

ESSAY | PEER REVIEWED

Social Music as a Prescription for Maintaining Wellness

Joanne Loewy ^{1*}, Jon Batiste ²

¹ The Louis Armstrong Center for Music & Medicine, Icahn School of Medicine, Mount Sinai Hospital, NY, USA

² Multi-Grammy- and Academy Award-winning Singer, Composer, Musician, Educator and Bandleader, Kenner, Louisiana, USA

* joanne.loewy@mountsinai.org

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Abstract

Growing attention highlights the potential of music as a social prescription to enhance wellness. Explicating music's function in communities can lead to healthy outcomes. During the COVID pandemic, communities tended to isolate, increasingly avoiding in-person interactions. Progress in music-based interventions highlights the potential of live music to improve our sense of community. The need for social prescribing to develop and maintain community brings us together. We propose a model that highlights how music serves as a social modality for maintaining wellness. As a musician and a music therapist, our focus includes analyses of historical contexts through time, and how through humanity's struggles we've relied on music's integrative elements to unite us, moving toward resilience as a quest to survive. Integrating these trajectories and expanding upon them, we elucidate ways that live engagement in music can strengthen performance and health and wellness. Music's capacity to treat social aspects of humanity changes the way humanity works within community. This includes our sense of feeling connection and togetherness that feeds social willingness to perceive intimate relationships. In contexts where healthcare systems prioritize symptom management, we must realize that the larger picture includes how we socialize, thus Social Music is supported herein as an inclusive model of care.

Keywords: social music; music therapy; music wellness

Author/s Positionality Statement

Joanne Loewy is a music therapist who has been practicing in medical and mental health contexts for over three decades and Jon Batiste is a multi-Grammy award-winning singer, composer, musician, educator and bandleader. We have worked together in schools and colleges as part of a National Endowment for the Arts AMEND (Assessment of Music Experiences in Navigating Depression) lab. We have common interests and beliefs in how music can be used to reach unique groups and that the origins of music's potential have not always been emphasized in mainstream culture.

Introduction

In this paper, we combine our perspectives to expand ways of understanding and conceptualizing how the arts, and most particularly music, can be applied for good health, and as a social prescription which brings people together to maintain their wellness. During the COVID pandemic, communities tended to isolate, increasingly avoiding in-person interactions. Progress in music-based interventions highlights live music's potential to improve our sense of community. Social prescribing develops a reliable community plan that brings together people in their need for human engagement. This practice of social music as a need that can contribute to wellbeing exemplifies the history of musical practices across cultures and contexts in all areas of the world.

Social Prescribing: History and Rationale

Social prescribing is defined as non-medical recommendations made by a range of professionals, including doctors, integrative medical teams, and non-medical teams as well. Recommendations include local social groups for participation, made for the purposes of improving health and wellbeing, including social gatherings, community groups, and local volunteer clubs (Dingle et al., 2025; Islam, 2020).

Social prescribing began in the United Kingdom (UK) and has become popular in Ireland and the Netherlands. Its implementation has become more formalized in England and risen to an elevated level with its goal to reduce the rise of healthcare costs. It is working to ease the burden of pressure within general practice clinics. In 2015, it was estimated that about 20% of patient consultations in the UK were for social problems rather than medical problems (Roberts, 2017). This highlighted the great need for social connections within communities, wherein music's capacity to address this need could be centrally placed. Most often, music's capacity to socially engage is organized as a muse that facilitates connections involving the young or old, as a developmental skill (Linnavalli et al., 2018) or as a rehabilitative modality for the elderly (Moreno-Morales et al., 2020). In early childhood, the focus on attachment between caregivers and infants is fostered through musical play and can fortify language building and enhance social engagement (Trevarthen, 2008). In ageing populations, music has been a stimulator of cognitive strengthening, a means of accessing memories and stimulating socialization.

In 2019, the US National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) released a consensus report that described the state of research, policy, and practice related to improving health and health equity (NASEM, 2019). The quest for better healthcare exists in a system of medicine in which social risk factors such as socioeconomic status, access to housing, education, food security, and social support networks shape incentives. It highlights how achievement of health outcomes lies in a reality that medical incentives may be dependent on the extent to which social needs are addressed. This report highlights how important questions need to be answered about when and how health care systems should integrate social care into their practices and what kinds of infrastructure

are required to facilitate such activities. This provides important implications about the social determinants of health and their relation to the delivery of health care.

Social Risk Factors and Need

Social risk factors and social need are connected to health outcomes (NASEM, 2019). Attending concerts is an under-recognized context for medical referrals despite evidence that engaging in concert group experiences indirectly positively influences medical domains. Studies of attending concerts are receiving growing attention in science and research environments (Clements-Cortés, 2017; *van der Vleuten et al.*, 2012). This has grown in parallel with the global increase in ageing environments, where loneliness and restrictions in communicative capacity have been surging (Dingle et al., 2024).

In 2008, concert attendance was studied and associated positively with prosocial behaviors such as voting, donating to charities, volunteering, and community involvement. At that time, 6239 households participated in a U.S. Department of Commerce Current Population Survey inclusive of Participation in the Arts. Controlled for effects such as age, race, sex, income, education, marital status, and occupation class, it was found that the likelihood of pro-social behaviors was greater with increases in music concert attendance (Polzella & Forbis, 2014). A recent study by researchers at Albany University suggests the experience of “groove” (Janata et al., 2012) was enhanced by a liking of musical structures and a desire to affiliate with the musician(s) performing by synchronizing one’s movement with the sounds that the musicians produce. The stronger the motive to affiliate, the greater the urge to move to the music and the more pleasure it evoked. This and other research on synchrony demonstrate the positive effects of attending concerts, as entrained communal groove has a likelihood of stimulating a “felt sense” of community experience (Kowalewski et al., 2020; Kowalewski et al., 2021). Advancing new standardized music-based interventions is important, not only because music affects core dimensions of mental health through the biology of tonality, rhythm, reward, and sociality, but because these avenues present an accessible, low-risk approach to addressing problems that need solutions (Bowling, 2023).

