

# Sound and Spirit

Music As a Path to Awakening

BY CARRIE GROSSMAN

*"The Sound is inside us. It is invisible. Wherever I look I find it."*  
—Guru Nanak

As a child, I absolutely loved to sing. Before being drugged with a potent dose of pubescent self-consciousness, I was more than happy to serenade anyone, anywhere, with earsplitting melodies of my own creation. When adolescence arrived, however, all of this changed. Terrified of what others might think, I stuffed my voice deep down where no one could hear it. There it sat, gathering dust, until difficult life circumstances summoned it to the surface many years later.

Worn out from a prolonged, mysterious illness, I was exhausted to the core. It was as if a heavy cloak had been thrown over my life, and darkness stared me down from every direction. Not knowing what to do, I learned to play the tamboura, an Indian drone instrument. For hours every evening, I strummed the long, resonant strings and surrendered into sound. Hypnotized by an ocean of rich harmonics, my grief began to flow. As I sang with wild abandon, each note rang out in space and broke me open. Like a raging river, the music swept away my sorrow and untied an ancient knot within my heart.

What happened on those evenings was pure magic, but that is no surprise—after all, music *is* magic. Few things have the power to transform reality so quickly, inspiring joy or calming the restless mind. While one short song can uplift a somber mood in minutes, another can churn the ocean of sadness within. That's because the power of sound is so vast it affects our physiology, mind, emotions, and even our libido. But it doesn't end there. Music can do something even more miraculous: It can take us to the infinite.

When we really listen to music, we cross a threshold into another dimension. Perhaps



that's why music and sound have always been an integral part of so many spiritual traditions. From Lakota Sun Dance songs to Gregorian chant, music acts as a powerful bridge between form and formless.

For centuries, mystics and prophets have used music to express their realization. In India, poet saints like Meerabai and Tyagaraja lost themselves in ecstatic devotional hymns, and Buddhist masters like Milarepa shared the dharma through spontaneous songs called *dohas*. In ancient Israel, King David sang his heart out in stirring psalms of supplication and praise. For these wise beings, music served as a powerful vehicle for enlightenment, inspiring others to the path.

In nearly every corner of the globe, spiritual seekers continue to use music to access the Divine. Shamans in the Peruvian Amazon communicate with the spirits through medicine songs called *icaros*, Hasidic Jews hum wordless tunes called *niggunim*, and Sufis express their longing for the Beloved through *qawwals*. No matter the tradition, music plays a role, and for good reason: It can cut through even the densest ego and connect us with something greater.

Since the beginning of time, song and chant have been used as forms of prayer. They help us express the inexpressible when words don't suffice. Singing or listening, we forget ourselves, which is what prayer is all about. In our thirst for freedom, we unleash a call from the depths. Music reminds us of this call, as it stirs

the soul's yearning. In truth, what do we hunger for but our own song, our own light? Sufi master Hazarat Inayat Khan said, "Our whole being is music." If this is so, it seems fitting that we should use music to remember who we are.

While we may enjoy different kinds of music, what matters is not what we listen to, but where it takes us. Ideally, if our aim is to awaken, the music we listen to should bring us into a space of deep, inner stillness. When the mind becomes fully absorbed in sound, all of the energy we deplete through thinking comes back to us. Like falling into the arms of a long-lost lover, we tumble into ourselves. Inner obstacles dissolve, and the heart becomes intoxicated with love. How could it not, when music is the very form of love, transcending all boundaries of color, caste, and creed?

Music is perhaps the greatest vehicle to help us access the profound peace of meditation. According to the tradition of *nada yoga*, the yoga of sound, as the mind becomes quiet we can hear the inner music, which in Sanskrit is known as *anahata*. Nada yoga concurs with quantum mechanics in its view that the entire cosmos is comprised of vibrating frequencies. The subtler our consciousness, the more we can tune into—and experience—these vibrations, both in our bodies and in the universe as a whole. Known by different names across traditions—*logos*, *shabd*, *naad*, music of the spheres, the unstruck melody, the Word—nada yoga reveals the undeniable connection between sound and Spirit.

With very little effort, we can ride the sacred wave of sound into silence, where our true nature dwells. In fact, many of us need this wave to reach the shore of unlimited love, as silence can be hard to come by in our hectic world. While a select few may find it easy to plop on a cushion and commune with the cosmic forces, most of us struggle to concentrate for even 30 seconds. Hindu philosophy offers a potential reason for this: We are in the midst of the Kali Yuga, the Dark Age of Materialism. It is said that the vibrations during this time make silent meditation a bit challenging. What we need, say the sages, are practices that help us drop inside more easily. Chanting, which utilizes the inborn instrument of our voice, is one such practice.

In almost every spiritual tradition, chanting plays an important role. Whether in prayer, recitation, or ritual, chants form the backbone of so many contemplative disciplines. Like alchemy, the repetitive sounds help us let go of painful emotions that sometimes stay lodged in the heart like splinters. By providing a powerful point of concentration and helping us *feel*, chanting moves us beyond the storyline of our life. This is why chanting is such an effective technology on our journey to self-knowledge: In its sonic brilliance, it bypasses the overactive, obsessive mind and brings us peace.

Still, chanting isn't the only way that music opens us. Today, concerts have become houses of worship. Step inside any stadium for a rock show, and what will you find? A mass of exuberant humans swaying, singing, crying, and raising their arms to the heavens. Such a scene could easily be mistaken for a religious revival. On the flip side, most revivals and pilgrimages—from Gospel gatherings to the Kumbh Mela—use music to create an atmosphere of sacredness. Immersed in sound, we feel alive and awake in the world, connected to one another and, at times, something more.

Despite this, at the end of the day we can't be rational about music, just as we can't be rational about love. It's something to experience, not analyze. We certainly don't have to listen to the radio with our hands folded in prayer, but we can acknowledge music's transcendent power. As U2's Bono said, "The music that really turns me on is either running toward God or away from God. Both recognize the pivot, that God is at the center of the jaunt." Indeed, whether we believe in God or nothing at all, none of us can deny that some mystery lives in music. Pulsing in our very blood and breath, this music calls us home. 🐦

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