

Christine Stevens, MSW, MT-BC



MUSIC
MEDICINE

*The Science and Spirit of
Healing Yourself with Sound*



sounds true
Boulder, Colorado

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*Immerse yourself in the rapture of music.
You know what you love. Go there.
Tend to each note, each chord,
Rising up from silence and dissolving again.*

*Vibrating strings draw us
Into the spacious resonance of the heart.*

*The body becomes light as the sky
And you, one with the Great Musician,
Who is even now singing us
Into existence.*

—SUTRA 18, *VIJNANA BHAIRAVA TANTRA (THE RADIANCE SUTRAS)*,

TRANSLATION BY LORIN ROCHE, PHD

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Foreword

A song can awaken the soul. When we listen to music, we might get goose bumps, breathe more deeply, or feel a flood of emotions that brings us to tears. Old memories might surface. The human response to music is indicative of how deeply music touches the mind, body, heart, and soul. Most of us love music, but have we really considered using its depth as a tool for stress reduction, health, and wellness? Even more, have we considered its great potential to transform communities and the planet?

I first met Christine Stevens while teaching at a retreat near Nashville, Tennessee. Within minutes, she had more than ninety people drumming, singing, harmonizing, and then sitting in silence together. The diverse audience that day included people in recovery from drug and alcohol addictions, therapists, and community members. Christine guided the group through experiences of the four elements of music—rhythm, melody, harmony, and silence—and created a parallel between those elements and the four directions of the medicine wheel. Through her workshop, we learned how to consciously listen to music and to freely make music.

The retreat participants came alive, smiles were contagious, and the rhythms united us all. There was a shared sense of freedom and joy, and a renewed connection to the inner pulse of life within. I sensed the credibility and creativity

of Christine's method of musical engagement and her specific applications of music for body, mind, heart, and soul. The transformation was evident that day as we crossed a threshold from music lovers to creators of our own music. Now through *Music Medicine*, you can make this transformation, too.

Music is one of the oldest forms of spiritual medicine known to humanity. If you look at ancient texts from most traditions, they have musical notations next to them. The Torah, for example, is not only read—it's also chanted. In ancient Greece, Pythagoras of Samos taught his students how certain musical chords and melodies could produce a wide range of responses within the body. The shamanic healers of tribal cultures use drumbeats and chanting to support healing experiences. It's no different in our society, where groups of people gather to chant melodies and drum rhythms to open doorways into other realms. In the experience of music, thoughts can take a backseat, and the essence of peace can be attained.

As a scientist, I have long observed a phenomenon—sound and melody, used as a form of meditation, turn off the thinking mind. I always suspected there must be research showing which brain mechanisms are at play in this process. And in fact a surprising amount of music research is emerging from leading laboratories and universities, much of it using brain-scan equipment and cutting-edge genetic analysis.

This book examines these scientific findings in depth and brings forth a profound conclusion: that the gift of music isn't necessarily about what music *does* for us; it's about what music *un-does* in us. When we engage music on a deep level, whole parts of the brain are turned off in an activation and deactivation pattern. Christine finds that this neurological system is replicated at the genomic level; musical participation switches off genes that signal stress alerts to our minds and bodies.

Medical and scientific literature is finally catching up to the ancient wisdom of music medicine and further supporting how music is an evidence-based technique for mind, body, heart, and soul health and healing. Strikingly, many studies show that music is an inherent part of who we are as human beings, woven into our very genomic code and evident even in newborn babies. This explains why music tugs at our heartstrings and strikes a chord in our souls.

Years ago, when I ran a stress disorders clinic at one of the Harvard Medical School teaching hospitals, I often told my clients that they were

already whole and healed. The purpose of the tools we gave them in our clinic was to peel away the layers of stress that covered their naturally wise, peaceful, and compassionate hearts. Most of us carry some form of musical wound: a sense that we are untalented, perhaps from a childhood music teacher telling us we should lip-sync in the choir concert. Christine helps us peel off those layers and discover our inner “musical spirit.” She allows us to awaken the music within for healing, connecting, harmonizing, and centering—skills much needed in the world today. In *Music Medicine*, she provides tools and techniques to bring music and sound into our lives through an abundance of guided practices.