In an effort to deepen concert attendees’ experiences of music performances and to integrate performers with audiences providing opportunities for social engagement and enhanced means of expression, music therapists at the Louis Armstrong Center for Music and Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City designed and studied a program with teaching artists at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts for individuals with dementia and their caregivers. After attending a year of monthly concerts, we instituted art, music and movement activities related to the music performance for participants with dementia and their caregivers to attend post-performance. The “after” performance sessions helped attendees synthesize the experience. It also leveled the typical separation between performers and audience, providing a new context for the “community” of music as an accessible, social encounter (Loewy et al., 2020).

Social Music

Social music is a concept developed by co-author Jon Batiste which includes the unique aspects of music sharing based on not only one’s personal history with music but also knowledge of the way music has been shared within various cultures through time. He considers this concept to be central to music’s existence and the way music has served vulnerable participants as a stronghold, and a place of meaning and fortitude for various communities throughout time.

“Social Music” is defined as music intuited through exploration whereby play and performance become a dialogue and music becomes a modality that is purposefully set up

for people to feel and find release and/or relief together (Batiste, 2023, private conversation). Social music as a concept and music sharing as a vision is inclusive of Batiste's intention to provide new consumer experiences of musicking—where performers are not separated from audiences. Some examples of social music have been exemplified in history (Dunbar, 2012) and include call and response music experiences and story songs, which originated as protest songs, and serve as a powerful way to fight, acclaim and celebrate freedom, particularly when pushing against adversity. Enslaved African-Americans were almost always forbidden to learn how to read or write because enslavers knew that educated people would be harder to control. African-Americans passed down songs, dances, stories, recipes, and other customs as part of a vibrant oral tradition which continues to this day (Nzewi, 2007).

Story Song as Clinical Music Expression

In working with emotional challenges in music therapy, Loewy and Bosco created a model of story song (Bosco, 2003) that has encapsulated challenges children and/or adults have faced, whereby the theme is born in words and music. From there, the challenge or conflict is expressed as the counter-theme and acknowledged through music and lyrics. The “play” is fostered through acceptance of the conflict and setting up musical circumstances whereby the participant navigates through variations that assign meaning.

The resolution asserts itself only when and if the participant finds their way through a variation that is meaningful and makes sense to them. The meaning obtained herein is that *any and all* resolution is acceptable within the story song play. In this way, the therapist and their music hold a theme of acceptance and move only when the participant cues readiness. The theme of honoring resistance has been utilized in story song, and its use in therapy is an example of the profundity of where social music can take us.

Shared Music Play that is Non-Clinical

Historical examples of shared music play that illustrate the impact of social music in a non-clinical domain include John Philip Sousa's marches where there is shared movement. Various music traditions, such as bluegrass, encourage music to be shared. Opportunities exist in Irish music where the passing of violins occurs. In county fairs, singing and call and response formats take place in the spirit of music serving as a community unifier and groups have an easy mechanism for playing and singing with each other. Communal festivals often provide participatory music formats. And yet, mainstream music largely has been commodified and has changed the intention and meaning of such community music opportunities in its quests to keep music restricted to entertainment. Record production, marketing, venue restrictions, and the selling of tickets have in many cases restricted community access barring what could be social music for many of the people in deprived communities, who may need it most.

Social Prescribing and Wellness

Social music differs from social prescribing in that social music is more specific and looks at the details of music content and history as its motivational context for developing an implementation plan (Loewy, in press a). While social prescribing has developed as a way to inter-link medical care to social forums involving the arts, the accessibility and follow up for how to do this has not always been a fluid process. A toolkit developed in 2022 was put together and published by the World Health Organization (WHO) aiming to help doctors and nurses understand social prescribing at the community level. While the toolkit spelled out the exact steps necessary to set forth a social prescribing scheme and offered

sample materials that could be adapted to local contexts, its applications and reach have been limited. A recent article describes the challenges of social prescribing:

A fundamental yet recurring question is how to make programmes accessible and engaging to participants. Barriers that might inhibit people's involvement include limited awareness about social prescribing opportunities, an absence of language translation, digital exclusion, and practical considerations, such as transportation, childcare needs, and associated costs. These barriers echo wider concerns that social prescribing could exacerbate inequalities, for example, working best in areas with existing community resources and not reaching those with greatest social needs. (Marshall et al., 2025, p.354)

The Intricate Role of Social Music

A controversial question in thinking about social music is whether the role of racially minoritized people within music and music therapy circles can benefit from a revised pedagogy framework that seeks to be inclusive (Edwards, 2021). When working within racially minoritized communities, access to music and music therapy often changes. An understanding of the various perceptions of positionality and historically embedded whiteness currently existing in music education and music therapy circles should address best practice needs from enriching the vulnerable lives of those who need it. Meki Nzewi, an African scholar and professor, has brought such seminal topics into the forefront in how he writes and teaches about the origins of African music in Pretoria and surrounding African areas. This topic was a central theme raised by Nate Holder and Jamal Glynn at the 2022 European Music Therapy Conference. It has provided the music therapy community with insightful ripples internationally since that time.

If we look at music's role in education across countries within the past century from an individual learning perspective, we notice a plethora of studies have promoted instrument learning as a golden gate to potentiated neural play, especially those instruments where learning pertains to motor networks recruited for practice and play. Research supports the hypothesis that learning to play a musical instrument can also impact brain networks that enable executive functioning, which, in turn, may mediate the link between music training and enhanced cognitive abilities (Miendlarzewska & Trost, 2014).

But how does this benefit a greater number of people? Playing a musical instrument requires access to it, which can necessitate a significant financial investment. Clearly, instrument play is often most accessible to people of means. This has made music learning restricted yet at the same time opened a field of play (Kenny, 1989) that highlights human resourcefulness and their quest for unrestricted creativity. In historical community settings, instruments have been noted to be a motivational and accessible force, particularly where people used ingenuity and resourced their craft in developing musical instruments from existing found objects. Neolithic flutes, for example, were made from bones in China some 9,000 years ago and guitars from early Greece were made from turtle shells (Bakarezos et al., 2012).

