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A Seemingly Fatal Attraction

Between Sad Souls

by

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English 106: Pop Culture Intersections

August 30, 2016

Introduction:

“Even the darkness has arms,” sings the band Barr Brothers.¹ Depression is a mental disorder defined as persistent feelings of sadness that result in decreased energy and lack of interest in activities. Depression affects about 6.7% of people in the U.S.² One of the most difficult aspects of depression is figuring out how to cope with it. Therapy is one step, but what can a depressed person do when they are alone to feel better? Depression necessitates a healthy outlet that allows the individual to purge intrusive feelings. Listening to sad music can help ease the intensity of depression. It seems contradictory that depressed people would want to listen to music that makes them sadder, right? However, it is my belief that sad music has become a cathartic way to express negative feelings. A quick search on Google provides you with countless websites offering advice on how to help a loved one with depression because no one really knows how. A slip of the tongue can actually do more harm than good. Sad music is important to our modern culture and lives because it validates the invalidated. One of the major symptoms of depression is feeling lonely. The depressed individual feels as though those close to them do not understand what they are going through. To an extent, they are right. Depression is very hard to comprehend by someone who has not experienced it. This invisible barrier between the depressed person and their loved one isolates the two from each other. Music gives a voice to the silent and a peek into what they are really going through. Specifically, sad music can provide support and acceptance

¹ The Barr Brothers. *Even the Darkness Has Arms*.

² “Major Depression Among Adults” (2014) National Institute of Mental Health.

when others cannot. In this way, sad music promotes social progress because it lends a voice to those silently struggling with mental health issues. Through my research, I will argue that sad music is a form of validation for people with and without depression because it provides catharsis and comfort in times when both are needed. I will support my argument by referring to specific studies on the effects sad has on people.

Music is the expression of sound. Sound can be expressed in many different ways using a combination of instruments, vocals, and mechanical sounds. Music has the ability to convey thought, emotion, and ideas. What makes a sad song sad? Sad music is music that has the capacity to evoke sadness in a person. Typically, sad music consists of slow instrumentals, soft vocals, and drawn out verses. The emotional notes we gauge from sad music are most commonly found in the song's tonality. The use of a minor key and slower tempos in music creates an air of melancholy. Listening to a song produced in major key in minor key completely transforms its emotional delivery. Lyrics can vary vastly but do tend to depict some sort of mental struggle. A few artists known for their sad music include: Iron & Wine, Sufjan Stevens, Ryan Adams, Joni Mitchell, The National, and Beach House.

Depressed people listening to sad music may seem completely counterintuitive. However, the attraction between sad songs and the listener has an underlying story. Sad music creates a bond between the artist and listener that counters depression. Music has the power to change a person's life. Particularly, sad music can help the listener feel less alone, validated, and even changed. Artists who have been through something similar to the listener write these songs. The artist puts their music out to reach an audience and the

listener consumes and understands it. Sad music can be a healthy form of emotional processing. There is even an emerging form of therapy that uses music to reduce external and internal pain. Rightfully so, it is called music therapy. Music therapy utilizes music to improve emotion regulation. Emotion regulation is the way in which a person processes emotional experiences on a daily and long-term basis. For people with depression, emotion regulation is hindered. Negative feelings persist while positive feelings seem intangible. Sad music is self-soothing and promotes healthy emotion regulation. A few lines can resonate with you and provide you with the closure you never quite knew you needed. A seemingly fatal attraction between sad souls is not so fatal after all. Two souls support each other through the art of music.

Argument:

In a study titled, The Change of Music Preferences Following the Onset of a Mental Disorder conducted by music researcher Stefan Gebhardt and behavioral scientist Richard von Georgi argues that listening to sad music has the potential to worsen depression. Their article states potential roadblocks of sad music as a form of catharsis and sought explanation in the way people listen to music. Their research examined the change in music preferences in a group of people after the onset of a mental disorder. For those whose music preferences did not change, music was found beneficial to their mental state. For those whose music preferences did change, music was found harmful to their mental state. For those who stopped listening to music altogether, music was found to impair their mental state. Their study found that though sad music may help some people, it could be dysfunctional for others. In these dysfunctional scenarios, negative

