

# Music's ability to shape people and culture

[Sociology](#), [Slavery](#)



Music's Ability to Shape People and Culture The lights blind me. I shake as the sweat pours from my head while everybody stares at me, judging me, and listening to me. The monitors in front of me hiss and explode with vibrations, the rhythm section is pulling behind me, and the room is packed to the brink. There is smoke in the air along with the ecstasy that seems to electrify the room and feed my creativity. I am not just playing music; I am creating it and living it. It's what I love to do the most and it is what I do for a living. Yet every Monday through Friday, people across America wake up early and go to work from nine to five. They take their short lunch breaks, have meetings, sit at their computers, hand in their reports, and do whatever it is the millions of Americans do. At the end of the week the American population at least has the weekend. The coveted Friday night, Saturday and Sunday give people a chance to relax and unwind after five days of hard work. In some religions, it is even a requirement to take at least one day a week for trust and reflection. Stress is lost, sleep is gained and people really enjoy losing themselves in a movie or dancing the night away at a club. Although everybody likes to relax and have fun, one thing seems to universally dominate the entertainment and nightlife of America and the obsession is music. Music in general is an everyday word that is thrown around from the latest pop album to greatly refined classical music, yet everybody craves it. Historians have gone as far as calling this era the ipod generation because of the ever-growing convenience and demand for obtaining music. Moreover, music's influence on people is growing by leaps and bounds. Nevertheless, music is not a new phenomenon and people have been playing, writing, and listening to it since humans have existed. We all

use it to relive stress, forget ourselves for a moment, and even improve our lives. The sound of music alone has crushed empires and brought peace to nations so it is only natural that it also stimulates culture. African Americans in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century and earlier twentieth century used music for everything from creating identities, reliving the day's stress, and even for secret codes. Music changed their lives for the better and has also unquestionably changed mine for the better as well. The warm climate, boundless fields of fertile soil, long growing seasons, and numerous creeks and rivers provided great conditions for farming plantations in the South. However, if you were an African American slave who worked in the fields things looked radically different. The hot sun beat down on your sweaty body for long hours during an even longer planting season, with muddy water at your feet and worst of all, you probably worked alone. Not only did slaves work apart from others on the field, but far apart from their families as well. Because the productivity of the plantations depended on the slaves, only the best were bought and families were split from anywhere from one farm over, to four states over. " Slave families were extremely vulnerable to separation. As a result of the sale or death of a father or mother, over a third of all slave children grew up in households from which one or both parents were absent. About a quarter of all slave children grew up in a single-parent household (nearly always with their mother) and another tenth grew up apart from both parents." (www.digitalhistory.com) When people are exposed to these types of conditions for long periods of time, the need to expel unpleasant emotions and communicate becomes overwhelming which led to slaves using the only

thing they could use: their voices. Long chants across cotton fields and cornfields could be heard throughout the strenuous day and it made sure you knew who was talking to whom, many slaves used different pitches. Over-articulation and long, drawn-out phrases was the only way to shout or sing so the other person could understand what the message was about. (www.imdb.com) If we were to stand in the hot fields of the south on any given day, we would certainly hear beautiful long rhythms and even harmonies about anything from how hungry someone was, to how tired someone might be, to even a beautiful girl that might have been spotted. But most likely you were to hear a chant in time with the hoe hitting the ground or a hatchet chopping some wood. This rhythm made the exhausting and mundane work seem less unpleasant. On the infrequent days that the slaves might not have to work, spending time with friends and slaves might not have to work; spending time with friends and fellow workers was certainly the most important priority. Random instruments such as a wash bin with a string, or an old ale jug were used to keep rhythm while people would sing away their stress and worries. This new form of music called "nigger noise" would soon be known as the blues. "The blues... its 12-bar, bent note melody is the anthem of a race, bonding itself together with cries of shared self-victimization. Bad luck and trouble are always present in the Blues, and always the result of others, pressing upon unfortunate and down-trodden poor souls, yearning to be free from life's troubles and trepidations. Relentless rhythms repeat the chants of sorrow, and the pity of a lost soul many times over. This is the Blues." -W. C. Handy (www.music-rock-h.com)

There were soon, all kinds of different instruments that accompanied the

slave music. There were still all the field hollers, moans, and shouts, yet they also made use of homemade instruments from the banjo and tambourine, to washboards, pots, and spoons. The one thing the African Americans could not use by law, was a set of real drums, which was one of the common threads that bound their old culture together. Thus, many states had banned the use of drums in fear that Africans would use them to create some form of a system of communication in order to strike back against the Americans. Nonetheless, the blacks managed to generate percussion and percussive sounds, using other instruments or even on their own bodies. The way that the slaves used this new form of music just goes to show how no matter what or how much you try to oppress people, people will find a way to grow stronger. The blues helped the African American culture survive and sculpted an entire generation of new music that would soon be known as jazz. For the longest time I can remember I have always loved music. I would always listen to it on the radio or listen to what my sister played on her tape player growing up. It is also a fact that all people remember certain parts of their lives when monumental events happen. For instance, I can tell every detail about what I was doing on September the 11th. However, not as dramatic nationally but an experience that was monumental to me are my memories of when my art started. I can remember sitting on the dusty floor of the school gym watching a presentation on the school's old movie screen of different types of music from around the world. There was Middle Eastern, African, East Asian, and finally, a man I had never heard of before by the name of Benny Goodman stood in front of a huge ensemble full of shiny instruments. The music of Sing, Sing, Sing or Sing, Sang, Sung began to play

