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Helen Hintjens & Rafiki Ubaldo

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Music, Violence, and Peace-Building

HELEN HINTJENS AND RAFIKI UBALDO

Music is not innocent. It often embodies many people’s hopes for peace in the aftermath of war, violence, and mass atrocities. And yet, already more than four decades ago, Jacques Attali warned us in *Noise: a Political Economy of Music*, that music may be as much connected with dissonance and violence, as it is with peace and social harmony. Attali’s study warrants a closer reading as he anticipated later critiques of a rather naïve belief in “music and peacebuilding” as somehow a natural paring or a means of social healing. Ambivalence regarding musical connections with violent and peaceful forms of social action and change, is now widely acknowledged both by practitioners and researchers, and those who combine both hats.

Although human beings have played music for a very long time to promote peaceful outcomes (perhaps even before they could talk), they can use the same sounds, tones, and rhythms to stir up emotions that promote violence and send humans, and mainly men, into battle. Those of us who may advocate and research musical experiences as means of promoting well-being, common understandings, and peace, have to grapple with the “other side” of music’s power to move us—the “flip side” of music’s power to heal is its association with tendencies to incite violence and victimization.

The arts—from dance, theater, and cinema to fine art, popular, traditional and classical music, are profoundly rooted in their social, relational, and historical context. Music reflects and operates within the boundaries of social practices, norms and values. As such, music can help to bring people together across historically fractured and violence-riven societies. But the question is how does it work? How can music heal in the aftermath war, mass atrocities, and violence? And how can utilizing

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music to celebrate violence and victimization be transformed into the reverse, to reconstruct society?

Critical scholarship in the field of music and peace-building is a broad, interdisciplinary “church,” with insights coming from peace and conflict studies, cultural and media studies, feminist and other critical theories, ethno-anthropology and cultural studies. Such studies tend to emphasize community-based or group-based work among youth, former combatants, victims of violence, women and girls, and other groups in society that may be viewed as “marginalized” and needing support for recovery from the legacies of the past. Musicological and psycho-social approaches tend to emphasize the bodily experiences of healing, whether individual or collective, and questions of tonality, musical forms and expression. Lyrics are often the focus of attention in the politics of music and peace-building, though usually in the context of daily struggles for emancipation and the post-violence recovery of communities.

The negotiated experiences of music and dance are generally taken to be both cathartic and healing. But is this necessarily so? There are indeed myriad examples of music being used in today’s world to forge new relationships. Marginalized young women and men express their pain in a violent society, for example, in such countries as Colombia, Jamaica, or Mexico; hip hop or rap singers analyze and deal with their traumatic life situations. But they may also vent their frustrations on those less fortunate unless there is clear peace-oriented guidance.

It is true that lives are transformed through musical production and expression, yet, often in the same contexts, the very same musical forms of hip hop or rap can be commercialized in ways that tends to disempower young people and those who are marginalized. Such exploitation reinforces emotions associated with violent retribution, hate, and resentment. We suggest that in relation to postwar, post-violence, and post-genocide settings, the growing appeal of using the arts to achieve more positive outcomes can be celebrated, but not celebrated uncritically. Music’s efficacy as an instrument for healing can never be taken for granted. It is not a given; rather it has to be worked for, persistently and with awareness of the outcomes of musical innovation and community-level work.

David Byrne from the Canadian band Talking Heads, recently wrote about these problems in *How Music Works*. Seeking to bridge the worlds of music theory and musical practice, popular music and academia, he explains that music cannot change the world, but it can make people relate emotionally to one another in ways that few other mediums can. His constant refrain, however, is context, context, context. He may be right in rejecting any general claims that may be made about music

“achieving” this or that, as if music were a technical tool. Music, and the arts generally, can never simply be “used,” for instance, to engineer reconciliation or peace-building.

What Byrne emphasizes is that music is profoundly social; it arises only marginally from individuals expressing their inner feelings; more often musical expression emerges from within a given social context. When we co-create musical experiences, when we engage in viewing, making, hearing, disseminating, the arts in general, we both reflect and act on existing social structures, prior processes of change, attitudes and norms. Thus in a range of post-violence contexts, from post-independence Zimbabwe, post-civil war Colombia, or postwar, post-genocide Rwanda, musical efforts in peace work are deeply embedded in existing norms and in the social context of the times. The home settings of the musical producers and audiences mean that using music for peace (or for violence) will need to be rooted in both the worlds of practice and in dominant ideals.

