

# Soothing the savage breast?



*The freewheelin'*  
**Peter Geyer**

## Music, type and other things

### **When we think about music, what is it that we feel?**

Respected rock music journalist Mat Snow asserts that music is 'the noblest expression of what it is to be human' (2004). But it seems to be gifted unevenly in our species.

Some people, for instance, hear rhythms and dance in their heads, rather than in their feet or hips. This can be a source of consternation to dance teachers and spouses, as well as to the person concerned, who may feel embarrassed or stressed in places where dancing in public is required.

On the other hand, having few inhibitions about engaging in collective musical expression doesn't necessarily mean having a facility with the process.

Recently I watched a DVD of a superb performance by the late soul composer and singer Curtis Mayfield. As is customary, in several places he engaged the audience in the production of the music. His English audience was enthusiastic, although some were unable to clap on the off-beat, and others were unable to sing in time.

So, are these uneven responses an accurate rendition of what happens when humans express music and dance?

Inga Clendinnen (2003) tells us that in the early days of the Port Jackson settlement there were times when Aboriginal Australians and British danced together. What it looked like, and what the participants thought it was, are open to conjecture, but it seems that this was at least a serious exchange between cultures.

From the evidence, not everyone seems to have been thrilled by Aboriginal dance, but many colonists went to observe ceremonies. For various reasons, this dancing between cultures didn't go on for long. One wonders, as Clendinnen does, what might have happened had it continued for a while longer.

Music—or perhaps *sound*—appears to have been part of human culture for a long time. We've seen the discovery of what look like prehistoric flutes. The acoustic properties of Greek amphitheatres are well documented, and the acoustics at Stonehenge and in long barrows have recently been demonstrated on television (Costello 2004).

Music was at one time considered essential study for those being trained to rule. Richard the Lionheart, for example, was well regarded as a musician and composer, and one of his songs is still in print (Danziger & Gillingham 2003). Amongst other stellar achievements, Richard's mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine, fostered the troubadour movement. What's now called 'classical' music was developed in European royal courts and sinecures.

Even today we have Bill Clinton's saxophone and Tony Blair's guitar—and not much else, regrettably, other than Nelson Mandela dancing the dance of his culture.

Even if music isn't an important part of your life, the odds are that you'll have musical experiences every day: from the *doof-doof* sounds from passing cars, to the sometimes startling sounds as you wait on the phone for service from an organisation that proclaims that they value your call but, paradoxically, not to the extent of employing sufficient people to help you.

Music is in shops, in the street. You can access it through radio, television, Internet, videos, DVDs and movies. You can be woken by it, or have a favourite tune as the tone on your mobile phone.

You can also read about it in newspapers. On one recent weekend, readers of *The Age* and *The Australian* were able to read, on top of the regular features, a review of a book interpreting Bob Dylan's lyrics as poetry; an article on the selection of music played in stores; a brief interview with a musician; and a cover story on indigenous music.

*I love my music*

*Ain't nothin' gonna change my view*

Kenny Loggins & Jim Messina

*My heart is black and my lips are cold*

*Cities on flame with rock and roll*

Eric Bloom

*I will sit right down*

*Waiting for the gift of sound and vision*

David Bowie

*Ya gotta have something that always rhymes*

*Ya gotta have something in 4/4 time*

*Ya gotta have something*

Daryl Hall

Three decades ago, blues musician Michael Bloomfield defined his pioneering jazz-rock band The Electric Flag as ‘an American music band.’ He went on to say (1995) that:

*American music is not necessarily music directly from America. I think of it as the music you hear in the air, on the air, and in the streets; blues, soul, country, rock, religious music, traffic, crowds, street sounds and field sounds, the sound of people and silence.*

Like his contemporary Jimi Hendrix, who carried his guitar wherever he went (for that highly introverted man, that was probably a self-protecting activity), Bloomfield lived for music, and saw the world in that context.