In this way, Christine’s approach is also practical. There has been a dramatic rise in the use of music to treat stress conditions in everyone from returning veterans and trauma survivors to overworked employees to people suffering from depression. I have extensively researched the all-too-common phenomenon of “burnout” and have found that high levels of stress are a major factor. Likewise, I have found that resilience in the body, mind, and spirit naturally and sometimes dramatically occurs when individuals include stress-reducing activities in their lives. It is more important than ever to find affordable, simple, enjoyable strategies to reduce stress, strengthen our immune system, and build a sense of community with others. Music—when approached through the lens of empowerment, simplicity, creativity, and calm—can provide the support we need in life’s challenging moments and can become part of our daily routine for spirituality and health.

Christine’s passion for her work and her curiosity about the healing and spiritual power of music have brought her to many unique places, from the sweat lodges of the Lakota to the war zones of Iraq. Her experience is the foundation from which she teaches. Her insights, stories, and scientific updates give us the sense of the ancient wisdom of music’s power to heal, and her ability to communicate her knowledge gives us a direct way to apply this wisdom to modern-day life. Enjoy this powerful path for your own musical healing—through the joy, and the great peace, of music.

Joan Borysenko, PhD

Author of *Minding the Body, Mending the Mind*



Prelude

This book is an invitation to take part in making your own music and to share it more widely in the healing that is taking place on the planet. Even though music is already in you, this book is a guide to remembering, reconnecting, and discovering the healing benefits of sound.

This is the story of an ancient artifact—or perhaps a fact of art—that has underscored thousands of years of humanity’s development: the medicine of music. This treasure has been with us since the beginning of time. No war can destroy it. No one religion can claim it. Mystics of different faiths have heard its song, shamans have traveled its rhythmic beats to invisible realms, and healers have carried its tune to wounded souls. It is present in the symphony of the notes of our lives, the harmony between people, and the inner music that is unique to each person as a living instrument of his or her own song.

In the poorest lands, indigenous people who have “nothing” are shining with musical spirit, dancing and singing together. They know the secret. Most of the world has figured out this prescription for happiness, a pathway to healing that is embodied in music’s medicine.

I want to serve as your guide to discover music’s medicine—the sound, play, passion, and pause are waiting for you, a sonic remedy composed at the core of your being. I will take you through the four elements of music’s medicine—rhythm, melody, harmony, and silence—with guided practices

that show you practical ways to orchestrate healing and wholeness in your life and in the lives of those you serve. Then we'll move inward to the fifth element, which is the music within you, a quintessence that blends all four elements into the human instrument. Finally, we'll explore how music's medicine can orchestrate change in the world and for the planet.

This is a book that sings. Free online music playlists offer a soundtrack to the teachings on the groove, song, harmony, and silence within you. If you are in the fields of education, therapy, health care, or personal coaching, the guided practices can augment your work. If you are a parent looking to give your children the creativity and expression of music, you can incorporate the practices into your family life. If you are a musician, you can become more well rounded and create music that resonates more deeply from your soul.

This book is about a paradigm change. It's not about being taught music; it's about music teaching us. It's not about practicing music; it's about music as practice. It's not about talent; it's about truth. It's not only about loving music; it's about living music. It's about finding your way into a "sound" health strategy that is joyful, creative, harmonious, and fun.

My Quest for Harmony

I spent years in higher education, getting my master's degrees in both music therapy and social work, where I was taught theory, research, and practice. But my greatest education came through traveling. My work in training drum-circle facilitators and leading drum circles in places of war and tragedy took me to many places: Asia, Europe, Latin America, South Africa, Russia, and Iraq, to name a few. Making music with people of diverse cultures that preserved the traditions of sound and music for healing burst my heart open. I found such a rich heritage of music; even in places of great poverty and war, the songs, rhythms, and dances continued. My experiences opened my soul to the power of music cultures that are still preserved on the planet today.

