But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

**How Do You Whistle?**

May 7, 2021

**Jane 00:15**
This is But Why: a Podcast for Curious Kids. I'm Jane Lindholm. Our theme music sounds a little different today, doesn't it? Our theme music sounds a little different today because you are the ones whistling. I'm so excited to hear all of your wonderful whistles. We just heard Audrey, Aaron and Holden from Burlington, Ontario, Burnsville, Minnesota and Southern Ontario, Canada, respectively. Here are a few more of you.

**Ava 00:57**
Hi, my name is Ava. I'm 13 years old, and I live in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Bye, I love your show!

**Jane 01:19**
And here are twins Madison and Kayla from Lexington, Massachusetts. Those were so great. And so many more of you sent us your own versions of the But Why theme music and you whistling it? It was so awesome to spend the last few days listening to all you great whistlers we've put together a chorus of all of the whistling entries we got. And we're going to play that for you later in the episode. But first, do you want to hear the guy who actually whistled the theme song you know so well?

**Luke 02:14**
Hi, my name is Luke Reynolds. I'm a musician, guitarist and a multi-instrumentalist. That means I play a lot of different instruments. And I was glad when my friend Jane asked if I'd want to talk about whistling.

**Jane 02:30**
Luke performs in the band Guster, and he plays on a lot of other musicians' records as well. He also makes really cool music and albums of his own. Luke told me he actually whistles a lot, not just in the finished versions of his songs, but sometimes when he's trying to figure things out.

**Luke 02:46**
Whistling is easier for me than singing because I have more control over the subtleties and embellishments than I do with my human voice. So I'll often use whistling as a way of trying out different ideas for the guitar or the voice before I actually play them.
Jane 03:07
One thing you may not know about our theme song is that it actually comes from a song Luke wrote for one of his solo albums, and it has words! The song is called no way to know what's coming. The whistling part is right at the beginning, just like you hear it in our show. I asked Luke to tell us a little bit about why he decided to use whistling in this song.

Luke 03:30
On the day we cut that song, we recorded it two or three times. And I didn't practice it much at all. Before we got started, I think at the last minute, I actually had the idea to put the whistling in there. So it's pretty off the cuff. There's a lot of imperfections and I decided to leave more in there because I thought it made it feel more human. Back in time, way back to before the stars were born. There was no cities, buildings or people. There were no sunsets in the evening. And then one day, everything happened... I was looking for an instrument to suggest that the lead melody that was out of the way of the acoustic and that it inhabited a different frequency band. So the acoustic guitars were kind of in the mid-range, the whistling was way up top. You could adjust this, easily use another instrument like a violin or a shimmery synthesizer way up high. But that day there was something that was pretty cool in the way that the voice and the right hand of the guitar lock up together in a really cool and human way.

Jane 05:00
I'm so glad we finally got a chance to talk to Luke on this show because his music is such a huge and recognizable part of But Why isn't it? So many of you are here adults tell us that you walk around your home whistling or humming the theme music, and so do we. But what if you don't know how to whistle? We're going to spend some time practicing our whistling in this episode and talking with people who know how to do it really well. Maybe it'll help us learn how to do it or do it a little better. A few years ago, I met a college student who was actually one of the world champions of whistling. Did you know there are whistling champions? He has some good tips on practicing how to whistle.

Yuki 05:47
Hi, my name is Yuki Takeda. I am a whistler, a musical whistler. I started whistling when I was 10 years old, because all my friends could whistle, but I couldn't whistle. If you have no idea how to whistle, this is the way to do it. You say he and then you. And what you want to do is to intensify the hissing noise that you get from the H. By shaping your mouth correctly, you can amplify it so that it would sound like whistling. The most important thing is where you put your tongue. So the tip of your tongue must touch your lower teeth or your lower gum in the front, both sides of your tongue you must be touching the upper back teeth. And then you fold your tongue a little bit vertically so that it would make a path of air in the middle. And then you want to whistle downwards not straight forward. That's the key. So if
you've been whistling and you've been hearing this wind noise that's almost whistling but not there. If you whistle downwards, you'll be able to get the note in five seconds. My one and only policy about whistling is that if I am annoying someone then I would not whistle. So I asked everyone around me to tell me to stop whenever it's annoying because whistling should be a happy thing. So these are different techniques that you can use for whistling: glissando, trills, inhaling and exhaling, and double tones. And I've been trying to incorporate whistling into beatboxing recently. It sounds like this. I am wanting to be the whistler who changes the image of whistling. Whistling has been a performance for show content, but not really been perceived as a musical instrument. You cannot not be happy when your whistle and if everyone's whistling, the world should be more peaceful.

