

Love. Song.

MUSIC POWERFULLY INFLUENCES
THE BODY, MIND AND EVEN SOUL.
WHAT'S AT PLAY?

BY BILL GIEBLER



Music makes us feel. In movies, at concerts. Even when we least expect it, like when that certain song calls—without our consent—a lover, a family member, a long-past moment into the visceral present, still aching or rejoicing with the original emotion.

A good book or movie can carry us away, too. But there's a unique power in our response to music. That's because music reaches deeper physical systems more efficiently than other types of art, says Valorie Salimpoor, PhD, a neuroscientist who for the past decade has studied music's effect on the brain. Music imprints and locks itself deep into your emotional memory, she says, so when it carries you away, it often takes you somewhere you've already been.

Using brain imaging techniques, Salimpoor found that music triggers extreme emotions by targeting the dopamine rewards system—an ancient mechanism in the brain that has evolved to reinforce behaviors like eating and having sex, highly satisfying activities worth repeating. Pleasure is the driver, nourishment and continuance of the species the targeted byproducts. These are activities with survival value, and survival value is precisely where dopamine does its work.

"It's the drive that moves you," Salimpoor says. Food and sex don't just appear, she explains. "You have to go out and get them, so there has to be that anticipation, that excitement about seeking these behaviors." Dopamine excites the hunt more than the prize. (Different chemicals release during the actual enjoyment of something.)

Music triggers dopamine through pattern recognition and expectation.

Salimpoor calls the brain a "prediction machine," and because music is a complex combination of patterns—rhythmic, harmonic and melodic—"the most evolved and complex parts of your brain get activated when you're listening to music." The biggest dopamine rushes come when musical patterns are established and then varied, or through the delayed gratification of a postponed resolution.

This is surprising because music has no known survival value, Salimpoor says. But surely our physiology can't be wrong, right? Asked if there is something more mystical at play, the scientist pauses, clears her throat. "I try to put the science into the mystery," she says. "There still are some mysteries, like, where did this come from? Why is it that every single culture has somehow developed music?"

MUSICAL HEALING

Perhaps the answer lies beyond cognition. "Music has more ability to activate more parts of the brain than any other stimulus," the late neurologist Oliver Sacks said in *Alive Inside*, a documentary film exploring music as a tool to reactivate memories in people with Alzheimer's disease.

Concetta Tomaino, DA, who also appeared in the film, worked with Sacks for more than 35 years. As a music therapist, Tomaino employs musical activations to achieve nonmusical goals, such as recovering speech and movement.

At the beginning of her career, experts believed that brain injury was final. "What fascinated us," she says of her work with Sacks, "was the fact that people who'd lost [basic motor] function could regain that function if it was done to music. In the 1980s we asked, does the

brain change? Now we know it does."

Tomaino and Salimpoor both point to physical healing tied to music therapy. Improvising on hand drums, for instance, can help people regain motor skills, Tomaino says. And tearful reunions with long-lost memories, as explained in the documentary *Alive Inside*, strengthen cognitive connections and maintain brain cells, says Salimpoor.

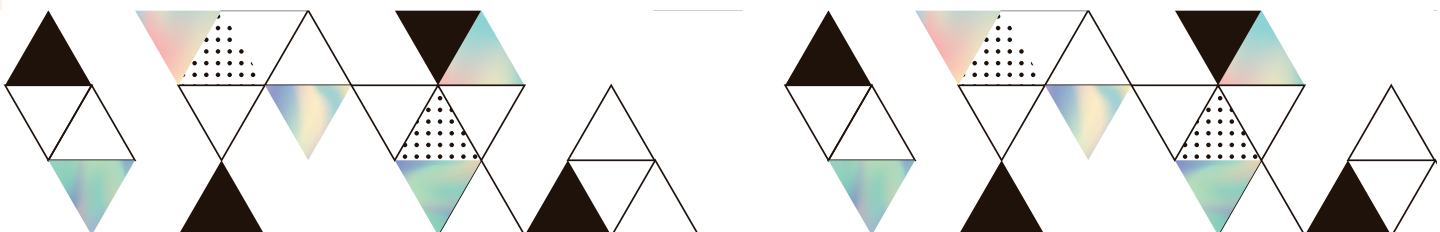
THE YOGA OF MUSIC

The inquiry of music's ineffable power takes another turn when focused on its soul-healing potential. "Love is the strongest medicine," says Jai Uttal, a pioneer in the West of kirtan (Indian-inspired devotional music), quoting his guru Neem Karoli Baba. "And music, in general, is so enlivening of the heart and the emotions."

