

June/July/August 2020
Vol. 9, Issue 3

Free minds Connect

THE MUSIC ISSUE



*Artwork by SF, Free Minds Volunteer
Inspired by the poem "Dead Men on the Radio" by MH*

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BETTER TOGETHER - MUSIC

Dear Free Minds Music Lovers,

I hope you are staying well and uplifted during this incredibly difficult time of COVID-19. Know that your Free Minds family is thinking of you and sending support and strength. I was recently at a drugstore (masked up, of course) buying birthday cards, and saw a sale on musical cards. I couldn't stop myself from opening all of them over and over, wanting to hear each card's rhythm. Well, consider this issue a musical card and let yourself be pulled into the up-tempo beats!

You will start your musical journey with the fantastic cover created by FM volunteer SF, inspired by a poem by MH. There's nothing better than creativity sparking more creative works. On page 13, Keela explains why we are so fully engaged when we listen to music – science has proven it activates all parts of our brains! You will also read how music serves as a catalyst for social change, from the freedom fighters in Africa bringing back a banned instrument called the mbira (page 6), to energizing the Civil Rights Movement and today's fight for racial justice (page 16).

Music not only spurs us to take risks to make the world a better place, but it comforts us when life hits us hard. I couldn't agree more with one of our favorite Free Minds poets, Maya Angelou, who writes, *"Music was my refuge. I could crawl into the space between the notes and curl my back to loneliness."* Two Free Minds songwriters, James and Ontae, used the pain of incarceration and family loss to birth powerful songs. Ontae has a burning mission to bring healing through music (page 27), and James just dropped a new single that is so catchy the whole Free Minds staff learned a special dance for it over Zoom!

On page 15, Sabrea pens a gratitude letter to music, a lifesaving force while she was in foster care. You'll read about another tight bond between FM member Craig and his sister, who support each other through thick and thin. As a member of the COVID-19 support team, Craig shares this love with the members in our reentry program he calls daily to check if they are okay.

In this issue's Photos section, come walk with us through the places we've been visiting lately, in DC and

elsewhere! And on page 40, *Connect* editor Michael invites us on a journey to Norway, a country in Europe that he visited before the pandemic.

But as always, the most special parts of the *Connect* are the emotional, touching, inspirational poems and essays from you all. VC's essay about his life's journey through different kinds of music, JL's essay about his first love (rap), and SM's invitation to listen deeply to the music in everyday life take our musical road trip to exciting and new side roads. Make sure you don't miss FM member David's story of commitment and compassion with the youth he mentors as a Credible Messenger. His beautiful musical memories of his mom singing sustain him through the tough times (page 36).

I learned so much from Janet's column on music and the Deaf community (page 28), including that there is a backpack that allows deaf or hard of hearing people to experience music through vibrations. DC's Gallaudet University is at the heart of Deaf culture. Did you know it's the world's only university designed to be barrier-free for deaf and hard of hearing students? It's inspiring me to learn sign language. Let us know if you want any materials to learn alongside me.

On page 34, Pramila explores the role of music in different religions and faith traditions around the world. Does music play a role in your faith? Why or why not? We'd love to hear your perspective!

Thank you all for your wonderful submissions about your relationship with music. Keep feeling the melody of connection and your Free Minds family.

Until next time,

Tara

*May the long time sun shine upon you
All love surround you
And the pure light within you guide your way on*

**Next Issue's Theme:
Black Lives Matter**

The Connect is a bimonthly creative writing newsletter published by the members, staff, and friends of the Free Minds Book Club. Each issue focuses on a specific theme as well as highlights the discussions of the Free Minds long distance BAM! (Books Across the Miles) book club. We publish five issues per year.



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We are ALWAYS looking for new contributors. Write or draw something for our next issue and send it to us! (Pieces not published in the *Connect* may appear on our Writing Blog and at a Write Night Event!)

Please write us when you are transferred so we have your up-to-date address as soon as possible!