Jane 08:59
That was Yuki Takeda recorded a few years ago when he was still a college student. Wasn't that whistling so impressive? And I agree with Yuki the world does seem like it would be a more peaceful place if we just whistled more. It's hard to feel sad or mad when you're whistling isn't it? That's something we discussed with our other guests for today's episode. Check this out. Oh, it's so beautiful.

Emily 09:42
Oh, thank you. Well, it's really fun to do. My name is Emily Eagen. I am a musician of all kinds. I'm a singer. I am a ukulele player, a pianist, a guitarist, I write songs and most of all I whistle.

Jane 09:57
What does it mean to be like a professional whistler or to say what you are as a job is a whistler? That's really cool.

Emily 10:05
That's a really good question. Because it's something that I've kind of had to find my own way with. I started out singing, but every time I sang, and there was a chance to do a little bit of extra stuff, I would always throw in a little whistling line. And people got really excited about it. And then I started whistling for things like sports games, where I would go and whistle the Star Spangled Banner. And I would whistle just to make people laugh. And eventually, I started whistling, when I whistle in all my performances, I started whistling for kids, I started whistling for grownups, I even started whistling, like opera arias and things like that. So basically, anything that you can sing, or hum, you can whistle. And that's what I've tried to do. Whistling used to be a really fancy art form. And you could find people whistling professionally all over the place. So one of the things that I like to do is remind people that that could happen again. So if I sing a bunch of songs, then instead of singing, I'll get up there in a fancy dress or get up there with my instrument, and I'll just whistle instead. And I'll really try to remind people that whistling can do all these amazing things that any instrument or voice can do.
Can you give us an example?

What's really cool is when you can whistle something really that goes really high and really low. So for example, I have to lick my lips a little bit. You can whistle all kinds of fancy stuff like that, like you probably know.

Oh, that was beautiful.

Thank you. So you could so it's really fun to show people that you don't just have to whistle little tunes, you can actually was a big, fancy orchestral things.

Yeah. And and can you whistle things like sounds that that machines make or that birds make and other things?

I love making little bird sounds. If I hear a bird outside, I try to whistle back to it. So if a bird goes, I might go. And see if I can have a little conversation with it or see if it can imitate me.

Okay, so I want to know how to do this. And I can whistle a little bit, but not always, sometimes I try to whistle and it doesn't quite come out right. And I know that for a lot of young people especially it takes a lot of practice to whistle. So let's get into the actual physical art and skill of whistling with some of the questions that we've gotten.

I'm Aurelia. I live in New York, and six in three quarters. And my question is, how do people whistle?

Hi, my name is Alma. I'm five years old. I live in Oakland, California. And my question is, how we whistle? And why is wrestling so hard?

How do people whistle and Ellie asks kind of a similar question so we can put them together?
Ellie 13:09
I'm five years old. My question is, how does whistling make a sound?

Parent 13:17
And where are you from?

Ellie 13:19
I'm from Fort Drum, New York.

Jane 13:22
How does whistling make sound? So maybe we can talk about the actual physical way we whistle with our throats?

Emily 13:30
Hmm, those are really, really good questions. Let's see, well, the thing that you whistle the most with, it looks like it's your lips. And the style of whistling that I do is called pucker whistling. But the thing you're really, really using is your tongue.

Jane 13:43
I'm just going to cut in here because we actually had a question about tongues from Cecelia.

Cecelia 13:48
I am seven years old, and I'm from Ames, Iowa. My question is, why does your tongue depend on how high or low your whistle is?

Emily 13:56
So if you want to practice whistling, I would say the first thing to do, you should lick your lips. Because if your lips are dry, when the air passes it doesn't feel very good. So you should lick your lips or use some lip balm. I like to use cherry lip balm. And then you stick your tongue touching your bottom teeth. So your tongue touches your bottom teeth. And what you're going to do. You're kind of going to go like this, u u, u u u u, but instead of saying those words, you're going to look for a way to make it with a little stream of air. And you're trying to figure out how to let air pass on the top of your tongue and out your lips. You're making a little chamber you're making a tiny little instrument by curling your tongue. And the thing that I like to think about is, you know, between your nose and your lips, that's a little body part that not a lot of people know the name of it's called your philtrum. I like to pretend that my whistle is coming out of that that really helps me make the sound have a little focal point that little that little divot beneath your nose is called your philtrum. So If you want to practice whistling, just try
making little tiny sounds, you can kind of pretend you're sipping tea in a little tiny space there. And just look for your whistle. You don't want to put too much, you don't want to push too much. If you blow too much air, it won't work, you have to be really, really gentle. And just look for that little spot where you can find, you'll find your very first whistle that way, I promise you. That sounds good.

Jane 14:20
Yeah, so I'm trying to think of because now once I've, once you've done it for so many years, you forget what it is that you're doing, you just do it naturally. So I'm trying to picture where I'm putting my tongue and how I'm thinking about my lips. It's hard.