Music and the arts involve the marriage of scholarship and practice, and can make sense in a community context of healing. According to musicologist David Akombo, music and dance work for healing of trauma and social schisms in contexts as diverse as Kenya and among Afro-Brazilians. Together, dance and music with cultural rituals, have profound psycho-social impacts on the collective. This research brings out the way that musicality, if it remains rooted in collective rather than individualized musical experience, can indeed provide powerful channels toward healing and “balance” in society.

Another interesting case is the music of “forgiveness” in post-genocide Rwanda as exemplified by Jean-Paul Samputu’s work. Brent Swanson, himself a practicing musicologist, has featured Samputu’s music in this light. Samputu has become a well-known musician with an international profile, and many of his songs express pain, forgiveness, and the desire for social healing in Rwanda and beyond. Swanson’s study of Samputu’s work centers on themes of reconciliation and forgiveness, and is informed both by ethnomusicological theories and by Swanson’s own experience as a musical performer. In context, dealing with trauma and pain through music, dance, and the arts can contribute to overcoming the fragmenting individualization that seems part and parcel of the effects of violence and war. In the “new age” capitalism of social media, music downloads, and smartphones, overcoming isolation can also suggest the need for collective experiences that break down isolation, building social bonds.

In Palestine, for example, artists, photographers, those in media, dance, music, and theater work to entertain and also to help the population deal with trauma and suffering. By being embedded in the context of shared

experiences, in a sense of community, healing through music and the arts can go beyond individualized “therapy.” Yet not all these media or forms of art imply “reconciliatory” responses or peaceful outcomes; they can also imply resistance and thus justify various forms of violence. This applies even more to Israelis, of course. Even so, Al-Ajarma, who studies various arts-led initiatives in Palestine, does conclude that most of those who work across the arts aim to provide audiences and participants with relief from trauma, rather than to incite negative emotions of fear, anxiety and hatred.

In Latin America, and especially in Colombia, peace has broken out amidst on-going violence that still looks like war. At the community level, in schools, with youth at risk of gang violence and former combatants, musical practitioners and educators have used classical music, and also hip-hop, rap, and story-telling to enable victims and perpetrators alike to deal with the past and reengage productively with society. Music can also enable those economically marginalized to make a living without resorting to violence or crime. This work with some of the most marginalized communities of internally displaced Colombians, for example, or with women facing femicide in Mexico, has a strong youth and gender dimension, and is focused on overcoming violence and impunity.

Hip-hop and rap can be modes of expression for articulating the hopes of those rarely listened to. In Mexico, young feminists started “A Feminine Batallion” of rappers who sing to keep women safe, and who sing for the justice for victims of femicide, a crime that too often goes unpunished. This expressive and empowering element in such music can work for peace and against violence. This is the case when such initiatives are firmly embedded in wider community or nation-wide feminist or youth-centered struggles for peace-building and alternatives to violence. Without such a setting, what goes on in schools and communities can hardly be expected to bring about “peace.” Even when the context is supportive of teachers, students, and community members, all is not plain sailing when using music and the arts to make sense of the past, for peace-building and reconciliation. Memories can get in the way of healing and can prove divisive in the present. Music is an interesting way to work inside and outside the curriculum to promote healing and mutual understanding, but it must be handled with care and sensitivity in order not to reinforce preexisting social divisions and conflicts.

A host of new technologies and modalities for listening and for music-making, recording, and dissemination are pushing recording costs toward nil, worldwide. Producers and consumers become blurred into “prosumers” in music as in the wider on-line economy. This blurring between audiences

and producers extends to musicians and scholars, teachers and learners. Much international intervention for peace, whether through the medium of classical music, hip hop, or rap, struggles to prove its impact in terms of outcomes related to peace and reconciliation. In Colombia, young men at risk of violence were engaged to participate in “Rap Battles,” and raised issues of globalization, worldwide racial injustice, AIDS, and corruption, as well as violence, war, and peace. The ubiquity of music means it will continue to be a very popular channel for working with diverse groups of people, old or young, male and female, victims, perpetrators, and by-standers in working toward social peace through reconciling people to one another, and healing their hurts. Writ large, alongside law, economic growth, demobilization, rehabilitation, democratic reform, and even sports, music and the arts will continue to be seen as one among many other means to construct peace, bit by bit, over time.

Let us not forget, though, U.S. forces in Bagram, in prisons in Iraq, and in Guantanamo, have also used music to torture captives. What began with Jim Channon as “indigenous music and words of peace” in his First Earth Battalions Operations Manual, switched into musical torture of Muslim detainees, subjected to endless Queen, Barney, or heavy metal Metallica songs. This musical torture was designed to drive these prisoners mad.