Norris and Spalding (2024) take this further in contemplating movement away from proverbial fields in their "push (for) participation in radical creative amalgamations, the communion of people—the inter disciplines, cross-disciplines and the intentionally undisciplined" (p. 326). And when considering their work into the realm of what the field of play can open, they imagine "sociopolitical and spiritual possibilities not as they are but as they could be" (Norris & Spalding, 2024, p. 326). Their quest is to reach multiple fields of play, with inclusion of all and most particularly honoring and giving birth to freedom, igniting all in a freedom trajectory.

Social Music as Wellness

Emerging evidence indicates that music has the potential to enhance prosocial behavior, promote social connectedness, and develop emotional competence (Zaatar et al., 2024). This article highlights aspects of social music that enhance wellness to keep people motivated in maintaining their health. In this way, social prescriptions are not only provided when someone's health is vulnerable, or limited to when they are compromised or lonely, but instituted as a practice ritual, to keep health and connectedness at the forefront.

Maintaining resilience is an essential aspect of wellness and music. In particular, music used socially may provide a unique forum for facilitating and maintaining social connection. Thus, the facilitation of social connection is an essential role of social music.

Cultural Development of Social Music

Growing up in Louisiana, music proved to be an intricate part of co-author Jon Batiste's culture and influence. Music is played on the streets, and a part of daily community life. Starting on the drums at backyard barbecues and playing in the street, enabled comradeship and fostered a sense of community for Batiste. In New Orleans, there exists a specific rhythmic idiom called a "backyard beat." There is a rhythm for everything—weddings, graduations, and especially funeral processions where musicians march in a line through the street, celebrating the joy of the deceased, first marching past the family and then friends. The instruments abound then by a second line of the deceased one's friends, musicians marching in line. There's also music every Sunday, and music for the birth of babies—it is part of the social fabric of New Orleans. Being born into a family of musicians, music was not connected to a venue or categorized as a particular genre. Genres, as far as Jon Batiste is concerned, were developed to organize music for production, record sales, and concerts.

With the development of steam technology in the early 19th century, New Orleans became one of the largest ports in the world. It remains one of the largest ports in the United States and handles trade from the Mississippi River Valley, as well as the Eastern seaboard, Europe, the Caribbean, and Latin America. In the 1800s, the port of New Orleans brought in all kinds of music from all different cultures, synthesizing and integrating those cultures. Many of the musical idioms within our pop music culture are rooted in the music of New Orleans. The city was an important meeting point for diverse musical characteristics with an array of unique styles, and influencers who came from Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean which comprise the music of the African diaspora. Some famous stories from the 18th and 19th centuries shed light on significant details of the germination of New Orleans's musical heritage, which formulated the seeds of its social and cultural history. The music sat at the ports, marinating. It evolved into what is currently known as jazz. Pierre Louis Berquin-Duvallon, a Black French author in his classic *Travels in Louisiana and the Floridas* (1802) described musicians at a Carnival celebration: "The musicians are half a dozen gypsies, or else people of color, scraping their fiddles with all their might." A later author, Christian Schultz (1810) depicted the diversity of the music as "...twenty different dancing groups of wretched Africans, collected together to perform their *worship* after the manner of their country. They have their own national music, consisting...of a long kind of narrow drum of various sizes...three or four of which make a band" (Epstein, 1963). Many early accounts describe musicians from many African cultures coming together in Congo Square.

Social Music as an Accessible Idiom

Social Music was developed from Batiste and Loewy's desire to connect themselves and others with the most communal aspects of music. We are driven to ask what we can do to make music accessible to all kinds of people. Maybe it's lowering ticket prices or moving music to communities that may not have access. Perhaps it's providing sessions for low or no pay, as we often do at our clinic. And we open up a community jam to patients and staff alike. This kind of access has been part of the Louis Armstrong Center for Music and Medicine's mission. Bringing people in is critical—whether in performance aspects or providing therapy. Selecting performance locations and therapy centers where no one is turned away can increase access to music and provides a forum for our creation of a communal, no-stage accessible experience. Music access is available to everyone who wants to engage, and while it may be perceived as spontaneous, stages and performance areas can be strategically set up in public areas of lobbies and waiting rooms to transform the otherwise sterile feeling of hospitals.

Social Music's Use to Address Conflict

During the George Floyd protests in 2020, Batiste organized music parades that became known as “love riots” connecting peoples' yells and expressions of anger within music forums. The protests in some cities became musical pleas that occurred on the streets of cities where music provided a tension-releasing experience led by Jon and his band. Social music was conceived of as a way to foster music participation for all attendees and to encourage the kind of performances where audiences are not “shushed.” Batiste and his musicians have aimed to get rid of that sense of superiority and reduce financial barriers. Requiring the purchase of expensive tickets separates audience and performers, which Jon feels is not ideal. Experiences from New Orleans have motivated Batiste and others to expand the possibilities for experiencing shared music.

This unique approach includes teaming up with people who are not usually connected. Such an approach is part of how Jon has disseminated his concept of social music. Shared values are used to form an action plan that evolves in relation to the desires and imagination of the businesses of the community.

In music therapy, integrating practice within a music community that is mixed not only in terms of culture and creeds, but also in terms of crossing professions is important. Bringing music into interdisciplinary rounds has provided Loewy with a modality that is transferable from patients to staff. Applying for and gaining professorship in the department of medicine was critical to music becoming more systematically accessible and integrated within the interdisciplinary healthcare setting.

Seminal Concepts of Social Music

Meki Nzewi (1999) named three important stages of music education in traditions of various groups. The first stage inducts a newborn baby into feeling the sensations of musical pulse and sound as a sympathetic participant during the first two years of life. The second stage concentrates on the imbibement of the sense of rhythm from the age of two and extends to about age eight. The third stage begins at age eight and involves specialized aspects of musical creativity and performance, as the mastery of instruments, singing, dance, dramatic expression, and so on are distinctly human-oriented.

In working together with musicians, it is important to understand how the origins of music reflect mechanisms that are inherently social. Understanding how the parts of music work together in a naturally-occurring ensemble emphasizing a jointly constructive experience, has implications for how we understand music therapy constructs.

In the following sections, Jon will lay out a foundational historic understanding of the instruments characterizing his concept of “social music” and Joanne will provide case examples for the basis of how this music has been evolving strategically into a “social music” orientation in medical clinical practice.