When I paused and reflected on the lessons of my life, I looked at the common threads among these rich, yet very different experiences. I wanted to understand what the heartbeat of a powwow drum at a Lakota ceremony had in common with women chanting to celebrate the anniversary of the end of apartheid in South Africa; what singing to Hurricane Katrina survivors in New Orleans had in common with leading drum circles for peace building in Iraq. What were the common themes that transcended location,

people, and culture and created sacred and healing musical experiences? The answers pointed toward the four elements of music, which independently hold unique healing properties.

Let me share with you some highlights from my life that were guideposts in the composition of this model of music's medicine.

In 2005, I traveled as a speaker on the Japanese Peace Boat to South Africa and Namibia. We were part of the ceremonies acknowledging the ten-year anniversary of the end of apartheid. While there, I led a drum circle and even met Archbishop Desmond Tutu. We went by boat to the Port of Walvis Bay, Namibia, where I took my drum to a poor village of tin-roofed homes. Hearing my drumbeat, an elder pulled out two spoons and started to play. No words were exchanged, only the energy of our drum-and-spoon-slapping groove. Even without drums, the rhythms of Africa were bursting in expression. The magnetic energy of rhythm drew others, and before I knew it, children were forming a circle around us.

One child with a deformed leg limped over and, to my amazement, started to sway and dance to the beat. He became a different boy; his body moved more fluidly and joyfully, a complete change from the difficult dragging stride he had used to join us. He moved to the center of our circle and continued to dance to the rhythms and the encouragement of the people. Without instruments, the bodies were the drums, dancing to the rhythm. I was discovering how rhythm is the medicine for the body.

Years before, while performing with Up with People in the former Soviet Union during the Mikhail Gorbachev era, I found myself joining an unforgettable demonstration of freedom by the Russian people, who were just beginning to experience free speech. I stood in a Moscow square, joining hundreds of people in singing "We Shall Overcome." A great sense of oneness permeated the crowd as this anthem of the American civil rights movement gave voice to the Soviet people's deep desire for freedom.

The heart's longing for freedom may be best expressed in song. The Russian people's call for revolution was amplified and synergized in the music. I saw that a song unites people, speaks the heart's language, and performs a kind of alchemy that transforms oppression to hope. I realized how melody is the medicine for the heart.

Everything I'd learned and taught in my life culminated in 2007, when I was invited to lead the first drum-circle training in an Iraqi war zone.

In a five-day workshop, my colleagues and I trained Iraqis from different language and religious groups on how to lead drum circles for conflict resolution and peacemaking. We met in a building that had once been a torture center during Saddam Hussein's regime, but which was now converted into a youth activity center.

The Kurdish and Arab trainees began to play their traditional instruments, sing songs, and even dance over the groove of the drum circles. I realized I was in a music culture in which there was no separation between drum, song, and dance. The result was a sacred space where opposing groups began to share cultural songs, rhythms, and dances with their former enemies. In the birthplace of civilization, music literally created harmony between conflicting groups and brought hope, peace, and healing to the wounds of genocide and the history of war. I was discovering how harmony is the medicine for the soul.

My global experiences in peace building were reflected back in my own spiritual quest. Even though I had spent years playing music for different religious groups—from playing organ for a Pentecostal church to drumming at the Agape International Spiritual Center—there was a deeper yearning in my spirit to come into direct contact with the Divine. My efforts at meditation grew frustrating because I have a very busy mind. But I persisted and learned to listen to the silence between the breaths, between the beats, and between the notes. Through chanting and mantra practices, I began to cultivate a silence that guided me to peace. Silence was the medicine of music that taught me to quiet my mind.

