

Music & Disability

Fall 2020

Student Discussion Forum on the AIDS Epidemic

Discussion Forum, Week 14: due on or before Wednesday, December 2, 11:59pm

Topic: Disease, Trauma, and the AIDS Epidemic

Hi all!

Before Wednesday, 11:59 pm, please complete your assigned readings/listening (see Tuesday class folder). Then, please post a response to the readings on this discussion forum.

I would like everyone in class to mention one issue, concept, idea from the article that you found surprising, intriguing, or provocative.

Reminder: Overall, your "post" should consist of at least one paragraph (3 full sentences, but you may write more), plus 2 questions.

Student Response: While the excerpt mentions how much of the music written about the AIDS epidemic focuses on the existential crisis of it and death itself, some sheds light on the physical disability aspect of it. However, the excerpt does not shy away from the stigma and guilt that society has constructed around AIDS, which is shown through the music associated with it. One of the most disheartening things I found out as I read, was that many of the music (and other mediums of expression) was written during this time because society, as well as medicinal advancements could not tolerate AIDS (figuratively and literally, of course). While AIDS is still stigmatized today, much of mainstream society has gone away with the harmful myths associated with AIDS, and modern medicine has improved so that the syndrome is no longer a death sentence.

1. While there are certainly tropes of incapability and incapacity associated with AIDS, how do we balance avoiding those while also acknowledging the severity of the syndrome?
2. While this is a more broad question, if a composer/artist who suffers from a syndrome like AIDS, but does not make that narrative known in their work, should we interpret their metaphors (whether lyrically or just musically) as having to do with that syndrome?

Student Response: Most of the works Paul Attinello mentioned in his writing are often more morbid, and revolve around the inevitable negativity associated with HIV/AIDS. Granted, it would be naïve to disregard the toll it takes on those who are diagnosed, but this mentality flows into the performances of those with HIV/AIDS being perceived extremely negatively as well.

Paul Attinello addresses the AIDS Quilt Songbook in the "Tired Music" section. This song book was the musical setting of poems. One poem in particular "Heartbeats" musically reflects the anxiety of the condition worsening and the inevitable result of death. Another poem set to music named "A Certain Light" by Marie Howe paint for setting of Howe's brother on his deathbed. This work being one of the more morbid messages highlighted in the song book. An example of how the performance of those diagnosed with HIV/AIDS were perceived negatively was William Parker's last performance. People mentioned the inconsistent quality of his voice as a sole result of his medical condition and those only saw his condition in his performance. Not to say that Parker's condition did not have a role to play in the limitations of his performance ability but to disregard his talent would be condescending. Attinello's conclusion that this was an exaggeration is extremely concerning.

HIV/AIDS was debatably considered a disability depending on the advancement of that condition. This is also concerning because in disregarding HIV/AIDS as a disability we disregard it as a progressive disease. This reminds me of how veterans would be judged on how much compensation they were granted depending on what or how much of a

limb they lost. How can we put a number on someone's conditional inconvenience. Even when addressing other progressive illnesses there is a focus on the worse to come rather than the compromise in accommodation of the condition that help those "live in it" rather than die in it.

Questions:

1. Why as a society are we used to jumping to death and pessimistic mentalities when addressing progressive diseases through art forms?
2. How can we open our perception of art and break away from the limiting subjective condition of the creative artist to allow the art to be freely interpreted and speak to wider audiences who fall victim to other conditions? Art has the capacity to speak for all, but if we constantly limit it to the the experience of the creator it will never have a chance to be universally impactful.

Student Response: This article was more intriguing to me than some we have looked at so far. It is an enlightening and realistic view on how different disabilities are viewed, and how not all people that are not able bodied or ill are not equal. Like fetishizing the 'genius' of the deaf composer or the 'heroic overcoming' of someone who is physically impaired (by loss of a limb), this invisible syndrome is taken advantage of musically by extrapolating on the emotions surround the supposed inevitable death. Anything in between the diagnosis and death gets completely ignored, with the focus on the descent, rather than the accommodation possible within the meanwhile. Attinello does an effective job showing examples of songs that follow that trope, as well as ones that seek to delve into the daily life of illness and incapacity. Another interesting tidbit that makes this all the more relevant: the mention of the musical Rent reminded me of it's 2005 film counterpart, where certain musical tracks would be played in any scene regarding the notion of a character's descent to death from being infected with AIDS (and a big scene being made when Angel died, or when Mimi almost died, while the day-to-day aspect of their infection being skipped over through time skips).

