The healing power of the guitar, and how you can share it with others

GOOD VIBRATIONS

By Jessica Baron Turner

IF YOU ASKED SYLVIA PLOTKIN HOW the acoustic guitar touched her life, she would probably explain that, at her advanced age, she began to feel renewed vitality. She might confide how her routine relationship with her wheelchair-bound husband developed an unprecedented romantic quality ". . . in public, even." Perhaps she would also confess that her lifelong dream of being "a singer of popular music" was fulfilled at last. She would make sure to mention that "nice young lady who came every Tuesday with her guitar."

On those sun-filled mornings in the activity room, Sylvia would sing and dance her way through the senior citizens' hit parade for her "man" and the other residents of the convalescent home. Unorthodox versions of "Lemon Tree," "Besame Mucho," and "Always" careened dangerously out of my Martin D-28. The residents had all hobbled, shuffled, or wheeled in, but in short order everyone was rocking, clapping, and smiling. Forgetting their ailments, they began singing along, some reaching out to one another for a dance.

Afterward, Wally Burlington would inevitably stand, brush the long gray bangs off his forehead, and croon a sentimental rendition of "I Had a Dream, Dear." It was, he always told us, "mother's favorite," and it made him "remember her sweet face." At the song's end, everyone would applaud for Wally except Lillian Finkelstein, who would shout with sharp conviction, "Get a new song, Wally! You sang that one last week."

Each week we would close the session with a raucous sing-along of mostly folk songs ("Now you pick one, dear"). These were new to the majority of the residents and required honest-to-God effort, but no one seemed to mind. "Blowing in the Wind" received the same vigorous interpretation as "Hava Nagilah." My elderly friends learned lyric after lyric, chorus upon verse. Use it or lose it, studies tell us. "Studies, shmuddies," my friends might have said, "let's just have fun."

Hopefully, you also have had the pleasure of sharing acoustic music. Music makes friends out of strangers (well, except in the case of band break-

AICHA NYSTROM

Singer-songwriter Judith Kate Friedman performs at a Bread and Roses event in a V.A. hospital in San Francisco.

ups). As a guitarist, perhaps you have discovered how your instrument releases the power of love, particularly when you explore which music is most valuable to others. The guitar, an easily portable instrument, has been known to turn unsuspecting players into facilitators and healers. The guitar isn't too choosy; give it to someone good-hearted who can play three chords, and off it goes, elevating moods and bringing people together. Why is that?

Let's get basic. Although some people consider healing something lofty or technically intricate, to my Midwestern mind, healing simply means improving the condition of oneself or another by alleviating discomfort of some nature. Homemade chicken soup or a hug can do as much as an hour of counseling or a massage; it just depends on what you need. Acoustic guitar playing helps healing along in a panoply of ways, some of which are just beginning to be explored.

"Healing is in the harmonics, overtones, and subharmonics," says Cooder. "That's the trouble with CDs: they don't reproduce those frequencies."

Remo's drum table is used to reach psychiatric patients with a wide range of disorders.

Whether we consider the power of music to heal ourselves or to help promote the healing of others, many of the same factors apply. Physically, music allows us to experience vibrations as they pass through our bodies. Harmonious sounds alleviate stress, and stress is the root of much illness, physical and mental. Soothing music also assists us to quiet down and turn within to establish greater self-awareness. This process, often deemed "spiritual," results in our becoming more "in touch," conscious of our needs, and better able to make wise choices. People who make such informed decisions probably stay healthier than those who don't. So it follows that music can serve as a medium for personal growth or healing, which, in turn, makes possible a preventative approach to health care.

People have speculated about the connection between sound and physical form for a long time. In the '30s, for instance, Hans Jenny conducted experiments running pitches on an oscillator through metal filings. The pitches caused the filings to settle into patterns found in the natural world, such as seashells, flowers, and human cells as seen under a microscope. Since sound can create order in the physical world, perhaps it can do the same thing in our bodies.

How long have we known about the healing power of music? Is it a new-age discovery? Ry Cooder reminds us that music has always been used for healing in primitive cultures. Citing an African practice of placing a sick person in the center of a drumming circle and drumming the illness away, he told me about an enormous round drum table designed by Remo Belli, progenitor of the Remo company, with the aid of Bruce Hoffman, Dr. Alicia Clair, and Barry Bernstein, a registered music therapist. It was originally designed to provide Alzheimer's patients with high-quality vibro-tactile stimulation and meaningful activity.

