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Music and Social Connection: Lessons from the Past to Guide the Future Generation

“Music can change the world because it can change people.” - Bono

Through the musical records of history, the wisdom of harmony challenges the discord of current times; it offers hope when the price of intersectionality comes at the expense of the most vulnerable populations and when both apathy and fear live side-by-side. How is it that when connection is one of the most important factors to well-being and longevity (Waldinger, 2015), that there are over five million youth and young adults disengaged and disconnected from school and employment (Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2015) - two institutions that are integral to building social capital? What can history lend individuals today to facilitate greater connections between youth and communities? Linked to valuable markers in time, music has brought groups of individuals together for centuries, carrying with it, timeless messages innate to humanity.

Through the Ages

Ancient scriptures have been conveyed through melodies before the medium of writing was in existence. Some origins of music, like those rooted in India, were created in sync with nature and human emotions to ignite visceral experiences of joy, sorrow, pain, and love. Villages have been known to come together to celebrate, mourn, heal and even call upon Mother Nature's compassion for their barren lands. Similarly, music and rhythm have been integral to Native American culture and have been symbolic for healing (Fly, 2010). There is a deep sense of spirituality imbedded within this joining of voices that brings to life the teachings and practices of their people and nations, even today.

A song can trigger emotions in a matter of seconds, and this speed and fluidity of purposeful sound has been the glimmer of light at the end of many dark tunnels throughout history. During the Holocaust, music was created to preserve glimpses of humanity. There is a display of musical pieces created in concentration camps at the Holocaust Museum in Los Angeles, where survivor stories reveal the search for collective joy during immense struggle. Just like this, music has brought to life new forms of connective arenas. In America, jazz arose from the influences of different cultures and also became representative of self-expression and identity amidst social oppression and racism (Tietze, 2006). The solidarity that came from such turbulent times not only echoes unity but promotes awareness and advocacy.

Music has nurtured conversations and allowed a space for vulnerable stories to be shared. Without a podium, professional musicians and everyday individuals alike have used music to speak to the world when people needed it most. During the Apartheid in South Africa, protest songs by activists were sung to give people hope when their leaders – freedom fighters like Nelson Mandela – were imprisoned. In the 1970's, Fela Kuti, the father of Afrobeat, used lyrics to expose and challenge Nigeria's corruption and oppressive ways (Veal, 2000). Hence, empowering messages have been shared with the masses when standing alone was not easy

Lessons for harmony and connection

These are just a few examples in time, and the social salience of music is already evident. Even without the existence of neuroscience or research, the past organically demonstrates what a newly emerging term called social practice is aiming to re-create today. What is displayed through the ages, are stories - stories of hope, struggle, bravery, joy, love, and unity - ignited by music. With music as a catalyst, powerful transformations can occur both individually and as a collective.

Young people everywhere are commonly tied to their iPods and are, themselves, creating their own stories and connection to music. In fact, youth have used music to change cognitions, enhance emotions and build greater connections with others (Papinczak, Dingle, Stoyanov, Hides, & Zelenko, 2015). What if more youth could be empowered to share music significant to their histories, cultures, family traditions, customs or social circles? What if members of community were more aware of each other's stories communicated through music? How can individuals learn from each other's playlists to connect more authentically? These questions can pave the way as the journey to integrate the fields of social work and art gains momentum.

My own story

As a musician and a social worker, I have seen the interconnectedness of these two fields. Growing up as a first generation Indian-American, I had my own assimilation process to grow through and music was my connection to both my eastern roots and my western upbringing. I also grew up listening to my father's stories about living through the Apartheid and the powerful influence of songs. Knowing what he knew, he gifted me with training in Hindustani Classical Music from which I gained valuable teachings of discipline, creativity, spirituality, self-awareness, and even loss. As I reflect, I see that music gifted me with a voice when I did not know how to speak and companionship during my darkest times. It is through music that I first understood connection, where the path of social work became clearer. I learned that even with no musical training, the natural elements of music - the rhythms, frequencies, melodies, note patterns, and vibrational movements, brought people together and helped them feel, love and care.

Music affects each of us differently and inherent within our musical motifs are the unique stories we all possess. These stories, like the stories of the past, carry with them rich experiences, beliefs, and emotions that draw us together in remarkable ways. As social workers, it is time to bring the musical lessons of yesterday to the forefront of conversations today. With societies surviving through collective trauma, collective experiences of music can be used to enhance civic engagement. Youth voices through their stories of song can be the exact social exchange diverse communities need today, to inspire a new wave of action. Through the records of time, music has weaved generations of deep experiences together, and can continue to promote awareness and connection in ways that have been modeled over and over again.

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