feelings intensified. This raises a couple questions about music therapy and proper use. The study notes that “patients with a depressive major disorder are more oriented to the cues in sad music than healthy control subjects.”³ The authors continue to suggest that this relation implies depressed people listening to sad music would further impair their mental state. However, this is not a fair assumption as the ability to identify cues in sad music is not an intrinsically bad thing. Actually, it should be expected. Depressed people relate better to sad music because it imitates their feelings. The similarity breeds familiarity and validation not impairment. This research necessitates further understanding into when music should be used and for whom like in Carlson’s research, for example, which identifies that the use of music for mood regulation is dependent on fundamental differences between individuals. Between this group of people, there is a clear difference in music attachment suggesting that those who place higher value on music in their life use it for emotion regulation.⁴ Gebhardt’s research does not contrast sad and happy music well enough. Their study used genres rather than particular songs or song content. Songs within a genre can be sad, happy, or somewhere in between. Without drawing a clear line between a sad song and a happy song, it is difficult to rely on this specific conclusion. The article did find that patients reported that music enforced more positive cognitive-affective cycles than negative cycles and that “learning how to use a specific individual kind of music to modulate an existing positive or negative affect and

³ Gebhardt, Stefan, and Richard von Georgi. "The change of music preferences following the onset of a mental disorder." *Mental Illness* (2036-7457)7, no. 1 (January 2015): 21-25. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost

⁴ Carlson, E, et al. "Maladaptive and adaptive emotion regulation through music: a behavioral and neuroimaging study of males and females." *Frontiers In Human Neuroscience* 9, (26 August 2015): *Science Citation Index*, EBSCOhost

emotion leads to a better psychological well-being and health (mediator approach).”⁵ The researchers are expressing that music is a helpful form of release for those that use it properly. The article repeatedly mentions that music needs to be used properly for patients. Their research implies that the using music for cognitive health can differ greatly for each person. Some may need more guidance in its use and some may need to seek alternatives.

The Science Behind Sad Music:

Neuroscientist Daniel Levitin has researched in his lab and through his book, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, how music actually impacts the brain. Levitin discusses how people with depression connect with music to feel understood.⁶ Sometimes, depressed people listen to a sad song and it resonates with them. They realize the artist knows what they are going through and has created something beautiful out of it. On a superficial level, “research conducted with healthy populations typically suggests that listening to music that reflects one’s negative mood is a fundamentally healthy act, and serves as a means for solace.”⁷ Diving deeper, however, Levitin discovered through his research that music activates the entire brain through electrochemical signals. Levitin goes on to

⁵ Gebhardt, Stefan, and Richard von Georgi. "The change of music preferences following the onset of a mental disorder." *Mental Illness (2036-7457)*7, no. 1 (January 2015): 21-25. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost

⁶ Levitin, Daniel. "This is your brain on music." *Chicago Ideas Week*. Filmed (March 04, 2015). YouTube video, 18:35. Posted (March 04, 2015).

⁷ Carlson, E, et al. "Maladaptive and adaptive emotion regulation through music: a behavioral and neuroimaging study of males and females." *Frontiers In Human Neuroscience* 9, (26 August 2015): *Science Citation Index*, EBSCOhost.

discuss how sad music provides a soothing effect, releases prolactin (soothing hormone that produces comfort), and reduces cortisol levels.⁸

There has been a considerable amount of research done studying prolactin levels and their correlation with sad music. Prolactin is a hormone in humans known to produce increased gratification. In a study by David Huron, it was found that "high prolactin concentrations are associated with pleasurable music-induced sadness, whereas low prolactin concentrations are associated with unpleasant music-induced sadness."⁹ The study notes that differing prolactin levels between individuals can result in a positive effect for some and a negative effect for others. Sad music may not influence the lives of everyone, but it is making an impact at a very fundamental level for others.

Some people are simply more attached to music than others. The reason for this is preference and possibly absorption. Music absorption is the ability for a person to draw themselves into music as an emotional experience. Absorption can be positive and negative as well as good and bad. Absorption is the heightened resonance of some sort of art. Hogue's study found that those who can absorb themselves into music liked music that induced sadness more than those who could not absorb themselves.¹⁰ Sad music can hold greater value for some of people as absorption levels can vary per person. Music absorption can be a very rewarding experience because this psychological phenomenon

⁸ Levitin, Daniel. "This is your brain on music." *Chicago Ideas Week*. Filmed (March 04, 2015). YouTube video, 18:35. Posted (March 04, 2015).

