

## **Music and our Monster Within**

**By Roberta S. Perry**

I've noticed a pattern developing in my recent commentary. Predominantly, healthy things we can do when we need an emotional shot in the arm or an end to the impossible rut we find ourselves in from time to time. Since I intend to carry on said remarks until I have exhausted every conceivable trick in my bag, I now find myself in pursuit of all things in life that can break a bad mood in an instant.

In June, I wrote about the importance of girlfriends in our lives and how laughing with them can be as therapeutic as sitting in a shrink's office talking about what's bothering us. This month, I want to talk about music.

Some time around 1697, William Congreve wrote, "Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast; to soften rocks, or bend a knotted oak." No truer words have been said that capture the essence that the power music has over our psyche. Sure, Beethoven said something about music being the mediator between the spiritual and sensual life and Confucius made note about the kind of pleasure music produces that we can't live without, but soothing beasts, softening rocks and bending knotted oak is pretty eloquent.

Music, whether recorded or live, has always been a big part of my life. Growing up, I listened to all sorts of stuff, but I have distinct memories of dancing to Donna Summer and the Beatles; being at the shore where The Police, B52's and Journey dominated; roller-skating to REO Speedwagon and Hall and Oates; and then there was opera at my Grandmom's every Saturday.

So far, no mention of anything 80's, because that was my age of reason and needs its own scrutiny. It was in the 80's that I began choosing the kind of music I wanted to listen to. My taste back then, however, was narrow - mostly typical 80's pop, New Wave and believe it or not, glam rock hair bands. It is also the time when I became a concertgoer. It's sad, but I don't remember my first concert, although Duran Duran sounds about right. I remember getting into the local Philly music scene then too. I must have seen the Hooters play at least 50 times. I still see the Hooters and have become friends with them over these last 24 years. And I still go see local bands perform.

So how does music tame our inner ogre? Why do we listen to upbeat or hardcore stuff while we exercise? Why do we instinctively turn to jazz when we are feeling randy? Dr. Lynn Brandsma, Assoc. Professor of Psychology at Chestnut Hill College and Board Certified Music Therapist thinks one component is that there are things we associate to certain music. "Music has the power to bring us to a specific moment," she explains. For me, the song "And We Danced" by the Hooters brings me right back to 1985 and the Exton drive-in where the video for the song was filmed. It was one of the most fun days of my life, so any time I hear it on the radio, I say "Yeah!" out loud.

Tempo also has a lot to do with music's mood altering ability. Music can regulate our breathing and our heart rate. Something with an upbeat tempo generally causes us to move to the beat, whether it's toe tapping, finger drumming or out right dancing. For world ranked triathlete, Fiona Docherty, music is an integral part of her grueling training. "From driving to swimming I like to have a bit of hard core stuff like Linkin Park to get me amped," she says. On her bike rides she listens to more upbeat stuff like Groove Armada, Black Eyed Peas and Salmonella Dub. "Usually I set my iPod on shuffle and let it do its own thing. Now and then a slower song plays which is fine, but definitely not during an effort session," she states.

If you're an average person who isn't running Ironman races (2.4 mile swim, 112 mile bike followed by a 26 mile run all in about 9 1/2 hours), music is great for getting out of an unpleasant frame of mind. Dr. Brandsma tells me that her go to song for breaking a bad mood is Sheryl Crow's "Soak Up the Sun". "It's the song I know will help me lighten up," she says. On the other hand, when we listen to something slower like Eva Cassidy's "People Get Ready" or "Nocturne No. 2 In E-Flat, Op. 9, No. 2" by Chopin, our heart rate and breathing slows and we relax, or in some cases, sleep.

Does the influence of music differ between listening to recorded music and seeing a live show? I think so. At a live show, there is a visual element and sharing a common experience with others. "There is an energy and magnetism to a live show," offers Maureen Malloy, Jazz Music Director and host of Jazz Hot 11 Countdown and All-Request Show at WRTI FM. "Being able to take in the ambiance the music creates, the signals the musicians give to each other and how they read the crowd, it changes everything. It allows you to feel the music rather than just hearing it," Malloy continues. Watching the musician, the emotion on his face, the movement of hands on a guitar neck or across a keyboard, and sharing an experience with others is pretty powerful. Malloy adds, "The live show can also make people feel calm and excited at the same time, which is something that rarely happens in life."

A late June Saturday evening, attendance at Dirk Quinn's CD release party for "QuinnTet" at Steel City Coffee House in Phoenixville is my case in point. I've known Dirk for a little while now and I think he's a very cool guy, very straightforward with a charming, aw-shucks disposition. He is a 33-year-old jazz/funk guitarist with the sophistication and talent of what I suspect makes jazz legends. I know from listening to his CD's that he is exceptionally talented but I did not expect him to be so good, nor did I

anticipate my reaction to this show. I'd seen him play before and was quite impressed. His writing, arranging and playing is prodigious and evocative. I can't say for sure why this night was different. My feeling is that the combination of an intimate setting of the coffee house, the group of people I went with and my acquaintance with Dirk was the perfect mix and the right time. I found myself bound to the performance, to the band, and to each musician individually by sound, sight, movement and emotion. Dirk's music is a seductive confluence of passion and tenderness; intensity and lightheartedness.

The show made an impression on most of us there. My husband commented that when he next went to work, "QuinnTet" was blaring from the stereo. A few of his co-workers saw the show with us, most for the first time. They were so impressed by the show; they purchased the CD and began auditorily consuming its music immediately.

Me? I added "QuinnTet" tracks to my iPod and assigned some of them to different playlists. Playlists are the score to our daily living. They help enhance moods, disarm road rage, make us happy and help us fall asleep. One of the playlists on my iPod is named "AA" or Attitude Adjustment. Songs on it include The Hooters' "I'm Alive" and "Twenty-five Hours A Day", "Pride and Joy" by Stevie Ray Vaughn, "The Hand that Feeds" by Nine Inch Nails, "Evil Birdman of Funk" by Dirk Quinn and other songs from the likes of Bon Jovi, The Beatles, OutKast, Pink, Phish and Diana Ross. This is a guaranteed mental slap on the forehead kind of list. Just like I couldn't possibly stay upset once I've laughed so hard I almost peed my pants, I can't help but feel great after listening to this compilation.

Dr. Brandsma is a big proponent of the playlist. She mentioned she uses playlists at homewith her own kids for various needs, like sleep, contemplation, inspiring

creativity and chilling out. “Instead of talking your kid out of a bad mood, have them make a playlist and use it,” she suggests.

So the next time you’re feeling blah, angry, anxious, sad or excited, do yourself a favor and make yourself a playlist of your favorite music. Listen to it. Allow yourself to get lost in it. Give it a chance to work its magic. You’ll be better off for having done so. “One good thing about music, when it hits you, you feel no pain.” Bob Marley