

38 – Robert Gupta: Music is medicine, music is sanity

One day, Los Angeles Times columnist Steve Lopez was walking along the streets of downtown Los Angeles when he heard beautiful music. And the source was a man, an African-American man, charming, rugged, homeless, playing a violin that only had two strings.

And I'm telling a story that many of you know, because Steve's columns became **the basis for** a book, which was turned into a movie, with Robert Downey Jr. acting as Steve Lopez, and Jamie Foxx as Nathaniel Anthony Ayers, the Juilliard-trained double bassist whose promising career was **cut short** by a tragic affliction with paranoid schizophrenia. Nathaniel **dropped out** of Juilliard, he suffered a complete breakdown, and 30 years later he was living homeless on the streets of Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles. I encourage all of you to read Steve's book or to watch the movie to understand not only the beautiful bond that formed between these two men, but how music helped shape that bond, and ultimately was instrumental -- if you'll pardon the pun -- in helping Nathaniel **get off the streets**.

I met Mr. Ayers in 2008, two years ago, at Walt Disney Concert Hall. He had just heard a performance of Beethoven's First and Fourth symphonies, and came backstage and introduced himself. He was speaking in a very jovial and gregarious way about Yo-Yo Ma and Hillary Clinton and how the Dodgers were never going to make the World Series, all because of the treacherous first violin passage work in the last movement of Beethoven's Fourth Symphony. And we got talking about music, and I got an email from Steve a few days later saying that Nathaniel was interested in a violin lesson with me.

Now, I should mention that Nathaniel refuses treatment because when he was treated it was with shock therapy and Thorazine and handcuffs, and that **scar** has stayed with him for his entire life. But as a result now, he is **prone to** these schizophrenic episodes, the worst of which can manifest themselves as him exploding and then disappearing for days, wandering the streets of Skid Row, exposed to its horrors, with the torment of his own mind unleashed upon him.

And Nathaniel was in such a state of agitation when we started our first lesson at Walt Disney Concert Hall, he had a kind of manic glint in his eyes; he was lost. And he was talking about invisible demons and smoke, and how someone was poisoning him in his sleep.

And I was afraid, not for myself, but I was afraid that I was going to lose him, that he was going to sink into one of his states, and that I would ruin his relationship with the violin if I started talking about scales and arpeggios and other exciting forms of didactic violin pedagogy. (Laughter) So, I just started playing. And I played the **first movement** of the Beethoven Violin Concerto.

And as I played, I understood that there was a profound change occurring in Nathaniel's eyes. It was as if he was in the grip of some invisible pharmaceutical, a chemical reaction, for which my playing the music was its catalyst. And Nathaniel's

manic rage was transformed into understanding, a quiet curiosity and grace. And in a miracle, he lifted his own violin and he started playing, by ear, certain snippets of violin concertos which he then asked me to complete -- Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky, Sibelius. And we started talking about music, from Bach to Beethoven and Brahms, Bruckner, all the B's, from Bartók, all the way up to Esa-Pekka Salonen.

And I understood that he not only had an **encyclopedic knowledge** of music, but he related to this music at a personal level. He spoke about it with the kind of passion and understanding that I share with my colleagues in the Los Angeles Philharmonic. And through playing music and talking about music, this man had transformed from the paranoid, disturbed man that had just come from walking the streets of downtown Los Angeles to the charming, erudite, brilliant, Juilliard-trained musician.

Music is medicine. Music changes us. And for Nathaniel, music is sanity. Because music allows him to take his thoughts and delusions and shape them through his imagination and his creativity, into reality. And that is an escape from his tormented state. And I understood that this was the very essence of art. This was the very reason why we made music, that we take something that exists within all of us at our very **fundamental core**, our emotions, and through our artistic lens, through our creativity, we're able to shape those emotions into reality. And the reality of that expression reaches all of us and moves us, inspires and unites us.

And for Nathaniel, music brought him back into a **fold of friends**. The redemptive power of music brought him back into a family of musicians that understood him, that recognized his talents and respected him. And I will always make music with Nathaniel, whether we're at Walt Disney Concert Hall or on Skid Row, because he reminds me why I became a musician. Thank you. (Applause)

Bruno Giussani: Thank you. Thanks. Robert Gupta. (Applause)

A few minutes of live music follows, played by the speaker

Robert Gupta: I'm going to play something that I shamelessly stole from cellists. So, please forgive me.

(Laughter) (Music) (Applause)