⁹ Huron, D. "Why is sad music pleasurable? A possible role for prolactin." *Musicae Scientiae* 15, no. 2 (July 2011): 146-158. *Arts & Humanities Citation Index*, EBSCOhost.

¹⁰ Hogue, John D., Andrea M. Crimmins, and Jeffrey H. Kahn. "'So sad and slow, so why can't I turn off the radio': The effects of gender, depression, and absorption on liking music that induces sadness and music that induces happiness." *Psychology of Music* 44, no. 4 (July 2016): 816-829. *PsycINFO*, EBSCOhost.

creates a sort of bond between the artist and listener. In this way, a segment of pop culture can influence our lives.

A majority (69%) of participants stated that they used music as a form of consolation in a research study done by Ter Bogt. Their research also found that “female respondents and respondents with higher levels of anxiousness/depression and lower levels of aggression sought consolation by music more often.”¹¹ Their study focused on adolescents and young adults and found that music provided consolation in mood regulation. Growing up is a difficult process. Young people are often unsure how to handle new experiences and intense emotions. Music as an outlet for emotion is an artistic form of expression. Music can heavily influence young listeners and, perhaps, even change coping methods.

So, how does sad music influence people that listen to it? Specifically, how does sad music influence people with depression? Mental health issues are being discussed openly more and more. However, mental health problems are still very taboo in American culture. Many families simply do not know how to handle a loved one who is mentally ill. This unsure mindset can be very upsetting to the mentally unwell individual as they feel even further pushed away from their loved ones. This lack of understanding can make an isolated person feel even more isolated. I hope to argue that sad music can be an outlet for those with nowhere else to turn. In this situation, there is someone that understands. Generally, music can be an incredibly personal and gratifying experience.

¹¹ Ter Bogt, T. F. M., et al. ““You’re not alone””: Music as a source of consolation among adolescents and young adults.” *Psychology of Music* (June 2016). *Sage Journals*, EBSCOhost.

Listeners feel as though they are part of something larger than themselves. For people with depression, sad music has the ability to validate their feelings and also create a sense of support. In this way, music is company for those who feel alone.

Theoretical Approaches:

I will explore two theoretical approaches that offer psychological evidence to my argument. The connection between music and listener begins at a very basic level.

Jerrold Levinson is a professor of philosophy at University of Maryland and is known for his work on the aesthetics of music. His writing on *Music and Negative Emotion* discusses the hedonic rewards associated with listening to sad music. His theory on emotional potency states that the listener identifies with the song they are listening to so much so that it expresses their own identity. Levinson wrote about music and emotion in a new light. He expressed that music creates abstract emotions. The music is not attached to life-sadness but art-sadness.¹² Generally, no one wants to experience sadness in their lives because it is usually attached to a series of unfortunate events. Art-sadness detaches the listener from life-sadness and creates a new way of feeling. The listener finds great pleasure in being able to understand and relate to this sort of "beautiful sadness" through past emotional experiences. This is particularly interesting because it suggests that perhaps the feelings sad people stem from sad music are not inherently negative? Perhaps these feelings are just familiar. Along the same lines, a man named

¹² Levinson, Jerrold. *Music, Art, and Metaphysics*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

John Hogue explored Levinson's study to see what the difference would be between sad people listening to familiar vs. unfamiliar music. "People respond to familiar songs differently than people respond to unfamiliar songs."¹³ A listener being familiar with a song is a precursor to them liking it, as argued by Levinson. Hogue's research shows further support of Levinson's theory while adding to it. In another research study by Kimberly Sena Moore titled, A Systematic Review on the Neural Effects of Music on Emotion Regulation, data found that "desired activation patterns occurred when listening to preferred and familiar music."¹⁴ In other words, listening to familiar music facilitates emotional regulation. Listening to sad music for emotion regulation is a highly personal and individualized experience. There are particular songs for everyone. Another study explored the use of music in everyday situations and concluded that music is used to regulate emotion on a daily basis. Music selection is specific to situation and mood. The study found that participants chose "emotionally congruent" music.¹⁵ For people with depression, sad music tends to appeal more.

Researcher Brian Geisler wrote a journal called "Self-verification in clinical depression" in the Journal of Abnormal Psychology. Self-verification is the theory that people want to be surrounded by stimuli that represents their own self-views. Geisler's study relates to my topic by affirming that depressed people like sad music because it

¹³ Hogue, John D., Andrea M. Crimmins, and Jeffrey H. Kahn. "So sad and slow, so why can't I turn off the radio': The effects of gender, depression, and absorption on liking music that induces sadness and music that induces happiness." *Psychology of Music* 44, no. 4 (July 2016): 816-829. *PsycINFO*, EBSCOhost.