Also like Hendrix and many other musicians, Bloomfield was an outsider in his culture. Blacks, Jews and other social minorities are over-represented in popular music. (Here in Australia, Aboriginal people have favoured country music or reggae.)

How does that compare with the person in the street, or even with other musicians? Not all of them would be so expansive on what music is and what it is not, or what is relevant and what is trite. Contemporary classical music, for instance, is a minority interest, not least because of the complex and confronting sounds it produces (e.g. Colbert 1988).

There’s a fine line between music and entertainment. Some may use music as background without considering the music at all. Others may struggle with *Australian Idol*, nightclubs or country music.

If music is a mixed bag, its contents seem to be related to the *unconscious* in some way. Jourdain (1997) suggests that the brain is an important location for responses to, and the experience of, music. To my way of thinking, that’s not inconsistent with an unconscious perspective.

This is why music is felt by many to offer a therapeutic benefit by way of enlightenment, development, or stress relief. There’s also the music of churches, the muezzin’s call, and the notes of the gamelan addressing the rising and setting sun.

Some parents have been enjoined to play Mozart to their babies (a form of cultural imperialism)—notwithstanding that what babies prefer to hear is their mother’s voice (Hershkowitz 2002).

Stress relief has its musical temperament interpretations—with uncertain results, perhaps because of lack of choice through overgeneralisation. Stressful situations vary and require different remedies. I use music as a prime means of dealing with stress, but the choice is fairly wide, including the choice of no music at all.

In popular music, for instance, figures such as Elvis Presley, John Lennon and Slim Dusty seem to have had an effect on the collective psyche. Their deaths were mourned by significant proportions of the community, many of whom had little prior interest in their music. Curiously, many others who are interested in similar music (myself included) remain unaffected by such experiences.

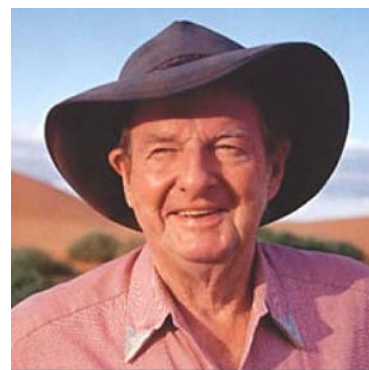
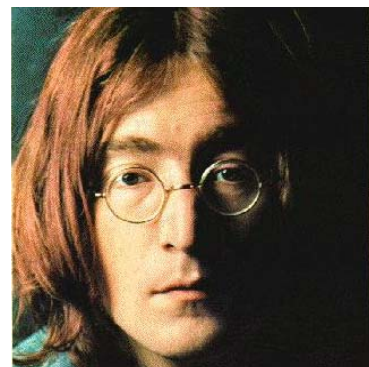
Presley is almost literally a deity these days (there is even a Church of Elvis)—depicted, somewhat incongruously, in his Las Vegas attire, when his creativity and passion might be said to have almost disappeared. Perhaps his previous incarnation as a danger to society—a menace, even—precluded this kind of apotheosis for our society’s psyche.

The menace in the words of Eric Bloom needs no elaboration. Paradoxically, his band Blue Oyster Cult uses many motifs of that sort, including some World War II German images—notwithstanding that the group’s members are all Jews from New York’s Long Island. A double-outsider strategy, perhaps.

Music is also about passion, humour, power, beauty, patriotism, solidarity, and a host of other things. Friedrich Engels often joined his collaborator and friend Karl Marx and Marx’s family for picnics on Hampstead Heath, sometimes singing folk songs from Strasbourg (Buruma 2000). Whilst the quality of their performance would be conjectural, one suspects a passionate rendition.

No matter what the personality type of the musicians, *passion* is something that both attracts and repels people. Most of *my* music is in my head. I rarely watch it played: I prefer to engage with it directly, without seeing it, and without needing others’ responses to help me engage with it. I’m not a visual person anyway, and I have my own internal vistas created by music and books.