Q1: Seeing as how this article was written in 2006, how is this topic viewed now? Have we made progress on how we view the incapacity of the day-to-day part of being inflicted with AIDS in the last 14 years?

Q2: Though HIV/AIDS is one of the more noteworthy autoimmune conditions, how are other conditions such as the strains of Hepatitis viewed?

Student Response: The thing that stood out to me is how "these songs seem almost eschatological, not experiential" and continues to say how these songs outline the extreme negatives of living with a progressive disease. I feel that only outlining solely the inevitable end of what living with AIDS can bring, can almost be classified as misinformation in a way. I had to read part of a book called "Singing for Life" regarding the AIDS pandemic in countries in Africa for a class and throughout that book, music is used to lift people up and give people hope while also providing a positive form of education. The chapter I explored extensively was titled "What You Sing Nourishes Your Body Like Food" and many people mentioned throughout the chapter that the joy that music brings can help you live a better quality of life. I believe that when fighting an illness or a disease that mindset plays a big role in your life moving forward and with the music discussed in the article only seems to encourage the negative mentality.

Student Response: The quote on the top of page 18 struck me the most while reading, "I have suggested elsewhere that some of the various marked differences between music and other media might result from a tendency for music to sidestep concrete experience and terminology in favor of the expression of personal and private emotions." When I think about it, I think he's right. I think it's hard for composers or writers to write lyrics that have medical terminology or detailed experience of illness because they fear that either no one will feel brave enough to sing about it, or that no one will want to listen to it. It is a brave thing to do to even talk about your illness with someone, whether mental or physical, it can be a very personal thing and I think people are sometimes scared of the details. And I think people who have the illnesses are scared that no one will really care if they explain the very in depth experiences of what it is like to have their particular illness. That is why singing these things would be even harder for some people.

This is honestly a big issue I have with mainstream music and I always have. Most of the time, the lyrics are all about dancing, sex, drugs, and/or alcohol. You have to dig deep on Spotify to find music that is genuine. Mainstream music is

written for parties and keeping people satisfied with the same beats and catchy melodies that are easy to remember. I don't think that mainstream music, (specifically pop), is often written to connect with the listener. I remember being in French class in high school and our teacher would always show us music by French composers/artists and almost all of it had lyrics that were about difficult topics. I don't know if it was just the pieces and artists my teacher chose, or if we as an American society are missing the point of expressing yourself through music and through words.

Am I right? Is this an American issue? Or are all cultures this way?

Why are we so afraid to use words that might actually mean something to others? Why are we afraid to use terminology and vocabulary that can directly spell out what it is like to have an illness or disability?

Student Response: The area of discussion that stood out to me the most after reading this chapter was the concept of time. Attinello discussed the difference between "dying of AIDS" and "living with AIDS" and how in music, we tend to only pay attention to the narrative of the future which is assumed death. This is an interesting concept because it sounds like most musical works aren't focusing on the static present living with AIDS, but instead focusing on the "dreadful endings." On page 18, Attinello states that classifying AIDS as a "dreaded illness" is problematic due to the fact that the music created solely focuses on what he states is the second "mode responding to disability."

How can we change the way we present musical works about specific diseases like AIDS?

Why do we as humans immediately dive to the "drama" and the "predictive instead of descriptive" musical works?

Student Response: When the AIDS epidemic first hit, many people used gay men as a scapegoat to pin some sort of "blame" on. This in turn led to a prejudice towards men, and as many have often described, prejudice stems from fear. Most music written of or about age is written from a viewpoint of fear or anxiety. Instead of writing of fear, it is important to write about what life can actually look like for an individual who lives with and prevails through AIDS. This is seen in the AIDS Quilt Songbook and I think could have been a huge help in stopping some of the prejudices felt towards men of the LGBT community.