Now the drum table is being used to reach psychiatric patients with a wide variety of disorders. The vibrations travel through the drummers' entire bodies as their legs rest under the drum, receiving subharmonics that come off of the drum head. Vibro-tactile stimulation seems to be able to reach parts of the brain that haven't yet been affected by dementia, even in patients who have lost short-term memory, speech, and other faculties. Eight people pull up to the drum table and play it simultaneously. In addition to the physiological benefits for those players, the activity brings them together in the present, encouraging them to make eye contact and to brave social interaction. The wisdom of this approach is centuries old.

The guitar's therapeutic properties are similar to those of the drum table. Though many of us play privately, the guitar's musicality, portability, and popularity do stimulate social interaction, to the point of drawing and focusing a group. You could think of it as a one-person socializing drum with strings. Add singing and healing musical content, and you've got really big medicine. No wonder our culture is so addicted to the guitar: pure pleasure with no adverse side effects.

CHAMBER MUSIC

Ry Cooder believes that the guitar's shape gives it extraordinary healing power. "As the descendent of Arabic instruments such as the Persian *tar* and the Egyptian oud, the guitar has developed new potential because it has six strings and two chambers," he says. "One-chambered instruments produce pretty but unidimensional sounds, whereas the guitar, with its small and large chambers, produces a richer sound with many more overtones and harmonics than its ancestors. I don't have empirical data on exactly what those two chambers do to the sound, but the effect of the vibrations cycling back and forth between them is rich. The guitar just feels so good. Look how many people play it and feel better as a result."

Renowned multi-instrumentalist David Lindley adds that all the relatives of the guitar offer some measure of this healing quality. "Anything with the word *tar* in it is an ancestor or far-flung relative of the guitar," he says. "The word appears in many Middle Eastern languages and means *string.* The oud, *saz, setar,* the Indian sitar, the *dotar,* the *guitarrón* . . . they are all stringed, chambered instruments. But the guitar [along with the Persian *tar,* which Cooder has studied] is special. The two chambers definitely make a difference."

To carry this idea of the effect of double chambers a step further, consider how the vibrations from the instrument resonate against the guitarist's chest (yet another chamber) so the sounds go right into the person's body, straight to the heart (even more chambers). And although the contact isn't as direct for audience members, in a live music setting the whole array

Ry Cooder recognizes the therapeutic effects of the guitar and its relatives.

of sound is also resonating with the audience—an immense set of chambers. Essentially, the guitar played sensitively could be thought of as a big human attunement device.

THE GOOD PLACE

What about instrumental music that induces a state of deep relaxation or a trance state? David Lindley has a lot to say on this topic. "Sometimes when I'm playing, even just practicing scales, that's *all* I'm doing," he says. "There's no critical voice nagging me; there are no distractions at all. It's a Zen thing. In certain situations, playing the guitar turns off the peripheral vision and pushes the 'ignore switch,' which shuts off environmental noise like 60-cycle hum, air-conditioning, conversations, clinking glasses. Then the internal dialogue shuts off. The method is to turn these off one by one when you practice. Pretty soon, when you practice, this begins to happen automatically."

Lindley adds, "One of the hardest things to stop doing is daydreaming. Daydreaming and emotional chatter are easily triggered by the sound of the instrument itself, if one isn't careful. If done right, playing [creates] an automatic sense of physical well-being. I'm not sure what happens to my breathing, but I know that when I'm done playing, if the experience has been a good one, both nostrils are burning. It's similar to doing kung fu and tai chi. All the decisions about what to do next are nonverbal. The responses are automatic. I'm sure it doesn't work the same way or in the same direct order for everyone, but the point is to go to the good place."

In contrast to these very quiet, private experiences, Lindley also enjoys playing in public situations, "getting up in a rock 'n' roll band, just having fun. It's easy to go from fun mode into an alpha mode—much easier to switch between those two than trying to shift out of an intellectual state of mind into a meditative one."

When asked if he recalls any particularly musical moments, Lindley describes a few times when he has been so centered and focused that he has actually witnessed the playing as it happened from a curiously "out-of-phase" perspective. "It's not exactly an out-of-body experience," he says, "but close. It's as if a part of me is watching and listening to the physical me playing from three or four steps back."

The soon-to-be-released Rabbit Ears recording of parables narrated by spoken-word wizard Garrison Keillor features one such moment. In the supplementary music after the narration ends, Lindley plays an extended instrumental on the tambour that has, he says, "no mistakes from beginning to end. This is unusual because the studio can be a pretty school-y [i.e., intellectual and critical] environment, so it's harder to get that Zen concentration going. The best environment for such deep attunement to occur is playing long improvisations in front of an audience, where the music and energy travel from me to the audience and back again."

Fingerstyle guitarist Michael Gulezian agrees and then some. Like Lindley, he describes playing the guitar as a form of perpetual care for his own soul. In the practice of practicing, he clears the way for what he describes as "receiving a gift from God."

Creativity at Any Age

After years of playing "maintenance entertainment" shows for people in nursing homes, I wanted more—not only for them but for myself. I joined a team of artists and started writing songs with the elders for whom I'd performed. This became the basis for Creativity at Any Age, an intergenerational songwriting project I direct in the San Francisco Bay Area and around the country when I tour.

Disabled folks, elders, kids, and inmates living in institutions need creative outlets. In these drab, alienating places, music raises spirits and brightens life considerably. An opportunity to get involved in original songwriting is a rarity here, and I've found that even the most reticent rise to the occasion.

JULIE POTRATZ

Judith Kate Friedman.

I bring my guitar and tape recorder. Participants come up with ideas, and I capture their lyrics in their own words. The challenge is to draw them into the process while using everything I know about music and improvisation. We might write a waltz about the city a half century ago; a rap, gospel number, or Nueva Canción about current events; or a Yiddish-English melody about growing old. We often complete a song in one or two one-hour workshops.

The encouragement Creativity at Any Age offers can yield amazing results. For instance, at an adult day center, a woman with acute dementia was often ignored. Even the staff underestimated her abilities. But she was clearly a musician. As I started to play and shape the chorus, she took hold of the hook line, singing with passion and conviction in her own style, far more in-the-groove than I was. She repeated it until we locked in together and made the song sound really authentic.

Another time, questions about my curly hair turned into a ballad about heritage and immigration:

I've got some French in me from my mother
My father's from Poland but that was long ago
They said never forget, you are a countess
Even though in the USA it doesn't show
Where are you from? Who are your people?
When did they come or were they from this land?
Never forget, we have these stories
and we can tell them again and again

Group songwriting has a powerful impact on communities. People hear themselves in the words and music. Families, neighbors, and wider audiences hear the songs and take notice: regardless of age, culture, language, or mental or physical health, everyone has a valuable creative contribution to make.

My own songs and performances are richer from the experience of writing with people aged four to 104. The project grows, and more songwriters are getting involved. (For more project info, send E-mail to AtAnyAge@aol.com; write c/o Patience and Adventure Musicworks, 2215R Market St. #303, San Francisco, CA 94114; or call [415] 824-5283.)

With respect and with guitar in hand, sit with people and invite them to join you. Anything can happen.

—Judith Kate Friedman

"The way I look at it, everyone on this planet is here with some special gift, whether it's sculpting or accounting," he says. "It doesn't have to be obviously creative. We're all blessed with something. I believe if we are to be happy, whole people, it's our responsibility to ourselves, each other, and our creator to find what it is that we have been blessed with and pursue that and be the best at it that we can be. There's never been any doubt in my mind since I was a child that I was placed here to make music and in whatever small way to communicate musically, to touch other people's lives positively with this gift. Music transcends words. It's powerful and we have to be careful with it, with how we use it." Ry Cooder echoes those words, citing people who "definitely know how to hurt people with the guitar" as "dangerously off track."

"Rock 'n' rollers with Marshalls boosted up to 11 miss the point," continues Gulezian. "The real power of music is more subtle; it goes deeper. Music is the thing that keeps me whole and sane in a world that has in many ways become completely insane. As it comes through me to touch others, it is healing me as well.

"In fact, the things people say are my best, I don't even feel I've written. I've acted more as a medium, a window through which the music has come. It's my job to keep my soul as clear as possible so that if God sends me some music, I have the ability to receive and make it manifest. My job is also to stay at a level of technical proficiency to play this stuff. Some of it is very demanding technically. Those of us who play stuff this rigorous train like world-class athletes from our elbows to our fingertips. I practice very hard to keep in top form so that when I record, the music can come through as it should. That way, I can record it on the first or second take without a lot of edits. The point is to get beyond technique for its own sake, to transcend it. Nobody cares if you can play fast—maybe guitar junkies do, but most people aren't really interested in that. The guitar has to speak with them on another level, an emotional one."

RECORDED SOUND

Many soothing instrumental recordings are available these days. Are they as beneficial as live performances? The value of any recording depends on the player and performance, the listener, the medium, the quality of the composition, the recording itself, and how the recording is used. According to Cooder, Lindley, and Gulezian, recording fidelity and sound engineering matter a lot. Unless recordings are analog (not digital), they lack the full spectrum of vibrational frequencies.

"Healing is in the harmonics, overtones, and subharmonics," says Cooder. "That's the trouble with CDs: the digital technique just doesn't reproduce the frequencies of live sound. You cut out certain highs and lows, and the music just doesn't sound or feel the same."

Gulezian says, "If you're recording, use analog equipment with Dolby SR. It's not cheap, but it's worth it. After all, recordings last a lifetime." The frequency range of a CD that was recorded on analog equipment, even if it was digitally mastered, still exceeds that of a recording done on digital equipment such as an ADAT machine.

For better or worse, recordings are static; they cannot easily be altered to fit a particular person or situation. If you want to use them therapeutically, you have to plan ahead. But they do

make musical healing possible in a vast number of settings and situations. They promote relaxation, visualization, and rest. They aid people who are "shut in" for any number of reasons: patients suffering from head trauma, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, for instance, or people in hospices. Thank goodness we don't all have to be able to play like the greats to spread the beauty of their music.

GUITAR THERAPY

In any case, music live or otherwise assists people in coping with all nature of personal crises. It can stimulate feelings or repressed memories faster and more directly than some talk therapy. Popular compositions from earlier times can really do that. "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" summons a wellspring of emotion in an octogenarian who remembers how her dad sang it 60 years ago. "Here, There, and Everywhere" rekindles feelings of newly wedded devotion in a couple trying to salvage a troubled 25-year marriage. And so on.

These days it seems there's a song played on acoustic guitar that addresses every kind of heartache. Bring a song about D-I-V-O-R-C-E to a support group of single parents to stimulate passionate discussion. Spice up an AA meeting by opening with a song by Hank Williams Jr. Whether we're venting anger, exercising a sense of humor, grieving a loss, or expressing desire or love, music can be made a valuable part of the healing process.

Some people intentionally direct all of their musical endeavors toward a therapeutic end. Robert Krout, professional music therapist and president of the mid-Atlantic region of the National Association of Music Therapists (NAMT), plays and teaches guitar while working with emotionally disturbed youths in his therapeutic practice in New York. He also teaches guitar at the State University of New York in the music therapy degree program.

"The difference between healing with sound and music therapy," Krout explains, "is that in sound healing, the sound itself is the source of the healing experience. In music therapy, the sound is doing its job, but the primary focus is on having a healing relationship that occurs through the music. The guitar itself creates a basis on which kids feel they can relate to me. I'm not just a guy with short hair who wears a suit and represents authority. I play the guitar,

Sharing the Wealth

If you're interested in sharing your music in a therapeutic setting but don't know where to begin, ask yourself these questions.

What do you like to do?

- teach guitar or music one-on-one
- teach guitar or music to a group
- play instrumentals
- play and sing songs
- lead sing-alongs

With what groups of people do you think you'd most enjoy sharing music?

- prenatal (expectant mothers)
- babies
- toddlers
- young children
- elementary-age children
- preteens and teenagers
- young adults
- adults
- elders

What types of issues intrigue you or concern you the most?

- socio-economic
- multicultural
- psychological/psychiatric
- physical/medical

Now pair up your preferred populations and primary areas of concern. Where might you find these people? Can you imagine a way of performing your preferred activity there? Here are a few examples:

Teach guitar or music to a group of elementary-age children with physical/medical problems at a local hospital or special-needs school.

Teach guitar or music one-on-one to a pregnant woman facing socio-economic challenges, so she and her unborn child can have the benefit of music (babies in utero can hear and respond to music as early as four months).

Play instrumentals for adults with psychological or psychiatric problems at a mental health facility or in a therapy group at a local veterans' center or clinic.

Play instrumentals for adults in hospices to help ease their pain and isolation.

Lead sing-alongs with multicultural toddlers at a local Headstart or daycare center.

and I know their music. They begin engaging with me as I teach them to play the guitar. I help get them comfortable singing and ultimately guide them to problem-solve by writing lyrics 'about a situation,' which is inevitably their own, in the third person."

The total benefits of guitar-based music therapy span the physical as well as the psychological/emotional, and the two aspects intertwine. "For instance," continues Krout, "most kids are passive music consumers. They might hole up in their rooms and listen to heavy metal. But when they learn to play guitar, they can physically manipulate the instrument in order to get results. I simplify the guitar skills to provide them with immediate gratification. If they can push past the initial frustration of sore fingertips, their self-esteem increases because they have overcome a hurdle and have something to show for their efforts. Their motivation to continue learning improves, and in time, with practice, they can become very good guitarists.

"The next step is learning to play in an ensemble. For some of these young people, this provides an outstanding opportunity to gain essential social skills. It can help to alleviate the feeling of isolation, and it gives them a sense of belonging. The ensemble work builds group identity, and as individuals learn to work together, they take pride in themselves and each other.

"When I assign the task of songwriting to an ensemble," Krout adds, "the members begin discussing personal issues as they are realized or acted out by the characters in the lyrics." Motivations, feelings, and the consequences of actions and decisions naturally emerge in this setting, and participants hear what others think about these issues. Taking such an indirect, nonthreatening approach can prove to be therapeutically very productive.

Krout's clients have the opportunity to pursue their interest in guitar beyond folk and rock music. Whereas the music therapists of the '50s and '60s were only required to learn one semester of folk guitar, today's music therapists must study for a full year and can take classes in jazz, fingerstyle, and classical guitar techniques. Their clients draw on this expertise and can also venture, with full support, beyond their therapists' skills. NAMT works in conjunction with the National Guitar Summer Workshop, where Krout and many other esteemed guitarists offer intensive classes. Each summer, scholarships for "special needs kids" are available.

Al Bumanis, director of public relations for NAMT, emphasizes the importance and viability of music therapy as a career choice for the next century. In a recent report, it was cited as one of the 100 best careers for the year 2000. As the demographics of our population shift, more music therapists will be needed to work, in particular, with older people. Music therapy stimulates and reinforces short- and long-term memory, and playing guitar improves fine motor coordination. Sixty-eight colleges and universities in the U.S. offer bachelor of arts degree programs in music therapy. The national norm includes a six-month clinical internship with 1,040 hours of supervised clinical experience. Compared to psychology or counseling degrees and board certifications, this path is shorter and much more accessible for a person who wants to work in a healing, musical context.

If you can find time to volunteer your musical talents in your community or are considering a change of career, the sidebar titled "Sharing the Wealth" (page 67) may stimulate some ideas about the best placement for you. Consider your preferences; once you have an idea of what you'd like to do and for whom, call around to find a good placement. If you want help, you can ask friends or coworkers for suggestions; look in the phone book; call United Way, your local chamber of commerce, or the departments of Human, Child Protective, or Family Services; ask a social worker about local agencies or organizations; call the Salvation Army or a nearby hospital . . . the possibilities are almost limitless.

But be forewarned: some organizations will jump at the chance to have your help, while others may have management problems that make it hard for a volunteer to be properly utilized or appreciated. Many of our social service organizations are poorly funded, so workers may be slow to return your phone call; often, they are burdened with pressing matters. But your persistence will ultimately pay off.

When you sense your talent is genuinely wanted and needed somewhere and you like the people, it's time to give it a try. In the end, you may come to agree that there's no better soul food than being of service. However you choose to share music, you can become a vital source of good vibes for yourself and others. ■