

Mavis Staples Freedom Highway Essay

I believe that music holds a strong importance in everyone's heart. The specific importance is dynamic for all who conceive it. Just like how we all listen to different kinds of music, we also live in our own unique way, and the music we listen to has an effect on how we live our lives. This is how the songs “Transgender Dysphoria Blues” by Against Me!, “Friend, Please” and “Lovely” by Twenty One Pilots, and “The Patient” by Tool affected my life.

Growing up for me was very difficult because of my mother’s past with hard drugs. I was always so naive to everything. Now looking back at it, I was very sheltered in my youth. I went to a Catholic school for the majority of my life. It was small so it only went up to 8th grade. When my sister started high school, she wanted to go to a school called TSAS which stands for Tulsa School of Arts and Science. It was very different from the school I went to. One day, she talked about how a student came to school wearing a dress and they were made fun of for it. This student was transgender and assigned male at birth. I was puzzled as to why they would get made fun of for something like that but I was even more interested in what a transgender person was. When I asked about it, my sister told me it's when someone isn't comfortable with the gender they were assigned at birth. This was intriguing to me and I held onto this information for a long time. On a vacation, my sister and I were playing a guessing game and she mentioned changing gender. This was the first time I’ve ever thought of such a concept, I was reminded about the kid who was made fun of. I told her that I wanted to be a girl. Confused, she asked if I was being serious. This makes me think back to my past, when I played with the girl next door and always longed to play with her toys instead of mine. I remembered all the Disney princesses I was obsessed with. I remembered the Monster High dolls I wanted so badly but didn't have the

courage to ask for. I remember the frilly pink dresses my friend showed me and how I wanted to wear them. From then on, I would drop subtle hints to my mother about my confusion with gender. Eventually I asked to buy girls clothes and she fully supported me which I'll be forever grateful for. About six months into seventh grade, I had transitioned my gender identity to female but that didn't help the crippling body dysphoria that I had been dealing with for years and years. So I started listening to punk rock. It began with goth bands like Siouxsie and the Banshees and The Cure. But then one day out of pure coincidence, I stumbled across a song by the name of "Transgender Dysphoria Blues" by a band called Against Me! It felt so much more emotional and powerful than anything else I had listened to. I read the lyrics to which I was stunned as to how much I felt it related to me. Lyrics like "Your tells are so obvious/Shoulders too broad for a girl/Keeps you reminded/Helps you remember where you come from" spoke to me in a way that music never had.

You want them to notice
The ragged ends of your summer dress
You want them to see you like they see every other girl
They just see a faggot
They hold their breath so they don't catch your sick! (Grace, 2013)

This line in particular reminded me of the beginning of 7th grade when I was still figuring out my transition or if I even wanted to. I was wearing a shirt that was obviously made for a girl and a student pointed it out, called me gay, and said "Boys shouldn't wear that stuff". I remember immediately going to find a gender neutral bathroom to cry so I don't have to hear comments about me in the boys bathroom. I felt the anger expressed in the lyrics so strongly that I belted out my really bad singing. From then on, I was obsessed with Against Me! and punk rock.

My musical taste has always been pretty dynamic in genre. For example, during the beginning of 7th grade I found a band called Twenty One Pilots. Just like Against Me! I listened to them on a daily basis and the lyrics spoke to my edgy, adolescent heart. In 8th grade, I met a guy named Adam and we quickly became close friends. We spent everyday together, playing video games, talking about life and science. He was always very smart. I showed him Twenty One Pilots to which he became even more obsessed with them than I was when I listened to them every day in 7th grade. He studied the lyrics thoroughly, finding the meanings and the hidden story behind their albums. There was a song on their self titled album by the name of "Friend, Please" where the lead singer, Tyler Joseph depicts his experience with trying to help a friend who is suicidal and needs help. This song really connected with him. When I started going to Street School, I met a girl named Micah and we became quite close. But just like me, Micah had problems too. Even more than me. She saw things that weren't there. She wanted to do things to me that I was scared of. I stayed with her in fear that something bad would happen either to her or to me if I left her life. Eventually it was too much for me to handle and I sought out help to which my mom and Street School counselors tried their best to distance me from her but the damage was already done. I wasn't very healthy, neither physically nor mentally, after that. This, along with my mother being arrested and me going into foster care, I had developed deep trust issues. These led to difficulties in all relationships. I got to a point where I thought that I would never get better and I was a terrible person. So I went to the drug store, bought some high strength Tylenol, and promptly downed fifteen tablets. Adam was spamming my phone with texts and calls wondering if I was okay. He contacted my mother, and I was sent to a mental hospital. During that time he kept listening to the song, "Friend, Please" by Twenty One Pilots.

When I got out, our hangouts went back to normal but I still struggled with my mental health. So he showed me a song, also by Twenty One Pilots, called “Lovely”.

You say things with your mouth, cobwebs and flies come out
I hear a second voice behind your tongue somehow
Luckily I can read your mind, flies and cobwebs unwind
They will not take you down, they will not cast you out (Joseph, 2009)

I immediately knew why he liked it so much. He had helped me so much during that time period and got me out of so many dark places. He really did care about me, more than any other friendship or romantic relationship.

Won't you stay alive?
I'll take you on a ride
I will make you believe you are lovely! (Joseph, 2009)

Just like the singer, Tyler Joseph, he made me believe I may have been lovely. I will never forget that.

I still struggled despite everything he did for me. It got to the point where I managed to push away him and many of my other close friends. I thought this would be an endless cycle of meeting people, connecting with them, getting too close and eventually it becomes too much for them and me. Adam knew this and stayed but he needed time away from me after everything I did. I had no idea if he was ever coming back. I thought if I lost my closest friend, then I would lose everyone in my life. I go to therapy often but in this case, just one song at least somewhat mitigated my pain. I know this is very cliché but I think a lot of people have one or two songs that they feel have saved them from something. For me, those are both “Friend ,Please” and “The Patient” by TOOL.

Right off the bat, the singer Maynard James Keenan quietly sings the first line of lyrics along with a beautiful, clean guitar riff.

A groan of tedium escapes me startling the fearful
Is this a test? It has to be
Otherwise i can't go on (Keenan, 2001)

I had listened to this song before but never have I looked into the lyrics in this way. They immediately connected with me and I realized what kind of predicament I had gotten myself into.

If there were no rewards to reap
No loving embrace to see me through
This tedious path I've chosen here
I certainly would've walked away by now! (Keenan, 2001)

This is the most powerful line of lyrics for me. It showed me that even in the face of loneliness, you can still learn to be content in your own skin. It taught me I wasn't alone in the first place. It may have felt as though I was alone in my suffering but in reality, I always had the loving embrace of my adopted mother. This song showed me that I really wanted to get better even though my friends and loved ones had left me. I always have my ups and downs but after realizing this meaning, I never tried killing myself again.

In my experience, everyone has some kind of relationship with music even if it's small. It affects us all in so many ways, both big and small. It's a beautiful thing to put all of your thoughts and emotions into lyrics, accompanied by heartfelt instrumentation. Even when the subject matter is not reality, you can feel the emotion put into it at the time of writing. You can especially feel this in the singer's voice. You can have such a positive message in your writing but if it isn't

conveyed properly in the performance then it may not flourish. I could have latched onto and written about so many other great songs that convey the same meaning but the feelings that these three songs gave me was unlike anything I had ever felt.

Works Cited

Against Me!. "Transgender Dysphoria Blues." Self titled. Total Treble, 2013. Vinyl LP

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3C-2xCuJZYQ>

TOOL. "The Patient." *Lateralus*. Volcano Entertainment, 2001. Vinyl LP