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FREE MINDS HQ

All the latest updates on what's going on at the Free Minds office

By Imanee

COVID Response Team: Standing in Solidarity

Free Minds's COVID Response Team has been extremely active in providing support for our members, not only in response to the COVID-19 pandemic but also in solidarity with victims of police brutality, especially those in the DC area. Staff and members have been participating in Black Lives Matter protests, in addition to making T-shirts with various messages related to practicing safety, exercising freedom of speech, and other causes. Moreover, the team worked hard to provide various certified training courses, such as trauma peer specialist or personal training courses, to foster healing and growth opportunities. The reentry team has also decided to launch a cooperative learning group that will meet (virtually) once a month to discuss African American history. We value our members, the DC community, and their families and want to continue fostering justice and positive social change!



COVID Care Packages

Continuing with our support for our Free Minds family through thick and thin, we created emergency care packages for our members, with help from Community Family Life Services and Thrive D.C. The care packages included various products such as food, hygiene products, masks, shampoo, soap, and more. Some staff members kindly stayed at the office to help disperse goods and bags; the office was filled top to bottom with care packages!

Virtual Write Nights Reach New Audiences

In June and July, we expanded our Virtual Write Nights to include live video conversations with our Free Minds staff, friends, and Poet Ambassadors. In June, we kicked things off with Julia, Poet Ambassador Tariq, and our good friend Marcus (Founder/CEO of Flikshop). In July, we were joined by Shannon, Clint (FM Book Club Facilitator and author of *Counting Descent*), and Poet Ambassador Gordon. More than 300 people from all over the country and Canada joined us online for each event! Pages with feedback are on their way in the mail; it might take us a little while to get the comments back to you, but please do keep those poems coming!



In Loving Memory

We've been listening to your suggestions about how we can continue to honor the Free Minds members who we have lost. One of your ideas was to dedicate every issue of the *Connect* to their memory. Keep sending your ideas.

Rest in Power:

Glen, James, Cortez, Derrick, Christian, JohnQuan, Nadar, Andre, Darond, Dontel, Tyree, Antwone, Amari, Kuron, Dwayne, Darnell, Marcus, Wayne, Eric, Sharod, Arthur, Isaiah, DeMario, Mshairi, Tahlil, Joshua, John, Delonte, Eddie, Gary, Benny

If you know of other Free Minds members that we've lost who are not on this list, please let us know so we can include them in our memorial.

FAMILY TIES

We All We Had

An interview with FM member Craig

MICHAEL: What was your relationship with your sister like when you two were growing up?

CRAIG: We were always real tight, always cool, all close. She's two years older than me but even so, we were always really close. We never fought, even when we were young.

MICHAEL: Why do you think that is? I know for me, my sister and I never fought because we couldn't really afford to. There was too much negative stuff happening around us, so we had to stick together.

CRAIG: Yeah, I think it was like that with us too. That's part of what made us close. We were raised by my mother, and sometimes she would be there but other times she wouldn't; we'd be home by ourselves. My other brother would be around sometimes, and some of our friends would stay with us too, but for the most part it was me and my sister. So yeah, I think that's what got us to be close, because it was just like, we all we had.

MICHAEL: When you got locked up, what did that do to you and your sister's relationship?

CRAIG: Our relationship continued strong, for sure. She's always been there for me. Even when she was struggling herself, she made sure I had money on my books. When she was able to visit, she would visit. Even when she was going through rough times, she made sure that I was straight. Any time she was able to take my calls, she would. I didn't have a single visit from 2000 all the way until 2014, because the spot I was in was too far out, but we always made it work.

MICHAEL: Some guys inside seem so restless for a romantic relationship – so eager to be getting love letters in their mail and stuff like that. But it sounds like, in terms of your contact with the outside, you kept it family first.

CRAIG: I had female friends and stuff like that. I had people I kept in contact with, people I met while I was in. But that romantic stuff wasn't really an issue, because I kept it on a friend thing and learned to block a lot of stuff out. I've seen so many guys fall in love with women while they're inside and then they really struggle when the relationship falls apart. I wasn't trying to be one of those guys who's going all crazy over things that are happening in the street, things I don't have any control over.

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FREE MINDS MAILBAG

We love getting mail from our Free Minds family.

Here are some of your thoughts on the April/May/June 2020 Connect Loyalty.