My most mystical experience of music's medicine happened in an unexpected moment while I was resting in a Japanese hotel, exhausted by the humidity and heat of a hot August day. As I lay on the bed, something strange happened; I began to hear my breath as if it were music. There was a rhythm in my inhale and in my exhale and a perfect balance in the pauses between my breaths. My heart felt filled with song. I felt the vibration of my soul, like a perfectly tuned instrument. I took a deep breath and sang a tone in a pitch that felt like it came straight from my inner spirit. It was my note, my personal pitch. I was feeling the inner music, the sound of my spirit.

If the four elements of music can bring hope to the hearts of people all over the world who have sung their way to freedom, discovered hope after genocide, awakened the spirit of creativity within, and facilitated inner peace, just think of the healing these elements can bring into your life.

PRELUDE

I know this approach to music will encourage the healing that allows your body to dance, your heart to sing, your soul to be in harmony, your mind to rest in silence, and the inner music of your spirit to be heard and expressed in your life. But this is not just about music. It is about awakened creativity and the heart. It is about freeing your voice and spirit. It is a journey that will reverberate beyond the discovery of the medicine of music into living a harmonious life.

Welcome home.

Christine Stevens
Encinitas, CA

1

Sound Check

Have you ever gotten goose bumps from a powerful piece of music? Have you ever been moved to tears by the words of a song that express how you feel? Have you ever had a song magically play on the radio just when you need it most?

If you answered yes to these questions, you are not alone. Daniel Levitin, author of *This Is Your Brain on Music*, calls our love of music a human obsession. But music's medicine is much deeper than that. You might say that we are music. Our heartbeat is a rhythm track pulsing through our veins; our voice is the melody that resonates as we speak; our health is the harmony of our body and mind; and our breath is the silence that allows our bodies to rest. In the words of George Leonard, aikido master and pioneer of the human potential movement, "We do not make music; music makes us."¹

When you go to a doctor's office, you get a checkup. In our journey of music for healing, we begin with a "sound check," or a quick examination of the viruses that inhibit music's medicine in our lives. I'll show you how to tune out any doubts that you are musical, and I'll share scientific evidence that confirms how innate music is within us all.

Consumers versus Creators

How have we forgotten we are all musical? How have we become music listeners more than music makers, consumers more than creators? It's often

one critical statement from some authority figure that silences us. We get told we “can’t carry a tune in a bucket” or that we should “just move our lips” in the choir concert.

If you’ve ever heard such comments, you are in good company. Sir Paul McCartney failed choir auditions twice. Luciano Pavarotti was told he needed to change his sound to be more like the “operatic greats.” At the age of ten, George Gershwin was told it was too late to start studying music. Thank God they didn’t stop making music. Instead they brought melodies to the hearts of music fans worldwide.

Imagine how many McCartneys have been lost because of musical criticism that silenced them and caused them to give up on their music. Imagine how many “survivors” of piano lessons shut down their musical creativity because they were told they weren’t talented enough. But as we shall see, it’s never too late to make your music.

Instrumentaphobia

What is going on with our musical spirit? A 2006 Gallup poll indicated that only 7.6 percent of Americans over the age of eighteen had played an instrument in the past year.² That’s a shocking 92 percent who felt they were not musical. The poll didn’t test singing, so it is possible that more of us make music than these statistics might indicate. I’m hopeful!

Three years later, a follow-up 2009 poll showed that of those who played an instrument, 95 percent started playing before age fifteen, with 72 percent starting between ages five and eleven. Only 5 percent started playing after age eighteen. There seems to be a pervasive belief that if we didn’t start early on, it’s too late. The poll also found that only 38 percent of homes reported that someone in the household played music; that’s 62 percent of households that face music-making deprivation. When asked what would motivate these same people to play music, 95 percent of the reasons had to do with health. At some level, we intuitively know that music holds healing benefits in our lives.³

The same follow-up poll found that eighty-five percent of people wished that they could play an instrument. This “wish factor” cannot be extinguished. The healing benefits of music continue to call out to the soul. Guess who is among this majority? President Barack Obama, who told Barbara Walters in an interview of Ten Personal Questions that he