The Bass Drum

Bass drum is the anchor—it starts at the bottom. Roots of the bass’ vibration are the focus of resilience and catharsis. Music is a mechanism that has been utilized for centuries. Rhythm was the basis. Polyrhythms are symbolic. Symbolism is expressed like a tonal allegory. Jon uses the characteristics of social music to integrate and bond, bond specifically to connect and broaden the evolution of jazz. Jon considers jazz to be one of the most social of all music idioms as it has a blend of so many aspects of social music embedded within it.

The symbolism of the bass as the low drum originating in places like Ghana and Benin, and the rhythms such as Conga, Bamaboo, Abakwa, Wawako, and Rhumba stemming from the African diaspora, have influenced beats from Haiti, Brazil, New Orleans, and Cuba. In these hubs, new traditions have grown from the original polyrhythms.

The anatomy of the woman and the way that the woman moves is the basis for drum sounds that ensue on such instruments as the djembe. Rhythm was the first element of this music. The bass drum, once served as an anchor for what can happen on the top, allowing opportunities for release.

The bass rhythm stems from Congo Square. The instruments playing on top of the bass drum provided release. Opportune conversation happened next. Based on the rhythm laid down, and the bass drum’s rooting, this fortifies whatever rhythm happens on top of its beat. African American culture stems from this—it’s the rhythm that took place at Congo Square in New Orleans. The “[Bamboula](#)” is one of the most popular drumbeats and dances that was first played in Congo Square more than 300 years ago (65 Parishes, 2026; Heart of Louisiana, 2026). This square is at the southern corner of Armstrong Park in New Orleans. It traditionally was an open space where the enslaved and free people of color gathered throughout the 19th century for meetings. There are open markets, and since then Congo Squares have been built in other cities such as Philadelphia and Chicago, where people gather for festivals, markets, music celebrations, and rituals. The traditions of Congo Square continue today in these places, holding African dance and drumming celebrations that continue to play a significant role in the development of jazz.

The bass rhythm promotes a context for conversation. Adding to it are talking drums conversing with each other, with cowbells, high drums, mid-range drums, and literally drums called “talking drums.” In this play, release can happen over the steady, almost drone of the steady repetition of a repeated form of the bass drum. As a symbol of Mother Earth, the dirt, the grounding, the roots of the tree and the force of the bass drum take us into a space of holding. All the fruits come from this. The conversation then begins—the element of call and response.

Bass Drum as a social music mechanism in clinical practice

The following depicts a case study of how the bass drum enhanced social music.

Client ‘Bobby’ came to music therapy when he was 40 years old. He had had a traumatic brain injury and was quite reclusive, even as he had gone back to work several months after his injury. It affected his language and some of his movement. He did not show much interest in many of the instruments provided, preferring to talk about his experiences. There were lots of silences. We allowed for this as music therapy considers silences, and the rest spots, to be a place for space but also for growing intimacy, which helped build trust between us.

Eventually, after some themes of his love for jazz emerged, we'd listen to Louis Armstrong and Cole Porter. One day he asked if he could "try" the bass drum sitting in the corner of the room. He had noted in his active listening that the bass and low drum sounds were the ground and provided with other sounds could unleash their freedom, where all of the other instruments could "go crazy."

It was not long after this time, about six months of music therapy sessions, that Bobby started to play. First, he played along with the recordings where we'd spell out the bass rhythms, injecting solos. Thereafter, he invited me to play with him and I played piano.

After several months of music therapy, Bobby would come early to sessions and listen to our Visiting Artist in the lobby on his way into our sessions. He loved listening to the weekly jazz guitarist and bass player. He would talk about how "smooth" their music sounded. One day, after mastering the tune "Autumn Leaves" on the drums, he joked about the idea of "sitting in" with the duo. He felt this was a risk—that he would either be rejected, or perhaps even worse, would "mess up" and lose his place in the tune had he been invited to play.

We played this tune many times, and Bobby worked up his nerve to take a social stretch in the music as he was most often isolated and still shy in his outside activity participation. As he approached the duo, the guitarist pulled up a chair and plugged in his amp next to Bobby. Together they played the tune smoothly and Bobby played through the with no pause, error or tentativeness. "How High the Moon" led to other tunes and soon Bobby became a regular. Today he uses his Visiting Artist spot to bring in other musicians, as he is now the host.

Call and Response

Call and response embodies the bass drum's encouragement to speak, negotiating space whereby declarations or themes can find a place in the greater world. This can eventually evolve into spirituals and march music. Spirituals affirm humans' deepest desires. Songs that our ancestors created within an environment as a source of expression. Songs historically offered opportunities for release and affirmation. Drum circles can go on for hours, evoking spiritual desires and sacred play where needs can be fully expressed. Releases can be heavily laden as they are often based on the histories of people who have been oppressed. Such expression lies safely within a musical context.

Call and response as a clinical social music mechanism

Starting with blues is a comfortable way to engage in call and response with kids from as young as eight to teenagers who may feel tension or be depressed about their situation. They may be coming to a group they'd rather not participate in. Using a slide whistle or melodica is a nice way to open their lungs and get the air moving. The therapist may leave a space in the blues for a toot, toot response after they offer or open up a question. Shifting this into a chant that is based on a spiritual can provide a place for initiating a "call and response" mode in which the therapist may initiate "You Gotta Sing When the Spirit Says Sing" and leave open a space for a response for the next line. How the client enters the response may be by incorporating something else; something other than singing, such as crying, or making a dissonant sound. Call and response as a therapeutic idiom gives patients a respectful, gentle yet playful tap that the therapist would like to hear from them. In this musical experience, any response whatsoever is appropriate—even silence, which can be honored, as a soft silent response.

Messaging

Messaging is another essential element that serves as a basis for social music, whether in a performance or therapeutic environment. Messages are communicated within the music to deliver ideas that are often beyond the consciousness of the oppressed. There are different ways we use music to express oppression. For many trapped in the dire circumstances of the Underground Railroad, music allowed for strategizing and experiencing a sense of freedom, even when there was no physical escape. Creativity expressed through singing and drumming provided ways to communicate. Messages in music are not always literal. Messages interspersed within a tune can spark a personal hidden theme that only certain members may know. Intentional selection of musical instruments can also convey messages, reflecting shared themes and rituals of groups who have historically played together.