Emily 15:41
Well, and the next thing you can do is play with your tongue because that's what helps the notes go up and down. So if you move your tongue forward, the notes go up. And if you move it down, they go down. Then you can make cartoon sounds that way you can sound like you're in an old-fashioned cartoon.

Jane 16:02
And so to Ellie's question about what's making that sound, it's, it's the breath passing through that small channel that makes that sort of whistling noise?

Emily 16:10
Exactly. The breath is coming through and it's making all of these overtones. Overtones or the reason that you can hear a whistle really well is that it has all these sparkly sounds in it. So whistling can be really loud and clear and piercing because you've got this really nice tight space. If you move your tongue up and down, you can get a trill of bravado. Oh, and that's really fun to try. You can I'll show you I'll start straight and then I'll make it wavy. My tongue is going inside my mouth. It's really fun to play around with you can spend hours sitting waiting for the subway or bus just practicing your whistling.

Jane 16:53
Do you have advice, though, for people who can't seem to make it work? Because I have to say there is nothing more frustrating than wanting to whistle and not being able to?

Emily 17:04
I know that's so true. And I people ask me that all the time? I think the answer is just to try. And don't try too hard. Because if you really push and press, you won't get a good whistle. But if you keep leaning into your lips and finding you just want to find one special sweet spot one special sound, then I think
that's the beginning of you whistling and I know people who it took them until they were 30 years old to learn to whistle. So you're never too old to learn to whistle.

**Jane 17:29**
So, you know, one of the other things that people want to know is about, you know, not just how we whistle, but why we whistle. So why do you whistle? Why do you think humans make this sound and enjoy it so much?

**Emily 17:42**
That's a really good question. And I have to say when I was a kid, I whistled for a bunch of different reasons. But it was mostly to try to explore what I could do I almost when I was a kid, I think I was thinking what what does this sound make? If I touch this part of my body? Does it make a sound pop, pop pop, or if I snap my fingers, it makes sounds and then eventually I found my way to whistling because I think people are just curious what their bodies can do. And whistling is one of those things. In my family, my sisters and I were always singing and always making noise. And so at some point, someone would say, Please don't sing. And so we would start humming. And then at some point, someone would say, please stop humming, and we would start whistling. So I have to say as a kid, sometimes I whistled just to be annoying. But it eventually turned into something that I love to do. And I think humans whistle because it's fun. I have noticed most of the time people whistle when they're happy. You don't walk around whistling a sad song as much. I think most of the time when people whistle, it's because they feel really good. And it feels really good to do it.

**Jane 18:39**
Or maybe when you are sad if you start whistling. It'll make you feel happier.

**Emily 18:44**
That's totally true. I think singing works that way too. You can really dig into and just whistle all your blues away.

**Jane 18:57**
When I was a kid, most of the whistling that I tried to do and failed was to be like my father who would whistle for our dog who would run away and run up the mountainside. And so we would have to whistle for the dog to come back. So you can also whistle to communicate or to do something other than make music.

**Emily 19:14**
That is so cool. That actually, that's so interesting to me that people whistle to animals and use it to call animals. Whistling is also used as part of some languages. It's part of Silbo Gomero, which is one of the
languages in Spain's Canary Islands. And there's actually a bunch of different words that you can make using four vowels and five consonants in that language. So you can communicate with it like a real language, there's different sounds in the whistling. Whistling is also used historically backstage.

Jane 19:44
Like in theater and plays?

Emily 19:46
Yeah, before people had electronic cues, they would use a little bit of whistling to signal to someone that they needed to bring down one of the big pieces of scenery for example, which is why it's considered bad luck to whistle in the theater now because of that history of the possibility that if you whistled, something might fall on your head.

Jane 20:02
Whistling has been used in other ways too, of course to communicate over far distances when you don't want to shout. Or when a place is really noisy. A whistle might be able to cut through all the noise and get to the person you want to be able to hear you. Or maybe you just use whistling to call your dog when it runs away. When we come back, we'll whistle along to a few more tunes and hear more of your But Why theme song whistling. This is But Why: a Podcast for Curious Kids. I'm Jane Lindholm. We're listening to and learning from musician and champion whistler, Emily Eagen. Champion whistler, you say?

Graham 21:14
I am Graham. and I am six years old. I live in Brooklyn, New York. My question is, how do you get a trophy for whistling?

Jane 21:25
Okay, Graham actually kind of knows the answer to that. He's Emily's son. And Emily does have some whistling trophies.