Krishna Das, another Western kirtan master, agrees. "Think about the joy and the happiness that billions of people on the planet get from listening to music—the relief they get, temporary as it is, from suffering." Both Grammy-nominated American artists shifted to kirtan from other musical pursuits after traveling to India in the 1970s.

Some popular music is churned out by the "mass-media, money grind-it-out machine," Uttal says, "but there are plenty of people in pop music who are actually writing beautiful music and singing from their hearts. This heart energy ripples through your body." So, it's not just yoga music that heals. "In my opinion," Uttal says, "any music that's really coming from the heart is spiritual music."

But to these artists, music alone won't do the trick. "If creating great music was enough, all musicians would be happy," Krishna Das says. "And that's not the ➤





"Love is the healing factor in everything we do."

-Krishna Das

case, is it? [But] it's still really powerful. It's still a wonderful way of finding some peace in the world. The only problem is it doesn't last. It does not necessarily make you a better person. It doesn't necessarily make you more compassionate or kinder or more nonjudgmental about yourself and others. It doesn't necessarily heal you of the very things that are causing you suffering."

Yet when music comes from an

intention of spiritual connection and inner healing, it becomes medicine, says Uttal. "The transformative power of [kirtan] songs, of the melodies, of the rhythms and of the intention, coupled with the power of Sanskrit mantras—which were handed down from sages from ancient times to transform and heal the inner being—is very powerful." Sharing that music between audience and performer, he says, amplifies the process even more.

Tomaino, too, acknowledges "the multiplicity effect" of people having peak musical experiences together. Concerts or musical gatherings or chanting can induce "a state of mind that some people think of as spirituality and connectedness to something outside of themselves," she says.

Music is the syrup that delivers the medicine, Krishna Das says. "The syrup tastes good; it gives us a pleasant

experience. But that passes. What doesn't pass is the effect of taking the medicine, which is the thing that will ultimately cure us of our unhappiness and suffering." Such a musical practice, therefore, is a spiritual practice.

The correlation of music and spiritual healing is not new. Prayer or mantra delivered through song existed and persisted from early tribal cultures through the development of organized religion. Music's healing potential, then, appears indirect—consistent with dopamine's sweet delivery and ulterior design.

ALL YOU NEED

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So, can music heal your woes?

It's the intention behind the music—carried in the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic syrup—that does the work.

"The key to it all is love," says Krishna Das, echoing Uttal's sentiment. "Love is the healing factor in everything we do. It's what everybody's looking for, whether they call it love or not. It's the love that lasts 24/365. It doesn't come, it doesn't go, you don't get it from someone else. Someone else can maybe uncover it in you for a moment, so it shows you where to look," he says. "But you have to look."

Perhaps the hunt for love is what music—the *right* music—excites in us. Makes sense. Surely love has survival value.

Can music mend a broken heart? Does it cause memories to return or muscles to strengthen? No, not lastingly and not directly. But, as part of a larger plan for healing, music *does* have a special role and should be part of your medicine cabinet of cures. When you continue the inquiry into music's similarity to food (because of how it is received in our brain as though it has survival value), it makes sense that different types of music serve different purposes. Think of the music you blast to energize your workout or keep you pumped during rush-hour traffic as junk food – it goes down easy with an addictive quality. While "junk food music" may make you smile or sing out loud, it's not necessarily a conduit for healing. Likewise, think of the music that reminds you of a teenage romance or holidays with your family as comfort food. It gives you a nostalgic, cozy feeling, but it's not necessarily a path to healing either.

The type of music that can lead to self therapy is like a carefully crafted, beautiful plate of food that delivers fresh nutrition and delicious tastes all at once. It's the type of music you select with intention, and it takes you to a deeper place of appreciation, spiritual connection and inner nourishment. That type of music is different for everyone and may change over time. But taking the time to identify your personal musical medicine may be the key to unleashing a new level of wellness within you. 

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