Music and water have long had a deep connection. Elements of the earth are a critical part of hope, which represent spirituality—and water is an important part of this symbolism. It is a life force, cleansing, used in baptism; it is rain, a valued resource, where rituals have been developed to bring it in times of need, as in a rain dance. “Mayim” is a Hebrew dance representing water that was found in 1937 in the desert after a seven-year search. “Wade in the Water,” “Noah’s Ark”—many spirituals and bible songs include water imagery. Living in the spirit, an acclaim of existence occurs in music within a finite space and time. However, both spiritually and physically, the symbol of water offers a message that signifies a possible means for escaping. Ancestors used these symbols as messaging and to express hopeful avenues of freedom.

Music acknowledges the lineage from varying times when freedom was sought. Music, songs, and hymns have messages that were expressed meaningfully. Hidden meanings, instructions, and inside jokes have been expressed within music, and these existed in a larger capacity prior to the time that music production became commodified.

Messaging as a social music mechanism in therapy

In music therapy, messaging is most often subtle. It can be expressed as a personal need or hope. It is not a prayer, but can have spiritual significance. In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States occurred—where two World Trade Centers in lower Manhattan, and also a capital building in Washington DC tumbled after being attacked by terrorists. Our center received a Grammy grant through the American Music Therapy Association where we studied and addressed the trauma through music therapy. One of our music groups was focused on the song “Fragile” by Sting. As we sang, we became aware that the messaging within the lyrics and style of the music was focused on loss and “what ifs?” When we sang “Motherless Child” at another point, the message of loss and grief became ever more pronounced and our group cohesion thickened (Loewy & Frisch-Hara, 2003) with many tears shed within the group. It was both profound and evocative.

Functional Music

Functionality is another element of Social Music. Music for work (work songs), prayers, jubilees, rituals, sacred dances, celebrations—these are forms of songs that are functional within the context of a person’s or a community’s lifeworld. Functional music traditionally allows people facing oppression to have a place of connectivity, humanity, and catharsis.

Work songs, historically, often included the sounds of jackhammers, rakes, the clanks of early sharecroppers, and all kinds of field workers making music. The development of blues-filled songs and work songs maintained functional incentives. Songs of worship were also functional music. At first, these songs were a cappella, one melodic line, one voice.

Eventually, they expanded into a chorus format as the music of early Black composers and arrangers of the African diaspora became essential to the American musical foundation.

The collision of cultures integrated, and the presentation of music changed and became codified. Early gospel music signifies an integration of cultures. Cadences, as in the ending or temporary pause of a closure, were embraced to enhance functionality. This was simultaneous with the development of the blues. In both the development of hymns and work songs, blues and repetition were essential to the music's formatting. Chants, simplicity of chord structure, and predictability made the music accessible and grounding.

Affirmation and Divinity

Affirmation and divinity are essential elements of social music that are closely intertwined. Affirmation lies in the expression of need or a yearning. Music can concretize such a need. Divinity asserts that there is nature, or fate, or something within nature that can be achieved through communal expression of organized or spontaneous human sound-making. Affirmation can serve as the celebration of a milestone. It's an acknowledgement of a moment in time that is blessed by musical expression. It is through affirmation that music can access some aspect of the divine.

Affirmation crystallizes the idea that the community is in something together that is important, and the music has marked it with a time stamp. Embedded in the concept of divinity is the affirmation of a human right to live, sing, and dance. As such, divinity affirms our right to be. Divinity within the music has also served to be more of a question than an answer. As in blues, there is no sense of knowing what might come next. In this way, the music expresses that the future rests in the unknown, but the element of divinity provides individual and communally shared hope.

Resistance Through Music

Clinically, music therapy has afforded communal experiences where anger and unrest is appropriately released and shared through drumming, singing, and chanting. As a music therapist who has led groups of teens and/or young adults for many years, when talking becomes provocative, providing options with musical instruments can provide a playfully meaningful alternative. It can break the tension and offer an outlet that is physically satisfying while at the same time emotionally indicated, drawing towards clarity.

It was incredibly meaningful to see the response to the George Floyd protests led in NYC in 2020 because it was Jon's dream of what music can be. We saw people from all over the world marching and the music played represented a reaffirmation of our humanity. While music is so often commodified, as a communal group of outraged New Yorkers, we were able to bring something to the streets that connected us to our higher and spiritual selves. This reminds us that music is enough. It can be both a stream and a current.

Access and Root Music

Access to music experiences has existed and developed historically within a variety of forums. Being exposed to music in the crucial early years of human development has multiple positive impacts on brain development (Dumont et al., 2017). Neurocognitive research indicates that reaching populations of need may render the most profound impact with important implications both from a scientific and social perspective, particularly when considering developmental factors in early childhood development and aging (Cerami et al 2025). Action and efforts that enable inclusion of individuals and social groups are fundamental to accessing the arts, which is influenced by society. Access is monitored by those who govern oppressive or liberating conditions, in ways that inclusionary or exclusionary conditions are carefully maintained and controlled (Allman, 2013).

Allman (2013) argues that from a sociological perspective, poverty is an important contributor to one's sense of social exclusion. The variables implicated within social structures include values inherent in society's systems of relative social power. The outcomes of this are embedded in educational policies and organizational behaviors that limit access to a society's musical resources in communities with low socioeconomic status. Roots music developed as a result of deprivation and exclusion resulting from a complex combination of African American musical genres (like spirituals, blues) with rural white European (like English, Irish) folk music, and has been the basis for many significant music idioms played today, most particularly jazz.

El Sistema

Research studies have explored the impact of music engagement for children from underserved areas. A longitudinal study from the University of Southern California used an *El Sistema* inspired program to provide free music training, five days a week, to children from compromised areas. An increasing number of global initiatives with social inclusion at their core aim to accrue the benefits of children and teen's collective instrumental learning, both within and inspired by the *El Sistema* program (FESNOJIV) in Venezuela.

An example of this awareness and how the problem of access can be addressed is found in the *El Sistema* program, where "a core aim (was) to effect social change through the provision of musical and intellectual opportunities for young people from poor and vulnerable communities who would not otherwise access such experiences" (Creech et al., 2013, p.17). It is estimated that there are at least 277 *Sistema* and *Sistema* type programs across 58 countries.