Miles Davis’s *Complete Jack Johnson Sessions* (2003) comes to mind. Interestingly, in their liner notes, the musicians involved have no hesitation in ascribing the role of composer to Davis, notwithstanding their own roles in developing the music. An almost mystical appreciation of the power of this musician.



‘Elvis Presley, John Lennon and Slim Dusty have had an effect on the collective psyche’

The joy and intensity of viewing performances can also be compelling.

Recently I watched film of trumpeter Chet Baker's last performance (2003), just before his death. He looked frail, a consequence of the drugs and alcohol that had been a large part of his life: but out of that condition, he produced music that was clearly from deep within, as well as from his life experience. Possibly, for him there was no difference.

In a similar vein, I came across a performance by Bruce Johnston (a member of The Beach Boys over some time) of his acclaimed 'Disney Girls (1957)'. He sang it accompanied just by himself on piano, stripped of the harmonies and studio add-ons.

One had the sense of watching a private performance in a public place, as Johnston performed as one with the song. He ended, then said shyly, "That's 'Disney Girls'", as though coming back from somewhere else.

I think that's something of what music is.

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## What types are these people, 'musicians'?

In some ways it may be better to look at that question another way, and say that people of various types use music to express who they are, and other things.

In general, I'd say that what passes as popular or folk music is largely an **SP** enterprise.

Certainly Chet Baker clearly presents to me as an **SFP** of some sort, and there are a few others easily identified as such: Elvis Presley, Bruce Springsteen, Van Morrison, Marvin Gaye, Eric Clapton and Keith Richards.

You also have the **STPs** such as Bob Dylan, raconteurs of the road, plain speech and physical life. They will have learned music through listening, repeating and adapting, more than through specific study.

Grace Slick, voice of the Jefferson Airplane, presents as perhaps an **ESTP**. Amidst a very physical description of her life (1999), she apologises to anyone and everyone she may have offended, without actually talking about the music much at all. Phil Kerr has presented compelling evidence that the Beatles are three-quarters **SP** (2003).

You'd expect **NTs** to be into complexity, clinical and technical in their music. At the same time, **NTs** can express their passions, through their instruments or their words. King Crimson and Steely Dan are repositories for such people; avant-garde jazz as well.

**NTs** may be seen as emotionless, but that's far from the case. King Crimson's Robert Fripp is passionate about musicians owning their music. His liner notes to the live CD *Absent Lovers*, which are predominantly about the iniquitous businessmen he's had to put up with, ring with crisp **NT** tones of precise words and logic. It's worth reading, even if the music is not to your taste.

**NFs** are attracted to music in large numbers. Brian Wilson and Sting come to mind, Neil Young, and John Lennon. The **INFs** are over-represented in orchestras and conductors.

One might expect peace and love from **NFs**, but they can also be confronting about their values: David Byrne perhaps; or singing without words, in the manner of Jeff Buckley or Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, where you're taken to some awesome place that's perhaps empty and profound at the same time.

**SJs** I rarely hear in the music I listen to. I'd expect **SJ** musicians to want to play by the notes. While that's a general requirement for music, it isn't as important for jazz and rock—what counts there is interpretation more than replication.

The Beach Boys' Mike Love, the opposite of his cousin Brian Wilson, comes to mind; Ian Anderson of Jethro Tull, perhaps; country performers of no individual style; and tribute bands. Competitions and quests for 'stars' are **SJ**, in format at least, with prescriptions about dress and body shape being key indicators, even though these characterisations seem somewhat unfair.

Are performing musicians **E** or **I**? I'd suspect mostly **I**: for every Mick Jagger, there'd be two or three John Lennons or Charlie Watts. It may be different with local bands who seek to entertain for enjoyment, but music can be a convincing mask.

Ultimately it doesn't matter. No matter what their type, there are other reasons for people to like, engage with, or ignore what's out there, and what's in their head and heart.

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