Emily 21:32
I do. It's funny, I have three trophies because in 2000 and 2001, I went to the international whistling competition, which was in Lewisburg, North Carolina, and I won both times. So in order to win, you have to go through a couple rounds. It's like a sports competition. And you have to place high in popular music, like a pop song or folk song and then also in classical music. So I placed in both of those, and they went through the final rounds, and then I won. So I have some really nice whistling trophies from that. And it was really, really fun to do it. The two things that I remember competing with one of them was just a little folk song, and you're gonna recognize this, if you've ever seen the song, I'm
bringing home a baby bumblebee. This is the folk tune that it comes with is called Arkansas Traveler and it goes like this.

Jane 22:30
And were you just playing the ukulele there with your whistling?

Emily 22:33
I was playing the ukulele, you know, the ukulele is so great because it's also a teeny tiny instrument. And I think it sounds really nice with whistling as opposed to a big instrument. So I really like to play the ukulele when I whistle.

Victoria 22:44
Hi, my name is Victoria. I live in Oakland, California. I am six years old. And I want to know, can people with laryngitis whistle?

Jane 22:55
If you have a sore throat or something else going on that's making talking hard? Can you still whistle?

Emily 23:00
You know what? That is a great question. And the answer is yes. Whistling uses something totally different. So you're not really using your voice when you whistle. Like we said, you're using your tongue, and you're using the top of your mouth. So because I sing a lot if my throat is sore, and I have laryngitis, I can still go to rehearsal and I can still get all the notes because I just practiced by whistling. So it's a really great tool to have in your back pocket.

Jane 23:23
Beyond just having fun. Are there other ways that you use whistling Emily?

Emily 23:28
Yeah, you know, I was a really eager music student when I was a kid, I played a lot, but I was super, super shy to perform. And I was especially shy either when I had to get something perfect, like play the piano perfectly, or when I had to sing even though I loved to sing. And so it's funny because whistling became the thing that got me over my shyness. I would, I had a neighbor who noticed that I was a good whistler. And he would invite me to come whistle for things you know, he'd always say Emily do that whistling thing. And I would whistle and I would be so scared if he were asking me to do anything else. But because whistling just was so fun and funny. It helped me get comfortable performing in front of other people. It was like, Hey, I have this funny, quirky cool thing that no one else can do and that I
can do really well. And even though I was shy, I had some confidence for that. And it really helped me have like a breakthrough.

Jane 24:18
That's musician Emily Eagen. Before we let Emily go we asked if she wanted to try whistling our theme song too.

Emily 24:25
The fun thing with whistling is that you can change the music of something. So for example, I'm going to take your theme song Jane, but instead of doing it fast, I'm going to do it really slow like this. I can also do it fast. Let me give you one other option. Fast and jaunty.

Jane 25:13
Fast and jaunty. I like that. When you send us your versions of the But Why theme song you also played around with how you wanted to do it. Some of you whistled kind of slow. And some of you whistled kind of fast. Some of you added those extra notes or trills to fancy it up. And some of you tried to do it just like Luke, there were so many of you who sent us recordings that we decided we'd try to make a But Why kid chorus of all your lovely voices put together. Want to hear it? You all are amazing. Listen to that. I sent it to Luke after we put it together because I wanted to hear his reaction too.

Luke
Hey, really nice job you guys!

Jane
Luke wanted to say something else about whistling and music as well.

Luke 26:14
Music is really cool. It's a way of us getting our ideas across. And it doesn't just have to happen at guitar lessons or piano lessons or at band at school. It can happen anywhere. And there's no right way or wrong way to whistle. Just have fun with it. And I just want to thank my friend, Jane, for inviting me to be a part of this. See you later.

Jane 26:39
And I want to thank Luke Reynolds for being such a fan of this show before we even got started, that he was willing to let us use his awesome music as our theme song. That music has become a big part of our show. And it's all because of Luke's amazing musical brain and talent. Thanks as well to Emily Eagen. We'll put a link to her website in our show notes. And thanks to Yuki Takeda for showing us how
he whistles and how you might too. Don't worry if you can't whistle. Lots of people can't. You can find other ways to make music with your voice with instruments or by making rhythms with other parts of your body. Check out our But Why Kids Facebook page and Twitter feed to see some alternative ways to whistle. Melody Bodette is going to teach you how to whistle with an acorn cap. And I'll show you how to whistle with a blade of grass. So again, you can find those on the But Why Kids Facebook page and Twitter feed. That's it for this episode. If you have a question about anything, have an adult record it. It's easy to do on a smartphone using a voice recording app that came with the phone. Tell us your first name, where you live and how old you are and what you want us to talk about on the show. Then email the file to questions at But Why kids.org We love hearing what's on your mind. But Why is produced by Melody Bodette. She still can't whistle but her son is trying to teach her how. And me Jane Lindholm at Vermont Public Radio. We're distributed by PRX. Our theme music is as you know by Luke Reynolds. Special thanks this week to engineer Peter Engisch. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious.