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Music and Healing

By Michael Skinner

Music has been one of the most important pieces in my healing and recovery from a lifetime of trauma and abuse. I have come to believe that it helped save my life – and I don't say that lightly. For if I didn't have music in my life, I know that life would have been a whole lot different for me.

I was born in Boston, MA and lived there and in Cambridge, MA till the age of 6. My parents then purchased a home in the small town of Billerica about 20 miles outside of Boston. Though owning a home is the dream of many Americans, I believe this purchase out in a small suburban town by my parents gave them the means to do what they wished to do with children and not get caught. I was the oldest of 5 children and I experienced severe emotional, physical, and sexual abuse perpetrated by both of my parents and some of their friends. Only 3 of us are surviving today – two of my brothers committed suicide.

As young child I can remember either listening to the radio or to records when one of my parents would put them on. I found this to be simply amazing and full of wonder. Though I didn't know it at the time, it was a great escape for me in helping me to forget [for a while] the sheer horrors I was experiencing at the cruel and sadistic hands of my parents. Sadly, I had made the mistake of trying to sing along some times and their verbal tirades of how horrible I sounded quickly put an end to any thoughts I had of singing along anymore to this wonderful music that was playing. No, I would sing along in my head and still found the greatest pleasure in hearing this wonderful music – I liked it all, but the rock and roll was my favorite.

Despite my early love and fascination with music, I had other plans for my life. I can still remember quite clearly how I had it all mapped out in my head of what I would do

when I became an adult. I had my mind made up to join the military. I would become one of the best soldiers the Army ever had and then transfer over to the Rangers and eventually become a Green Beret soldier who would be highly skilled and proficient in all forms of covert warfare. I wanted to possess the skills of a sniper and then I would come back and use those skills to protect children. My first order of business would be to eliminate my parents and their perverted friends.

Fortunately, I had one of those magical moments come into my life that transformed how my life was to be. I was able to see and hear "The Beatles" perform on the Ed Sullivan Show and I was hooked. I too wanted to play the guitar and sing just like John, Paul, & George. Unfortunately, I made the mistake of saying this in front of my parents. The condemnation and verbal garbage thrown at me by both of them as to how stupid and lazy I was, worthless, no good, how I would amount to nothing, and this list went on and on, did indeed cause me to believe that what they said was true. So I did not set about to play the guitar and sing like so many others did after having seen "The Beatles".

But there was to come another magical moment in my life when one day while tapping along to the radio I realized I was keeping perfect time with the song and could anticipate what would happen next in the song and tap my hands accordingly. This was huge for me, for I now realized that I still could find a way to be in music. I could be a drummer - and so I set about to learn to play the drums. I was forever tapping along to any and all songs that were on the radio or on a record. This time I did not share this new idea and joy with my parents.

I was able to borrow a friend's set of drums to join the neighborhood rock band till I was able to get my own. This opened up a whole new

world for me. Practicing with the band gave me not only the greatest joy in playing music, but I was forging some good friendships. Practicing at my friend's different homes gave me the opportunity to see and experience the interaction between loving and caring parents with their children. I was amazed and transfixed in observing the simplest of gestures of kindness, caring, and love between my friends and their parents.

The band did indeed become my surrogate family. It also helped boost my confidence and self-esteem, for the more we practiced, the better we became. Soon that neighborhood band was performing at parties, teen centers, junior high and high school dances, and many outdoor events. Our first Battle Of The Bands Contest saw us taking 5th place from out of 20 bands. Soon we moved up to 3rd place and getting that trophy was one of the greatest times in my life. From here on in we were winning those contests and what that did for me in helping to keep me focused and alive was huge. I had value as a person, as a human being and to receive the most welcome praise coming from so many, did indeed help me to think for some short brief moments that I was someone with value and worth and who could follow his dreams.

The nucleus to that band eventually was performing full time and I was a professional musician. It was my greatest title and I felt so proud of what we were doing as a band. Eventually I ended up touring overseas in Great Britain for two years with the very successful hard rock band "American Train". This too became a major turning point in my life for the healing process was about to make a huge shift. I lived in Liverpool, England, which in of itself was so cool, for this is where my idols ["The Beatles"] came from.

But the most profound part of this was when I realized it was the first time in my life that I had felt truly safe

from my parents. I was 21 years old and living in another country with this large ocean keeping them away from me. This also set about the un-locking of more of my creative pursuits in the areas of songwriting and now I was putting to paper and to music some of what I felt inside of me from the horrors of my youth. I also found that some songs were shelved because I didn't want to deal with what it was bringing up. But to feel safe and alive was so important and to be living my dreams of being a professional, touring musician, despite what my parents told me, was a godsend.

To try to encapsulate a lifetime of music and how it helped transform my life into a short article is a bit difficult - for there is so much to share and how it affected me. I continued to perform till the ripe old age of 29 at which point I started my own business of managing and booking other musical acts. I would still perform as a weekend warrior, but now my focus was on building my business and providing for my wife and 5 children. The business grew quite successful and I was having the time of my life and what it was able to provide my family and me.

Sadly, the past was still knocking at my door and in January of 1993 at the age of 39, I had a complete nervous breakdown from the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder [ptsd], non-stop flashbacks, and a major depression. I was unable to work and lost my business. But it was the loss of my ability to play the drums that caused an even deeper depression. I could not understand how I could lose something I had been doing for most of my life.

During this extremely difficult period my wife also left me and kept me from our children. The light at the end of the tunnel had burnt out for me, I had lost too much and the fact that it was related to my childhood abuse issues only caused more frustration and anger.

Thankfully with time, my ability to play the drums came back and now I thought about the long held dream of mine since I was a child to learn to play the guitar and sing. It took a lot of effort, hard work, and lots of

practice but it was so huge in helping to rebuild my shattered self-esteem and confidence.

I learned some "Beatles" songs, some oldies, and other classic rock songs and would go into 'drop-in centers' for those dealing with severe mental health and trauma issues. The loving support they gave to me when I would perform for them and that exchange of a healing energy did wonders to aid in my own healing. This soon gave me the confidence to try this out in performing at pubs, coffeehouses, and schools. Soon I was writing songs that had long been buried inside of me relative to the abuse and all of its effects upon me.

This too proved quite pivotal in my healing for I was able to express my sadness, my anger, my rage, and my frustration at what I and so many others have experienced. These songs were also resonating with other survivors so I set about to make a recording and I released my first album "TRAIN OF TEARS". It was successful beyond my wildest expectations and soon I recorded and released a second album, "PIRATES".

Soon this led to setting up a website - Hope, Healing, & Help for Trauma, Abuse, and Mental Health through music, resources, and advocacy. Hundreds of thousands of people from around the world have visited my website and the fact that it was done mostly through word of mouth has been important for me in realizing and understanding that in my own small way I am helping other survivors, their family members, and their friends.

To feel good about the things we do in helping ourselves and others is indeed a huge factor in surviving and thriving after abuse. I am half way through the recording of my third album release "WAITIN' FOR A TRAIN".

My healing through music has brought me to a place where I can now write songs about love, life, loss, and hope. There are still many days and many times that it is a struggle to carry on and move forward, but I try my level best to see where I have come from and what I have achieved and I can see the good things that

have been accomplished, even the little things are huge for me and I am forever grateful for that.

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I Am Not a Horrible Child

I am not a horrible child
I hear myself cry and no one answers
I am a horrible child
I reach out into the darkness but know
no one is there
I am a horrible child
I ache for someone to hold me and
wonder
Am I such a horrible child
Still no one answers
I think I must be a horrible child
I hear my mother scream
I want to die
Am I that horrible child
Why does she always leave
Because I am that horrible child
I awake years later from a deep
slumber sleep and ask
Am I still that same horrible child
The answer is yet to come
I don't know if I am that horrible child
So I pray that someone will answer
And I wait And I wait And I wait
Am I still that horrible child
I try to dig my way out from what
seems a lifetime ago
Yet I still ask
Am I still that horrible child
I await for the answer
Someone must answer
Am I still that horrible child?
The answer I think is near
No you are not nor were you ever
That horrible child

By Jill M. D'Angelo

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