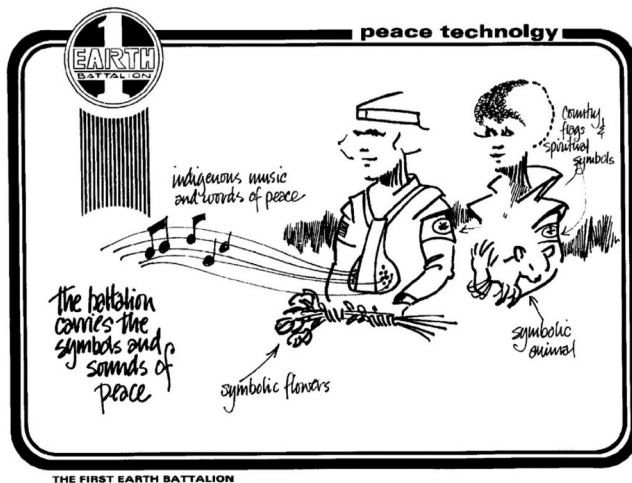


Illustration 1: An image from Jim Channon’s First Earth Battalions Operations Manual (written by a Vietnam veteran and used in actual training of U.S. forces).

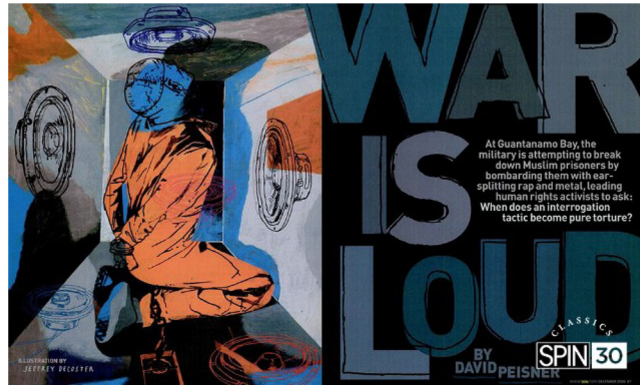


Illustration 2: A poster warning of musical torture being used in Guantanamo, by artist David Peisner.

After music-for-torture was more widely exposed, some musicians decried the (mis)use of their music to torture U.S. captives; others welcomed their music being used to “fight the war on terror.” Here, the “flip side” of music’s power became all too evident. It is interesting to note, however, that such abuse of music for torture depended on first isolating the prisoners, denying them any form of solidarity in a process of total individualization and deprivation. Perhaps, if there is a lesson here, it is that the powerful transformative capacity of music, in order to be experienced as healing and reconciliatory, needs to remain rooted in the everyday and prosaic, the mundane level of “ordinary” human communities. Once music is used by the those in power, its emotional power can become instrumentalized to reinforce anger, fear, or hatred for “others,” including torture victims who are defined as “terrorists” by the state.

In her seminal work *The Politics of Emotions*, Sara Ahmed argues that, rather than arising from the individual emotions of single individual persons, emotions are part of dominant norms as reflected in society. In Ahmed’s view, musicians would be creatures of their time and place, reflecting and acting in their wider social setting. Again, we see here the mantra: context, context, context.

As we seek to catch up with the messiness of our ever-transforming daily lives, what Zygmunt Bauman calls the liquid quality and evasive quality of power relations become ever-more evident. We struggle to find adequate conceptual tools to convey the slipperiness of our efforts in terms of creativity, emotional work, and institutional initiatives of intellectual endeavors to analyze a wealth of empirical and experiential knowledge around music and peace-building. Music, as part of ritual practices, can be particularly significant in societies recovering from mass-violence,

where social bonds were shattered and mass suffering from violence, gender violence, and political authoritarianism is widespread.

Where political, economic, social, and cultural violence continue to be transmitted through structures, actors and communities will be beset by contending norms and values well after the war has ended. In deeply divided settings, music and the arts may need to be less explicitly geared toward peace, than toward reaching all “publics” so that they start to buy-in to shared musical experiences. The outcome involves hoping for the best, and seeking to prevent further polarization, at the very least, on the basis of the “do no harm” principle common to so many belief systems and moral philosophies.

Social ties, communities, and peaceful modes of living, however, may be under threat even in “peace” time in the local dislocation that has become a quasi-normal expression of the fracturing impact of globalization. John Paul Lederach, one of the best known Peace Studies scholars, suggests that even the most localized reflections need to be firmly embedded in an awareness of the wider global hegemony of the Liberal Peace model. Through reflective practices, Lederach advocates for what he terms a “moral imagination” or an “elicitive” approach to working for peace. What this means is once again the old adage, context, context and context-specific.

Until quite recently Liberal Peace models of postwar transition have been so pervasive that they have become naturalized and perceived as universally applicable. Yet breaking with the violence of the past is also risky; creative acts, involving music and the arts can be highly unpredictable in their outcomes, in whether they are accepted, and in whether they eventually support what Lederach terms “constructive change.” One possible path toward such “constructive change” may be shared musical experiences of making and hearing music, carefully managed to not be divisive. As an interesting study by Chantalle Mouffe claims, historically war and violence have been about statecraft, about “political power,” and one might add, about racial and imperial dominance and patriarchy. In various justice and liberation struggles, music has been both part of the culture of dominance and part of movements and patterns of resistance in the everyday lived experience of “ordinary” people.

The sheer legitimizing power of music can render popular musicians especially vulnerable to attacks from state authorities. This is so precisely because of musicians’ ability to relay and condense the daily worries and values of those mostly left out of dominant political discourses and concerns, whether on grounds of their identity, gender, class, or religion. Fela Kuti’s politicized lyrics in Nigeria arose in part from

immersion in pan-African struggles worldwide. Kizito Mihigo, a formerly very regime-friendly musician, like Fela Kuti, was arrested and imprisoned for singing “off-script.” Each broke unspoken rules of musicians in their context, and each paid a price. When using musical expression to challenge those who rule over you, you may lose your personal liberty.

We conclude with Zelizer’s assertion that the shared and embodied emotional experiences aroused by music, rhythm, dance, and shared spectacle, do not necessarily cause more lasting forms of healing and peace. They can, however, work toward this end provided there is constant negotiation toward peaceful outcomes and the prevention of further division, polarization, and moves toward violence. Thus, it may be the very embodied quality of musical performance and production that makes music both an ideal instrument for peace-building and something states and elites seek to employ to encourage nationalistic and sectarian fervor through emotions of threat that are projected onto “others.” When the Rwandan Simon Bikindi became the first musician in history to be sentenced for a crime of genocide, he was not sentenced for his lyrics or his songs, but for openly inciting people to kill Tutsis, by shouting through a loud-speaker. Some may suggest Bikindi’s anti-Tutsi lyrics “caused” killings of Tutsi Rwandans by Hutu Rwandans, but this did not convince judges at the ICTR. In the somewhat similar context of the Balkans, a substantial body of literature suggests the arts and music were and are being used to reinforce and legitimate chauvinistic and nationalist discourses and practices, yet no musicians or artists were prosecuted.

Ultimately, then, we conclude that music is neither innocent nor guilty. Rather, contextual circumstances and sensitivity to that context will decide whether working through music tends to facilitate peace, or on the contrary, to reinforce patterns of violence, even if unintentionally. Music’s “fundamental ambiguity” as Jacques Attali terms it, means we cannot make general claims for music as especially suited for peace-building. In spite of its seeming ideally suited to bringing people together in shared bodily and emotional experiences, music by the same token contains the seeds of a society’s latent dystopian potential.

It is perhaps fitting to end with Johan Galtung, for whom “positive peace” implies going beyond ending violence, toward greater social, gender, class and inter-group justice. Within the “positive peace” framework, musical expression, whatever the context, potentially facilitates a wide range of emotionally-informed interactions compared with either speech or the written word. One exciting and potentially revolutionary discovery of recent years, the existence of the “human mirror neuron system” or MNS, suggest that human beings respond to music in ways that enhance resonance with others, emotionality, and behaviorally. This powerful

emotional bonding effect means music can produce a range of emotions, rallying the troops, even for torture, or mobilizing people for greater understanding, social healing and peace.

The same music, in another context, changes its meaning. Repeating the Barney song over and over for hours may be lovely for some four year olds. When you are an isolated adult, isolated in harsh conditions, unable to communicate with others, the repeated Barney song becomes torture. Use of music to inflict pain, or incite violence does not undermine, but strongly points to, music's reciprocal and opposite capacity to promote the reverse—healing and peaceful outcomes. Past trauma and divisions will remain, but at least through contextually-sensitive musical experiences, it becomes possible to try to bring people together across social divides, and to learn something from shared emotional experience, and perhaps move toward the wider and complex societal task of recovering from violence.

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Helen Hintjens is Assistant Professor in Development and Social Justice at the International Institute of Social Studies in the Hague. E-mail: hintjens@iss.nl

Rafiki Ubaldo is a Rwandan–Swedish writer, scholar, and photojournalist. His publications include, *We cannot forget: Interviews with survivors of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda*, Rutgers U.P., 2011 (co-edited with Samuel Totten). Since 2011, he maintains online platforms such as www.templesof-memory.org for his photoliterature on post genocide memoryscapes.