and I was captivated. I sat there unable to sit still, not really knowing what was driving me insane, but I had an absolute fascination with what I was watching. The big band was comprised of saxophones, trumpets, trombones, and a rhythm section: guitar, bass, and drums. I had never heard of such a powerful sound coming from those types of instruments and I could hardly believe the amount that they were swinging the rhythms. To this day I still hold a very special place in my heart for Sing, Sing, Sing. I can also remember every detail about the first time I started playing music: it was magic. We allowed to join the band in the fourth grade. The band director showed us the different instruments and explained each to us. Drums looked cool, but I didn't pass the rhythm test, so I chose the sax. Little did I realize what the casual decision would mean to the rest of my life. For the following few years, I played in the band and took private lessons. Sometimes I even practiced. At the end of eighth grade, my band director told me it was time to step it up and I began to study with a serious teacher. From that point on, my life changed forever and I really began to have a real life in music. Before I knew it, I was playing in every band that my high school had to offer and music was consuming even my social life. My friends were in the band, after school was spent practicing and rehearsing, and my weekends were consumed with performances and competitions. Music was slowly changing my lifestyle without me realizing it. As my life continued to move forward and I continued to grow, I soon began to realize that the one thing in my life that stayed constant was my horn. My saxophone didn't give me bad grades in school. My sax did not break up with me or say bad things about me when I wasn't around; it was always there for me to go to when I needed it.

Nowadays, I cannot go anywhere without being completely consumed by music. I soon realized that with every good movie came an equally good score and with every good score comes an excellent piece of music. Each of the different movies I went or owned had a programmatic journey that could reach down to the middle of my body and make me feel humble and unafraid, or could scare me even if I was just listening to it without the movie itself. There were songs that would remind me of my family, my loving sisters and my closest friends and there were songs that would fill me with adrenalin. I also discovered classical peaces such as the piece " Moonlight" Sonata in C# minor. (Beethoven for Relaxation) This piece preformed by Nelly Kokinos and written by Beethoven is a slow, yet intense peace of music that I enjoy listening to when I want to calm down or when I am depressed. Feelings of compassion, of empathy, and of even hope enter my body and I feel rejuvenated from the minor chords and triplet feel. This song reminds me of the other hard times I have had in my life and reminds me that I pushed through them, so I can push through now. This song really gives me hope. Music was slowly having the power to change even my mood. M. F. Carnival is a song that starts out with a guitar solo and a lone trumpet played by Maynard Ferguson. (Carnival) The song then moves to the full Jazz band playing Latin rhythms and finally switches to an unexpected funk style and feeling. This song reminds me of the jazz band and makes me think about whether or not I will have my own band in the future. This song really gets me excited to play in a jazz band and of course, work hard. The song also reminds me of the summertime, when you are hanging out with friends and deciding what you should do and where. I receive a certain spontaneous

feeling when listening because this song changes different feels so many times and so unexpectedly. The chart Pick up the Peaces, originally created by Average White Band is a good song I use to really pump me up to practice soprano saxophone. (Average White Band: the Essentials) Whether I am tired or unwilling to really dig into a session, the soprano solo in this tune gets me going and ready to think of new solo ideas or cool patterns to jam out on. Of course the original Average White Band's song doesn't have a soprano solo, so what I listen to is Buddy Rich's cover of the tune. (Burnin' for Buddy) Buddy Rich's adaptation is very honorable to the original, yet has appropriate changes that make it even more special to me. Like all jazz, listening to the song makes my head nod to the beat and my body wanting to dance to the rhythm and melody. This song reminds me of the small combo I participate with and of all the fun gigs we played together. Good memories and feelings come from this song. I soon realized that I was becoming obsessed beyond just a liking or hobby for music. My practicing was becoming more involved, longer, and with in-depth ideas of what to do to make myself a better player. I used many different kinds of techniques and ideas to help me express myself, but until I began playing seriously, I didn't realize all that went into playing the horn and I was learning everything. Before I just played from my heart; however, I now had to use my mind and my ears. It started with scales, and it seemed like they were endless. Every day I have to play the scales, or I will lose an aspect of my foundation. Then there is the tuner and metronome, two examples of technology, which keeps me grounded to the basics. I feel like the process of art becomes so ingrained in who we are that sometimes it becomes hard to



separate the art from the artist. Moreover, because of my art I have seen many different places around the world that have changed the way I think and learn. I have been as far as Arizona, to Liverpool England studying and playing music. I have seen historic America in Virginia, the Grand Canyon in the west, and lots and lots of cornfields in Nebraska when I went there on tour with a show. There really is no doubt in my mind that music has changed and sculpted my life in almost every aspect. It dictates who I am, what I am doing, and even what I will become. The same went for the slaves because without the blues, they would have a harder time venting, releasing their sorrows, and communicating with each other. I think that Thomas Carlyle really knew what he meant when he said that music is well said to be the speech of angels. It affects, defines, and dictates who many of us are, how we act, and how we define ourselves.

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