the piece is very unstable- which makes it easy to see/understand that this is *Rylynn* battling the unexpected illness. The rhythm instability is shown in Figure 8. The rhythm chosen for the circle is a rhythm that is repeated many times in that section and is very congested with sixteenth notes, thus showing the constant instability. The “celebration” theme then comes back as a sense of enjoying the time left with the beautiful girl Rylynn

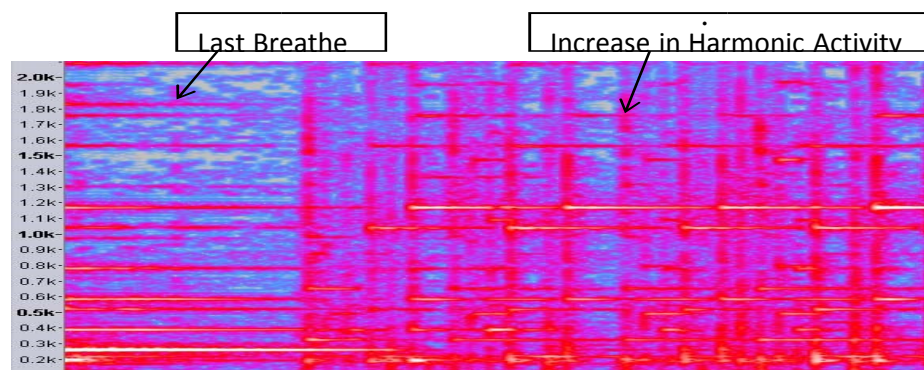


Figure 9: Excerpt from the “Peaceful Transition” segment

As we already know, *Rylynn* ultimately lost her life at the young age of 2. Her last breathe is indicated through the sudden lack of activity shown to the left in Figure 9. This part of the peace, measures 86 to the end, are encoded with a symbolic gesture of harmonics. Harmonics on a guitar are achieved by lightly touching the guitar strings on the proper spot and pulling off quickly. It is achievable on many different points of the string, in this case its fret 7 (which is actually fret 12 after adding the T_5 value from the capo). As shown in Figure 8, the harmonics are very strong and are symbolic for heaven. Heaven is an idea of peace and for some a reason to be able to let go of a close friend with the idea of them being in a better place. This feeling is strong during the end of the piece and it repeats while softly fading to silence, which in my opinion is the most powerful part. After listening to that piece for the five minutes my mind starts racing with thoughts and once the music starts fading out all I have left to listen to are my thoughts- something I think people need to listen to more often, Andy McKee is no exception.

It is clear despite trying to tell a story Andy McKee is listening to his thoughts and expressing them at the same time. In the beginning of the piece when I mentioned the curiosity, there is also a sense of remorse and confusion. In Figure 1 measure 2 there are the notes as follows: C-E G-D. This is not one chord two playing over top of each other. It is the I and the V chord mashed together. The two chords that have a push and pull affect and used to direct the line and movement of a piece compacted. This is Andy being confused. Perhaps wondering why such a wonderful, beautiful being of only 2 years old was not given the opportunity to answer her curiosity? There is beating all over the place- shown in Figures 2, 3, and 6. This beating even

occurs during the “Celebration” part, though it is not 100% apparent to the conscience mind while listening, it does have an emotional affect. What he does is he adds the 2nd of the chord to create a subtle uneasiness farther questioning “Why Rylynn?” For example- the IV chord in C is F major, notated as F-A-C. What Andy does is he adds the 2nd of that chord or adds a note increasing the value of the root by S₁ in addition to the root. So for IV it would be F-G-A-C. In theory this is called a 9 chord because the 2nd is also the 9th degree. This is not a full 9th chord because a full 9th chord goes as follow: 1st, 3rd, 5th, 7th, and 9th. The chords he writes are 1st, 3rd, 5th, and 9th. The 7th is missing with makes this chord a sus9 chord where sus means suspended. It is called a suspended chord because the 9th tone will want to resolve down to the 8th tone or tonic. It is above the tonic, thus suspended. In conclusion *Rylynn* by Andy McKee expresses the story of how even a short life can affect the people around them. The simplicity within the character of curiosity, the celebration of life, the demonstration of how fragile life is, the pain of a loss, and the peaceful acceptance of the idea of a “better place” all drive different emotions of Andy McKee’s *Rylynn*. The beauty is these emotions come together and simulate the feeling of life and in more ways than one. It teaches us lessons of both how grateful we should be to be here today and how we can learn from anyone- even someone as young as 2 years old. Rest in Peace *Rylynn*, Rest in Peace.