At the core of the *Sistema* approach is access to instrumental music learning. Its roots were seeded initially as a kind of collective that held the value of collaboration as its stronghold mechanism for building community. It emphasizes social interactions through group instruction and performances. A large, randomized clinical trial of the *El Sistema* program showed that 2914 children, aged 6–14 years, when matched with controls who did not participate, demonstrate positive change in four child functioning domains after one year: self-regulatory skills, behavior, prosocial skills and connections, and cognitive skills (Alemán et al., 2017). Participation in the instrumental music learning program may increase self-regulation skills, or the modulation of emotion and behavior.

Such activity and focus can have a greater impact on development when formal training begins during the crucial period before the age of seven (Herholz & Zatorre, 2012). Violin and keyboard playing (Lotze et al., 2003) have been studied more frequently than singing. There has been relatively little research on structural network architecture altered by vocal training. A recent study suggests that both piano and vocal musical training strengthens connections between emotion-related regions of the brain (Cheng et al., 2023).

Community Music Therapy

In challenging the former norms of music therapy being offered exclusively as a treatment by therapists for patients, Community Music Therapy (CMT) arose in the late 1990's as a modality which expanded traditional boundaries and created more inclusive definitions of music therapy. The nature of this expansion included being aware of social and political issues, including gender inequality, climate change, and other forms of oppression. CMT reinforcement of inclusivity sparked innovative, ecological inquiries of how culture can inform ways of perceiving therapeutic needs. In looking to expand new perspectives, music therapists aligning with CMT principles challenged traditional models of practicing music therapy and questioned the therapist's role. Music therapists such as Brynjulf Stige (2002) wrote about the ways we could expand our ideas of music therapy and eventually the social engagement of the music therapist became more inclusive. Prime early examples of

community music therapy were cited by Ansdell (2002) which highlighted the creative ways Community Music Therapy influenced groups. Music therapist Trygve Aasgaard's (2000) research on the life cycles of songs written in music therapy demonstrates how musical patient-therapist collaborations impact more than just pediatric patients and their families and friends. The life cycles of the young people's songs reflected music's integrative capacity to facilitate relationships with the nursing and medical staff. In arranging songs for the staff to perform, the children were able to interact with the staff in a different context, enhancing feelings of safety and building a strong sense of community.

Peter Jampel (2011) was another early proponent of a community music therapy approach. Many of our music therapy students at New York University witnessed his harvesting of a unique community jam; one which brought staff, patients, and administrators together at his Baltic Street Clinic in NYC. His vision promoted musicking which strengthened relationships of all kinds and opened access across patient-staff boundaries. At Mount Sinai, we have used a similar forum for years to gather custodians, doctors, families and patients for mid-week jams. Our current forum includes our community choir for stroke survivors and their carers (professional and personal). We meet weekly and call ourselves "Singing Together Measure by Measure."

Community Music Therapy provides insight for the context and conditions of how we might enhance practicing. Social Music provides a window into characterizing the conditions of our intentions within the music itself. The cultivation of critical socio-cultural awareness has been an important honored value of this very journal. In light of the journal's aim to "promote radical participation in the co-creation of the music therapy discourse, by interrogating normative assumptions and fostering exchange" (Ghetti et al., 2022, p. 43) between all cultures and creeds, we feel that Social Music fits well herein to encourage interdisciplinary discussion, thus enhancing our comprehension and use of how music itself as therapy is integrated in practice.

Singing as a Social Instrument

Recent investigations have indicated that vocal melodies are easier to remember than instrumental melodies, which may reflect greater salience for sung music than instrumental music (Norman-Haignere et al., 2022). Furthermore, the human brain contains a neural population selective for song that is distinct from neural responses to speech or music alone (Weiss et al., 2019). Singing often provides a means for equal-powered expression between client and therapist.

A study by Dingle et al. (2013) on choral singing for vulnerable populations suggested that becoming a choir member prompts social identity for members which often leads to improvement in mood and emotions. Jon Batiste has often made communal singing and movement—such as creating a second line emerging to the streets and subways—a hallmark of his work using music to heal a fractured nation. Through his innovative style, which blends jazz, classical, and pop genres, he has explored his belief that collaboration makes people more human. He believes social music gives people permission to remix and reimagine—as a tune is taken out of the constraints of its usual and customary characteristics.

The Voice and Music Hold Social Potential

In our artistic expression, music can help us preserve and reimagine simultaneously. Music can be used as a tool of the future—to reignite the mind-music archeologist. Preservation is not the key but rather is a necessary part of conscientious development.

Improvising takes us into the moment. Jazz is distinctive in what it gave to the world at the time of its birth. Jazz was influenced by the same principles that were supposed to be

in the philosophies which birthed the United States—meant to ensure a melting pot of culture where people could hold a place of freedom. However, when jazz was born there was a reluctance to honor Black genius. The expression of freedom and democracy put a special sheen over the art form.

It is an important aspect of social music that we do not silo artists into different genres or categories based on what they look like or where they're from. Music itself is social, because anyone can make music. Music is connective. Making music with someone else is something that is special. The aim of what we make is higher than we can intellectualize. There are no limits—purity of expression happens in music. The poignance and simplicity of music can be an allegory for life. Suspense occurs within music in a moment. In social music, we create pockets of pressurized experience that push us forward.

Social Music as a Therapeutic Idiom

Social music is about our sounds co-existing with others' sounds. Music is a conduit to express our shared humanity. Creating has been a productive way for us to deal with the turbulence of the past few years. Because music expresses things that we cannot put into words, it provides a powerful venue for sound expression. Sound is a frequency, and the frequency vibrates, and if we can connect to that vibration, it can tell us many things.

Social music creates a collective life force energy. Its electricity and community manifests in connecting us. It's an aspiration for what the world can be, and our music allows this to happen. Social music provides a platform to join together in the ranks of building something with others. Through instinct and with a natural sense of pleasure, we make something communal with an awareness of the greater good.

Everything is perceived within the context of culture. Refining and recreating, social music recognizes that we can best create ourselves in relationships. We can play improvised music for long periods with others and stream into various forms of consciousness.