Student Response: When reading the Attinello article the section of "Tired music" was very interesting to me. I learned that most of the music written about AIDS focused more on the fear, anxiety and mourning about death. But in the AIDS Quilt Songbook had songs that focused on what happens in a person's day to day life with AIDS. I liked reading about the song "Heartbeats" and how it "exposed the blunt realities" of what happens when someone has AIDS. My first question would be why was it more popular to listen to the emotions of what it feels like to have AIDS then the other aspects of the disease? My thoughts for the Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence article are that I found it interesting. I got a little confused with the wording of some of the content on page two. My "question" for this article would be that I would like someone to talk about the Crip theory because I got a little lost in the middle when reading it.

Student Response: As I write this on World AIDS day (December 1st) I am taking a bit more time to sit and reflect this reading before I respond. Something that really stuck with me while reading was Attinello's discussion on how modern medicine created a shift in music and how music expresses health. It was a shift to more "dramatically personal". This shift was less focused on how on the physical and more on the mental. The theme of circles was very popular because of the "death avoidant culture". This is connected because life is a circle, people want to believe that life never ends. Death makes people uncomfortable and in the 1980s, this was inevitable for PWA. Many rather listen to the story of the mind over the body because even when their body is gone, their mind, thought and souls continue in this circle.

Student Response: One concept I found interesting in this article was the idea that songwriters would rather depict AIDS and those afflicted by it having painful, dramatic deaths, rather than uninteresting, anti-climactic lives. Additionally, the idea also struck me about how songwriters would rather discuss comically gruesome emotions and ideas relating to

AIDS, but stray away from actually discussing the physical affectations it takes on. Those works that do discuss this often have polarizing reception among critics and listeners alike.

Why do writers and composers so often stray from discussing physical ailments in their works relating to AIDS? What do they hope to gain by avoiding these very real parts of the experience, when writing music purportedly meant to reflect the entire experience?

Student Response: One aspect of this article that I found very intriguing was when it stated that illness scenes in musicals are not typically set to music. After thinking about this for a while, I could not think of one musical in which illness scenes were sung or set to music. Why is this? Is this due to wanting the audience to feel for the character? The issue that I have with this article is that it stated that there was a decline in personal drama in music. On page 15 of the text, it states, "It is thus not surprising that musical, and in fact much, artistic, production has decreased in the West since the mid- 1990s, and that the music which is now produced tends to be politically assertive and somewhat abstract rather than immediately or dramatically personal". The way I read this comment, it seems to me that the writer is talking about all music. Just because there was medications for AIDS that came about does not mean that music in its entirety became less dramatic and more politically assertive. In what ways did the author mean that music became more politically assertive?

Student Response: I thought it was interesting that the article explained how most of the music written about AIDS does not capture the full extent of the disease and tends to focus on fear and the idea of death. Some works help to describe the physical changes that come with AIDS such as fatigue and a dry cough, but avoids talking about the mental impact it has on people. Occasionally there are works that showcase the experiences of misery in people living with this disease.

-Why do some people tend to avoid talking about a person's feelings, and instead discuss the scientific changes behind this disease?

-How can someone without AIDS feel they can fully convey what it is like to have AIDS through their music?

Student Response: From this article, I found that this article was informative in what the AIDS Movement was for music and musical theater productions. The topic that I really found interest was that John Musto wrote a piece that was all about the last seconds of their lives. The Baritone that sang this when it was premiered sang his last note with this song before he passed away. I think that this is amazing to sing because he can totally relate to what Musto was looking for in the music.

Another point that I thought of was the Musical Theater production especially Rent. Rent is one of my favorite musicals that I have seen and Jonathan Larsen, the composer, really captures the true meaning of the AIDS movement. For example, Larson makes 3 characters that have AIDS and it captures the death of Angel, one of the characters who has AIDS. This scene really makes a difference in what this disease can really do to a person.

A question that left me wondering is Why do people during a pandemic or a terminal illness have different opinions about what is going on during the illness?

Why does music always capture what really is happening during a pandemic or a terminal illness?