¹⁴ Moore, Kimberly Sena. "A Systematic Review on the Neural Effects of Music on Emotion Regulation: Implications for Music Therapy Practice." *Journal of Music Therapy* 50, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 198-242. *Education Full Text (H.W. Wilson)*, EBSCOhost.

¹⁵ Thoma, Myriam V., et al. "Emotion regulation through listening to music in everyday situations." *Cognition & Emotion* 26, no. 3 (March 2012): 550-560. *Business Source Complete*, EBSCOhost.

validates their perceptions of the world.¹⁶ This theory discusses that individuals will subject themselves to stimuli that validates their feelings of themselves. This is a reason for why sad people listen to sad music. The songs can evoke the feelings they already feel. This theory may seem self-destructive and in some instances it can be, but in terms of an artist-listener relationship, it is a larger source of comfort than negativity. While self-verification may further breed negativity, it may also breed familiarity. There is literal comfort in knowing you are not alone. As prolactin concentrations increase when listening to sad music, the body senses comfort. Listening to a sad song can help alleviate the intensity of depression through physiological means. Researchers Hogue, Crimmins, and Kahn incorporated this theory into their study on music-induced sadness. They found that depressed people preferred to listen to low-energy music rather than high-energy music.¹⁷ Their findings were in line with self-verification in that people prefer stimuli that reflect themselves.

Low self-worth seems to have a tendency to attract a negative person to negative things almost like a magnet. It is important to affirm that when I discuss sad music, I am not talking about music with inherently negative lyrics. Reverting back to Gebhardt's article, it is important to recognize that listening to music as a coping mechanism needs to be used in a functional manner. Kicking a dog while it is down, so to speak, can only make a bad situation worse. Just as well, it is important to differentiate between listening

¹⁶ Geisler, R. Brian, Robert A. Josephs, and William B. Jr. Swann. "Self-verification in clinical depression: The desire for negative evaluation." *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 105, no. 3 (August 1996): 358-368 *PsycARTICLES*, EBSCOhost.

¹⁷ Hogue, John D., Andrea M. Crimmins, and Jeffrey H. Kahn. "'So sad and slow, so why can't I turn off the radio!': The effects of gender, depression, and absorption on liking music that induces sadness and music that induces happiness." *Psychology of Music* 44, no. 4 (July 2016): 816-829. *PsycINFO*, EBSCOhost.

to sad music as a form of catharsis rather than torment. Unfortunately, there are fan bases that glorify and romanticize depression and other mental illnesses through tumblr and other forms of social media. This is not a healthy form of healing. Though it may help an individual feel validated, embellishing sadness can have negative impacts on our young culture. Depression is a mental disorder that takes lives. There is nothing favorable about that. I want to make clear that by discussing the relation of sad music and sad people, I am not supporting the praise of depression. Rather, I am discussing how slow, melodic, and melancholic music can actually provide comfort to those suffering. Music that captivates you and beautifully sad lyrics that provide the listener with a sense of empathy can have a positive impact.

Sad Songs:

Sad music has a general definition but is often up for interpretation. Music is extremely subjective because personal tastes in songs can differ from person to person. The beauty behind music is that it creates an individualized experience for each listener. An artist's intent can differ vastly from listener interpretation, but that's the beauty in its art. A song may have a different meaning to me than it does to you. The following are examples of songs I believe evoke sadness and have the potential to provide the listener with empathy.

An example of a sad song is *Upward Over the Mountain* by Iron & Wine.¹⁸ The lyrics throughout the song express a source of comfort while the slow tempo puts the listener at ease. Especially, the lyric, "so may the sunrise bring hope where it once was forgotten" relates to negative feelings and lost hope. The lyric suggests resting and sleeping knowing there is hope for a better day tomorrow. A large issue with depression is that negative feelings can seem unbearable. The most important thing people with depression need to remember is that these feelings will not last. Another lyric, "sons are like birds flying upward over the mountain" is a reminder that being far from home is part of growing up and sometimes you have to go far to get far. Lyrics like this can cause a sense of comfort when a person finds themselves alone. Comments below the video discuss how beautiful the song is, how sad it is, how much they miss their mothers, and the struggles they have endured through life. It is truly fascinating how much one song can evoke endless emotion and public support to those suffering through something.