DA: I love this Loyalty issue. I most definitely love how everything is so bright with colors now, it looks great! The In Loving Memory names bring back a lot of good memories I have of some of the Free Minds members who we have lost. I started in the Class of 2006 and it's sad to say, but five names of people who I grew in friendship with, along with two who I knew before we joined FM, have passed away. James, Cortez – whose name I have tattooed on my arm, RIP – Nadar, Tyree, Arthur, and there are a few more names that are close to me on the list. I look at all the names I know and can put a face to them. It's not just a memorial for me, but also a reminder to stay out of the streets, do the right things, and try to make a difference in the life of somebody who looks up to me.

The Loyalty issue's Family Ties column is about one of my friends who I talk to damn near every week. We're from the same neighborhood and David is a person I grew up looking up to. I'm happy he gave his sentence back and I'm happy for him and Yukia. I can't wait to get interviewed by Kelli! I have a love story to tell about me and my wife.

I love the Choosing Your Loyalty story by Maji. I've had my fair share of what he's been through; I can relate 100%. I love the Reentry Profile story, A Glimmer of Hope by Shannon. I'm also going to that beach "Folly Beach" that Kelli spoke about in the meditation. I can't wait to try those energy drinks Yerba Mate. I'm a gym junkie so I love working out. And to Pramila's question: what does loyalty mean to me? It's priceless. It's not just a word, it's my lifestyle.

AS: My fave was from Imanee on loyalty to self. So huge, so important. I enjoy being loyal to myself because it's easy to forgive myself if I let myself down, but it's harder with others. And I really love Louisiana, I feel like I lived there before! The pictures of Gallery Place, Chinatown, Waterfront, then downtown had me really missing home. I really miss home so bad.

LG: This *Connect* is very powerful because loyalty is a principle everyone should exhibit. I enjoyed Pramila's article on Rumspringa. When I was housed at Lewisburg and Allenwood, I would see Amish people as we rode from the airlift to our destination. DC is sure looking good. Chinatown and Gallery Place have really changed. I was smiling to see the bookstore Loyalty in the Petworth area; I used to hang out down the street from there.

TG: Poems by FM Members? What's not to like about that?... To read everyone's concept of loyalty in an aesthetic medium unites the mind and heart. It unites us as well. I also notice a running theme in all the poems: loyalty starts with being loyal to yourself first. That resonates with me so much. All of the contributors did an outstanding job. There were some lines that did a Jackie Chan kick to my brain. MT's "You can't be loyal to someone that you don't love," SM's "A stone in the dirt – the tone of your loyalty will forever be told," and QS's "Loyalty is showing the best of who you are without any strings attached except the one to your heart." I tip my stetson to y'all.



AFROPOP: THE MBIRA TRADITION FROM ZIMBABWE

By Banning, Free Minds Friend (and Julia's cousin!)

Afropop Worldwide is a Peabody Award-winning, weekly one-hour public radio program and website that introduces listeners to the musical cultures of Africa and the African diaspora. Produced by World Music Productions since 1988, and hosted by Cameroonian born, Washington, DC-based broadcasting veteran Georges Collinet, the radio series is distributed to over 100 stations around the U.S. The programs are also available via podcast and streaming at www.afropop.org and www.soundcloud.com. Banning is Senior Producer for the program.

At *Afropop Worldwide*, we use music to discover and reveal the history that has made the world what it is. Sometimes our stories dig back into ancient history, like the empires of West Africa that still echo in songs and stories created today. Sometimes they are very much of the current moment, like a story about how hip-hop in Senegal has influenced the outcome of recent elections there. Some detail the life of a particularly important musician or tell the story of a unique genre, like West African *highlife*, or *mbaqanga* music from South Africa. The story always begins with music, but it can lead many places; as we like to say, music tells the story of the world.

One story that caught my ear many years ago, and that still fascinates me today, is the mbira tradition of the Shona people of Zimbabwe. The mbira is a hard slab of wood with 21 iron prongs bolted onto it in three arrays. The player plucks the prongs with two thumbs and the right forefinger to create complex rhythmic melodies. For that reason, outsiders call it a “thumb piano.” But Zimbabwean players generally frown on that term, since it is using a Western idea (the piano) to describe an African instrument. Musicologists call it a lamellophone, referring to the prongs, which are shaped like tongues. There are a number of lamellophones found throughout Africa, but none quite like the Shona mbira.