Being in a social music forum enhances our cultivation of music realms. We travel and move, following what our hands or voices are telling us to do. Sometimes the moment of making music is telling us things we do not yet know. We are unsure of what we will actually make of it. The moment calls for what it calls for based on preference or preparation. The music is channeled to us within the moment—not necessarily reoccurring or happening again. It can provide insight, even in such fleeting moments.

Pentatonic—the Blues

The blues exists within the sound of the pentatonic scale. By adding one note to the pentatonic scale, it can become a blues scale. The addition of “blues notes” deepens the range of musical expression and reflects a broader experience of American life. We can find a shuffle beat within the blues. Anyone can sing the blues: it often involves two verses and an answer. It exists in the air, and it lives in the spirit. These songs connect peoples' lives back to moments of their past and the humanity of what brings people together is recognized. We have heard it in the consciousness of our spirits.

Developing mantras in preparation for playing who we are

Only recently have the neurologic implications of singing been appreciated. Supported by evolving neuroimaging studies, the insula has been identified as an important area in the neurological processing of music. Research has illustrated the potential of its influence in pathological contexts, such as brain disorders (Namkung et al., 2017; Weiss et al., 2012). As the anterior insula is involved in the processing of emotions, and music elicits emotions, it plays an important role in the processing of music and emotions.

The subjective feeling states processed through the insula might also provide a basis for the feeling of “self,” defined by Namkung et al. (2017, p. 203) as “the conscious perception of one’s own being.” Subjective feeling states, constantly integrated with input from bodily states, enable an awareness of the physical self. The authors also acknowledge interoceptive representation in the anterior insula as a prompter of awareness of one’s physical self as a feeling (sentient) entity, which may constitute the basis of selfhood. These ideas have been substantiated by research (Craig, 2009; Naqvi & Bechera, 2009).

Singing has been linked to better respiratory and laryngeal control. Zamorano et al. (2023) suggest that singing experiences also enhance the integration of somatosensory information within the speech motor system through strengthening salient associations of bodily signals. These signals are associated with conscious and non-conscious aspects of expressive language production and take place within a musical framework.

Sociocultural considerations

Musical cultural competence is best achieved when music therapists begin the process of transformational learning needed for deepened authentic self-awareness. It is also about the roles that the particular music takes in real time and its specific relevance to the client. It involves understanding our biases and how they might play into the music therapy relationship. This is part of social music and it is cross-cultural. However, positions of privilege are positions in which we often have power to make change (Hadley, 2013).

Our aim with social music is to provide conditions of connection—connection within the sound sphere of our expressed cultures. Working toward multicultural awareness is sharpened within the context of social music where listening is heightened and pretense is unbounded.

The universe is carrying us together and trusting there is a divine logic to it. Fate often limits the belief that we have control. In some way, there is not much we can do. We understand that there is a path, and we are accounted for on that path. We are the culmination of many things that makes us each individually unique. We are social and there is a revelation of many things that come forward to us, and it comes to each of us in its special way and in its own time. This is akin to a cleansing that we can release for ourselves that which would otherwise not lead to the best outcome. This process is useful for our health.

Utilizing mantra as a blessing

What we need in a sense is to surrender ourselves during a time when our health fails us. When there is nothing we can do to take away pain or the unknowns of an illness, or the anxiety of waiting, there is an opportunity for a great amount of growth. A lesson that we can learn that almost nothing else can teach us. We can sit with our self composed mantras and develop more within a “social music” context through sharing, particularly during times of need, when our bodies fail us. There is something about suffering that is so essential. It counters the idea that we are supposed to run from pain and live a life of frictionless meaning. The obstacles and the pain *are* part of the path. It’s a blessing to get through difficult things together.

This primes us to know and trust what is coming. What ignites us? How do we cultivate being together? How can we give a music mantra and share it? Can we give way to a generous tempo from within? What is our reserve, so we do not drain our individual portal?

We are in this deep feeling. We can be vulnerable but coming into crisis, can also be fearless. We can cleanse together and regain our force together and enter unusual states using mantras—in repetition. It’s a spiritual practice. As we continue to refine rituals of community and life, our energy expands each time we do it. What we play is life, even if

we are a broken vessel. It is a space inside us that we've saved. It is a sense of understanding that we can access.

Social Music is Supported by Research

Research has provided evidence that premature infants exposed to music therapy that mirrored conditions of the womb, including a heartbeat entrained, or calibrated to their own heartbeats and respiratory rhythms, responded with stronger vital signs than when the music conditions were not provided, over a two-week period (Loewy et al., 2013). Further, the “song of kin” as a meaningful, cultural implant, may increase infant vital stability while at the same time supporting caregiver confidence and reducing potential impact of trauma post-NICU stay (Loewy 2015; Loewy et al., 2020, Loewy et al, in press b). One of the strongest demonstrations of the potency of live, social music conditions was babies’ reactions to a baby opera under two scenarios: a live performance versus a web-based, pre-recorded version (Kragness et al., 2022). The music performance of a children’s “opera” featured simple tunes with small interval melodic content, such as “the Itsy Bitsy Spider,” in a concert hall that doubles as a research facility at McMaster University in Canada. Sixty-one babies attended in person, while the other 59 watched a recorded version (Kragness et al., 2023). Outcomes for 120 babies (aged 6-14 months) demonstrated heart rate synchronization and a higher level of engagement when watching live music compared to the recorded playback at home without others present (Kragness et al., 2023). Increased infant engagement was indicated by their overall and sustained attention to the music, as well as their physiological synchrony. Findings suggest that performer–audience interactions and social context play a crucial role in facilitating attention and coordinating emotional responses to musical performances early in life. Interestingly, the babies’ heart rates sped up and slowed down in a similar fashion to their peers watching the same show, as they were all stationed equidistant from the stage. The live performance captured the attention of the baby subjects for 72% of the 12-minute show, while the same audio-visual recording held their attention for 54% of the time (Kragness et al., 2023). The live show also resulted in infants watching continuously for longer periods. These findings offer intriguing speculation about the importance of communal, live music conditions and the properties essential for cognition and learning, such as listening and attention, as well as the significant impact live music can have as a socialization experience in our lives as uniquely human beings.