In general, Iron & Wine has a knack for manifesting sadness through music. Not all of his songs express sadness but the ones that do, truly do. Iron & Wine uses slow melodies and Sam Beam's hushed voice to produce some of the most fantastic sad songs I have ever had the pleasure of hearing. Sam Beam's whispered words are a warm hug in a dark, cold room.

¹⁸ Iron & Wine. *Upward Over the Mountain*.

The song Dear Chicago by Ryan Adams discusses feelings of loneliness and isolation. The fleeting guitar chords create a feeling of beautiful nostalgia.¹⁹ When a depressed person feels so low and an artist expresses they have felt as blue as they have too, a spark ignites. There is a quiet affirmation in the artist's message. The depressed person does not feel so solitary because the person singing to them knows exactly how it feels. Ryan Adams has really figured out how to use a harmonica and an acoustic guitar to produce a hauntingly beautiful sound. His instrumentals immediately create a bluesy, heartbreaking character. Several comments on each Ryan Adam's YouTube music videos write how heartbreaking his songs are.²⁰ This provocation of emotion is a notable feature of the music's potential in mood regulation.

Help Yourself by Sad Brad Smith may not be as poetically melancholic but still a great source of comfort for those with depression.²¹ The song content is fairly straightforward. The artist is the shoulder to lean on when others are not. Even if an individual is going through a difficult time does not feel like their friends and family are there for them, songs like this one verbalize validation. When a depressed person does not receive any outward support from their loved ones, a song like this tells them what they needed to hear. The validity music grants is such a beautiful source of support.

Sad songs can be apparent by their lyrics. However, sad songs are fairly noticeable by their instrumentals and tune as well. The list goes on. Many sad songs can

¹⁹ Ryan Adams. *Dear Chicago*.

²⁰ NeverOddOrEven. "Dear Chicago- Ryan Adams." YouTube video, 2:10. Posted (December 19, 2009).

²¹ Sad Brad Smith. *Help Yourself*.

resonate with a person in different ways. These songs and many other sad songs are extremely poetic. They express life experiences that everyone goes through in a beautiful way. Attachment to specific songs varies for each individual. A favorite sad song can provide a familiar comfort. Whether it be familiarity or empathy the listener is after, these songs have the potential of striking a chord and resonating deeply within.

Conclusion:

There is significant evidence that sad songs provide solace for listeners. Sad music is an embrace in the darkness. Sad music is the voice that understands. Sad music is there for you when no one else can be. Sad music does not have to care, it simply does. Sad music is a source of support for people with no one else to turn to. There is no sense of burdening another person. There is no form of misunderstanding. There is an attraction between two sad souls that result in mutual support.

The cathartic response associated with sad music seems to be dependent on the individual. The studies referenced above discuss how personal preferences and differences attribute themselves to the use of sad music as a form of consolation. Having a mental illness, absorption levels, personality, and temperament all play a substantial role in the beneficial reaction to sad music. Since sad music is not as beneficial for some as it is for others, it must be properly regulated and monitored when it is used for music therapy. Otherwise, music is readily available as a form of emotion regulation. Several studies dispute whether music provides a functional form of regulating emotions. For

depressed people with no one to turn to, sad songs provide the empathy they need. Music should not be used as the only form of coping with depression. When used in conjunction with therapy and medication, if needed, the depressed person can find comfort in an empty room.

Talk about captivating our attention, sad music seems to have a way of captivating our souls. There's more to sad music than feeling blue. For some people, sad songs actually produce a comforting effect on the body through the production of prolactin. Popular media, specifically sad music, comments on the world we live in. Mental health issues are a much larger issue than the general public wants to admit. These issues are silenced because they make people uncomfortable. Mental health is heavily neglected. People need to be able to express how they feel to get help. Ignoring a problem does not make it go away. In silencing mental health problems, we are invalidating American youth and teaching ourselves that mental health is not essential. Sad songs comment on these issues and allows them to permeate throughout popular culture and reach a large audience. Whether it be radio, a local venue, or a YouTube link, music is readily shared. For some, sad music provides solace. For some, sad music provides understanding. For some, sad music provides a voice for those too scared to speak. Regardless, sad music is a form of empowerment in our modern world. For the select few, it has been a light in a dark tunnel they did not think they would make it out of. And that is noteworthy.

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