In the Shona religion, the mbira has a very specific purpose. It is used to attract the spirits of deceased

ancestors, so that they can be consulted about problems facing the living. The central repertoire of mbira songs is very old – no one really knows how old – and the idea is that by playing the right song in the right way, an ancestral spirit can be drawn to a ceremony, or *bira*, and will inhabit, or possess, a spirit medium, who facilitates this vital communication. For this reason the most common mbira in Zimbabwe today is the *mbira dzavadzimu*, or “mbira of the spirits.”

The Shona people are the majority population in the country we know as Zimbabwe. But there were no African countries as such in that region until the late 19th century, when Cecil Rhodes arrived from the UK, via South Africa, in search of gold and diamonds. Up until 1980, Zimbabwe was known first as Rhodesia and then Southern Rhodesia (Zambia being Northern Rhodesia). Rhodesians never found much gold or diamonds, but they did discover rich, arable land, an agreeable climate, and generally peaceful communities of mostly Shona people. They came for riches, but stayed to make a home. That meant bending the local people to their will, to serve as a labor force and working class in their fledgling society. Christian missionaries played a crucial role in influencing hearts and minds, and, not surprisingly, the notion of using music to communicate with spirits was not part of their plan. Thus, for much of the 20th century, the mbira was either forbidden or stigmatized by white outsiders as backwards, primitive, and even evil.



Mbira

Fast forward to the 1970s, and the country was in full revolt against Rhodesian colonial rule. Zimbabweans fought a bloody war to attain independence in 1980. Part of the liberation struggle was a movement to revive African traditions that had been suppressed by the Rhodesians, and that included mbira. The mbira became a symbol of resistance and African pride, and it is considered the national instrument today in Zimbabwe.

One way that mbira music returned to the cultural foreground was through popular music. The singer Thomas Mapfumo pioneered a genre of music that transposed mbira music onto electric guitars, keyboards, and trap drums, and laced songs with revolutionary messages, disguised in deep language that meant nothing to the colonizers, but helped to rally Africans to join the fight for freedom.

Mapfumo called his music *chimurenga*, a reference to a warrior ancestor, and the name used by the guerilla fighters in the liberation war. After independence, both traditional and popular versions of mbira music thrived. Mapfumo eventually added actual mbiras to his band lineup. His messages changed too, as he began to sing about the corruption and failings of the new African leaders. This eventually led to his exile in the United States.

Through all of this, people around the world have discovered and learned to play mbira music. Today there are mbira music communities in the United States, the U.K. and even Japan. Aside from the instrument's rich spiritual and political history, the real draw is the unique beauty of its mellifluous, hypnotic, poly-rhythmic sounds. It is music that can grab you and never let go, as it has me.

DEAR MR. ADVICE

Do you have advice for LB? If so, write in and we may print your advice in the next issue. And if you have a question for the FM Fam, please send it to us. We want to hear from you!

Dear Advice Man,

I have two sons and a daughter by a woman who I left as a teenager, over 22 years ago. (We'd been together since 13, 14 years young.) I know she cares about and loves me. She's living her life happy and so are the kids, who are grown. They say how much they miss me, need me, love me, and how they're waiting for me to come home. But they never show it in their actions: no letter, no mail, no Father's Day cards, no pictures, no nothing. Always broken promises. They talk about what they're going to do, but never do it. Meanwhile I write, send pics, give fatherly advice on a regular basis. I'm starting to feel like it's just out-of-sight, out-of-mind. They just tell me what they know I want to hear.

What should I do?

LB

Dear LB,

I hope these words of advice will bring you understanding, and some peace to your mind and heart. I understand the meaning and pain of broken promises, LB. But as men, it's our responsibility to continue to express our love to those we love, even if inside we don't agree with all of their actions. This is especially true when it comes to our children (either young or adult).

I know it hurts to feel so much neglect and face broken promises. But remember: you are a father, but you are also incarcerated. They are grown, with their own lives to live as young adults. Continue to guide them and talk with them when you are able. Be an understanding father by showing your strength mentally and being patient with them, instead of worrying about those broken promises.

Focus on how blessed you are, that you are able to talk to your children at all these days. Continue to love them and encourage them. They are yours, and love conquers all! Stay faithful and stay strong. They will come around.