In an age of headphones, tracks, links and expanding contexts where artificial intelligence affects so much of our access and functioning, one can lose sight of shared music experience. We are musical beings. Our bodies are a symphony of rhythms, equipped to organize intra-mechanistically within our anatomical systems, and extra-mechanistically through engagement with others. In these studies, the seeds substantiating the potency of a live music experience are planted. Our brains have evolved and developed to respond to the sounds of others. Sound, through the voice, has been a primary channel for communication and connection in our biological lineage for hundreds of millions of years, with humans exhibiting unique capacities in collaboration and coordination through language and music. The beginnings of the use of voice (tone and timing) to communicate date back to our last common ancestors with lungfish, some 420 million years ago (Challands et al., 2023). The traditions of music embodied by our ancestors highlight some of the most essential ways that music has fostered our development as social human beings.

Musical Group Interaction

Research on music and the brain has focused collectively on music investigations involving the neural correlates of attributes enhanced by music related to the study of musicians,

music instruction on an instrument in individual education/practice, and less within group contexts. As such, less attention has focused on music's propensity to access social-emotional capacities, such as empathy (Rabinowitch et al., 2013).

The social construction of reality is defined by Nickerson (2025) as:

a theory that suggests that humans create their own understanding of reality, through their interactions and communications with others. This includes the way we see and interpret the world around us, as well as how we interact with others. (para. 1)

Conditions of social construction and access include circumstances whereby interaction as a primary outcome may or may not be reflected in research. In general, this has involved the perception of "ensemble" in music execution, and significant elements that may exist outside of the usual and customary tabulations of dosage (length of time playing or engaging), instrument performed on, age started, brain imaging and cognitive-related tasks.

Humans have a culturally rich aptitude for entrainment, which is understood as the conscious and unconscious synchronization of rhythmic beats. Entrainment has been found to be a critical mechanism of meeting someone in a music moment. Specifically, when following and purposefully engaging with another person's rhythm and melody may be representative of a feeling of being heard and understood. Overy and Molnar-Szacks (2009, p.495) explain this as a "co-activation of neural networks that relate to movement of self (as action), and other (as perception accounting mirror neurons involvement as part of this process)."

In their paper "Music and social bonding: 'self-other' merging and neurohormonal mechanisms," Tarr et al. (2014) discuss the role that endorphins play in the exchange of synchronous rhythms. Their claim that "group musical activities should include reference to endorphins, which are released during synchronized exertive movements" is important (Tarr et al., 2014, p.5). They advise that future research include the acknowledgement that endorphin release occurs during collaborative music-making. Endorphin release is a critical factor that plays a major role in social bonding.

Conclusion

As the need for social prescribing is growing, so too is the need for a recognized model of music sharing that can influence health outcomes. Our intention was to affirm the multiple possibilities that social music can provide. It is our hope that medical, educational and organized communities will increase their integrative incentives to build upon the possibilities that music can afford logistically, spiritually, aggressively and perhaps most of all, opportunistically.

Whether we are performing or providing therapeutic interventions, when engaging in music at the bedside of someone who is nearing end of life, there are opportunities and a multitude of collaborative possibilities. Our existence throughout time, from inception to passage, exemplified through periods of struggle toward freedom, has been fortified by our expression of sound, and of intentional music.

Our human composition, indeed, our body's constitution, exists in a symphony of liquids, rhythms, and sounds. The apparent urgency within our contemporary civilized life has led us to recognize a growing need for social prescriptions. Technological advantages abound and have provided unique access to our communal needs. However, our human population is filled with people who live siloed lives and are unable to access or socialize with others. Perhaps their health has declined. Many are still jarred from the losses COVID incurred within their families and communities. In many circumstances, as a developing global community, we have moved away from music being in the community and have failed to

recognize its potency as a shared experience. Thus, recognition that the history of our civilization has utilized music making, socially, as a means of growth and survival is important. It is our hope that this paper has amplified the value of social prescribing and, in doing so, has increased its conceptual understanding. Social music, centered on the value of communal music experiences, is grounded in scientific data, highlighting synchrony and endorphin release (Tarr et al., 2014), and entrainment and bonding (Overy & Molnar-Szakacs, 2009; Polzella & Forbis, 2014); which further substantiates the mechanisms involved and the potential within our applications. We have highlighted the value of “social music” born out of the African diaspora and continuing today around the world despite being at odds with, and often actively suppressed by, the dominant paradigm of music for commercial distribution. We are hopeful that the concept of social prescriptions of music can be integrated and carried forth by clinicians, educators, researchers, and therapists.

About the Authors

Joanne Loewy DA, LCAT, MT-BC is the Director of the Department of Music Therapy, and a Professor at Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. A Founding Member of the International Association for Music and Medicine, she initiated the Department of Music Therapy, in 1994, which among many populations is serving musicians and their unique ailments including chronic fatigue, chemical dependency, performance anxiety and overuse; children with developmental delays, teens with emotional issues, adults with neurological disorders and all ages of patients with asthma and COPD. Her research lab AMEND (Assessment of Music Experiences in Navigating Depression) is funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. She is an MPI on two NIH studies: a U24 ENSEMBLE network on pain, and a study addressing how music therapy can impact metabolites of stress in Black pregnant women. She serves on several editorial boards and is a Cochrane NICU and Palliative Care reviewer. She received her doctorate from NYU and has edited several books including *Music Therapy in Pediatric Pain*, *Music Therapy in the NICU*, and she co-edited *Music Therapy at End of Life* and *Caring for the Caregiver: Music Therapy in Grief and Trauma* and the *Integrative Advances in Music and Medicine: Music, the Breath and Health*.

Jon Batiste is an American singer, composer, musician, educator and bandleader. He is an 8x Grammy award winning artist and a devoted musician and leader, developing new idioms in the use of music for populations of all kinds. He has channeled his transformative musical gifts into nine studio albums, an original symphony, and countless musical projects and collaborations, including his Oscar nominated Documentary “American Symphony” on Netflix. Jon is also known for his work as bandleader and musical director for *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* from 2015-2022 and his 2020 Pixar film *Soul* composing won him an Academy Award. Social Music is a model he is developing along with Loewy with support from the National Endowment for the Arts.

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