

Sweet Sounds

The Healing Magic of Music

BY CARRIE GROSSMAN

At sixteen I fell in love with the music of Miles Davis. Some days I would drive out to a local reservoir, open the car windows, and listen to *Kind of Blue*. On such occasions I would place a stick of sandalwood incense in the ashtray, lie back amid the earth-sweet smoke, and dive inside. There, in trumpet-steeped solitude, I was at ease with the wide-open world. Music offered a refuge where I could surrender into sound — a refuge I relished right out of the womb.

When I was an infant, my parents soothed me to sleep with Barbra Streisand's restful voice. In sixth grade, I enjoyed my first real dance with a boy to Madonna's "Vogue," twirling around the charming dude who made my heart flutter when he held my hand for a full ten seconds.

By ninth grade certain songs became a sanctuary. I listened to Peter Gabriel's "In Your Eyes" for over an hour each day on the van to and from school, drowning out the world. The song awakened an indefinable longing in me and melted the knots of loneliness that were all too familiar to my adolescent heart.

Indeed, for most of us the power of music is undeniable — it makes us feel deeply the beauty and pain of our human existence. One song can shift our mood and thaw our heart, melting the icy edges of self-protection that we work so hard to maintain. In the sweetest, most unexpected way, music sneaks in and softens our shield, helping us feel more connected to all that is. Some tunes inspire monumental merriment; others make us bawl our bleary eyes out. Some are superb for back-road driving, others for laundry folding, love-making, or head banging. Whatever we need, music delivers.

It's no wonder that when we take an interest in someone, we often inquire: What kinds of music do you like? Which song sets your heart

on fire? Which makes you feel alive? Music reveals us — whether we resonate with punk or pop, bluegrass or bhangra. Music unites us and satisfies our hidden yearning for genuine connection — with a lover, a flower, or the entire shimmering universe.

For millennia, music has been used to access unseen realms. In ceremony and ritual, drums, conches, bells, and other instruments have helped the mind turn toward the sacred. In every corner of the globe, people have shared songs of love and sorrow, joyful jingles, and holy hymns. We can hear these diverse songs today thanks to YouTube, which allow us to be in Mongolia with a Tuvan throat singer, at Lake Titicaca with a Peruvian panpipe player, or in Australia with an aboriginal artist and his didgeridoo. In just a few minutes we can marvel at the mbirra, relax to an evening raga, or delight in the hang drum, a relatively new instrument from Switzerland and one of my personal favorites.

The healing power of sound and music across cultures is available to us like never before, and science is beginning to recognize the value of this ancient wisdom. Music has been shown to reduce stress, lower heart rate and blood pressure, and support the immune system. Research by neurologists like Oliver Sacks explores the connection between music and the brain, while pioneers like Alfred Tomatis suggest that Mozart may help children with learning disabilities. Classical music, it turns out, may even calm our furry friends: According to psychoacoustic studies, symphonies have a soothing effect on dogs and may also help cows increase their milk yields.

But mammals aren't the only ones affected by music; apparently, foliage is fond of Ravi Shankar. A 1973 study by Dorothy Retallack showed that plants flourish when exposed to

classical music, both North Indian and Western. They're not so into rock, however, so think twice before blasting Jimi Hendrix in the greenhouse.

While music can heal, it can also harm — depending on the context. Listening to an *Eternal Om* album while driving may not be wise, as road signs aren't always evident to those in samadhi. A neighbor's thumping techno record may not bring a placid smile to our face at 3:00 in the morning, either.

Physicists tell us that underlying all matter is vibration. We are essentially bundles of pulsing atomic and subatomic particles. Sound, too, is vibration — a waveform that travels through matter, including flesh and bone. As the great Sufi mystic Hazrat Inayat Khan said, "The human body is a living resonator for sound." Indeed it is — and every cell imbibes the music of life. After all, what *isn't* music? Don't we live in a galaxy of sound — from the hum of celestial bodies to the sway of trees, the roar of the ocean to our beating hearts?

In the sixth century, the Greek mathematician Pythagoras spoke of *musica universalis*, or music of the spheres, suggesting that the sun, moon, and planets pulsate in perfect harmony. We know that many spiritual traditions trace the origin of creation to sound. Perhaps this is why we long to hear music: Listening takes us back to the source of our being. If fully experienced, music can bring us into the present moment and relax the contraction of our small self, which often fools us into thinking we are separate and alone. Music, thank goodness, can help us remember who we truly are. Let us listen with deep gratitude for the sweet sounds that inspire and enrich our soul. 🐦

Carrie Grossman is assistant editor of Common Ground. info@thelightinside.org