Peace,

WH, Advice Man

Dear LB,

I can honestly say I know the feelings you're experiencing, and I know they don't feel good at all. But (and I know this is easier said than done) you can't allow these feelings to consume you, because then you'll start to think irrationally and convince yourself that "out of sight, out of mind" is a fact. Trust me, you couldn't be further from the truth.

In your family's defense, we (incarcerated brothers) don't fully understand how time-demanding society really is, and the speed at which it moves these days. It can be pretty hectic. I've also come to understand that with the advancement of technology, sending letters, cards, etc. isn't nearly as exciting as receiving them. It isn't for lack of caring that your family isn't reciprocating – it's just the fast pace of today's society.

I know your family misses you, your family needs you, your family loves you, and your family cannot wait for you to come home to show you just how much. How do I know these things? Easy – you told me so. Over the course of 22 years, you've managed to cultivate and sustain good relationships with the people who matter most to you. That would be an impossible feat if it was completely a one-way street. So, what should you do? Keep writing, keep sending pics, and keep giving fatherly advice. But above all else, keep being the man that your family knows you to be. The man they love and respect. And keep your head up, brother.

Your FM Brother,
DA

PAYING IT FORWARD: MUSIC FOR TRANSFORMATION

By Imanee

DECODA

"Can music heal us?"
The answer from
Decoda's founder,
Kris Saebø, would be:
Yes! Decoda is a New
York-based collective

of classical musicians whose purpose is to create opportunities for musical expression amongst incarcerated individuals. Founded in 2012, Decoda combines the creativity of its members with a love for social justice to empower incarcerated individuals through interactive songwriting and composing workshops, and is recognized by major media outlets such as the Washington Post, Billboard Magazine, and CNN.

Decoda's new social justice initiative, Music for Transformation, was designed to answer that very question: "Can music heal us?" The purpose of Music for Transformation is to help with rehabilitation and anti-recidivism for adults and youth within facilities around the United States. The project incorporates week-long visits to different facilities, led by four to eight musicians from Decoda and working with 25 to 40 incarcerated individuals.

These songwriting and composing workshops are based on different themes, such as 'Transformation,' 'Where I'm From,' or 'Hope,' and teach members how to create live music. Each workshop is three to four hours per day. At the end of a Decoda residency, the incarcerated musicians play a live concert for their invited family members. In addition, each participant's playing is professionally recorded. Decoda provides all instruments and tools

to amplify the voices of this country's incarcerated population!

So far, Decoda's musicians have visited Lee Correctional Institution in South Carolina and Sing Sing in New York, both maximum-security prisons for men, with plans to help more incarcerated folks in different parts of the United States. After playing in a Decoda concert, one participant – Jim, at Lee Correctional Institution – stated, "Sound is one of the strongest energies that I know of. It can penetrate wood, stone, even steel. Music has a way of touching our minds, our hearts, even our very souls." He is one of many participants who have felt healed from the collaborative environment provided by Decoda. Another participant, Keith, said, "I went from thinking that only some people could be musically inclined to seeing that everyone has it in them, to some degree or another. Decoda showed them how to dig down deep, pull their creativity out and share it with others."

The organization seeks to cultivate a space for healing, allowing each participant to freely express their creativity and "foster good citizenship within the prison community." Decoda's collaborative work environment aims to develop the social and analytical skill sets "necessary for successful living both inside and outside the facility," helping participants along in their rehabilitation. This generation's upcoming musicians are coming out of facilities like Lee and Sing Sing; Decoda urges incarcerated individuals to believe that their voices are not silenced, and their potential is unlimited! Just as participants heal through music, the world heals through them.

QUOTE-I-VATOR

"One good thing about music: when it hits you, you feel no pain." – Bob Marley (Singer, Songwriter)

"Music was my refuge. I could crawl into the space between the notes and curl my back to loneliness." – Maya Angelou (Poet, Author, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*)

"Music is the great uniter. An incredible force. Something that people who differ on everything and anything else can have in common." – Sarah Dessen (Author, *The Rest of the Story*)

"I was born with music inside me. Music was one of my parts. Like my ribs, my kidneys, my liver, my heart. Like my blood. It was a force already within me when I arrived on the scene. It was a necessity for me – like food or water." – Ray Charles (Singer, Songwriter, Pianist, Composer)

"Music makes us want to live. You don't know how many times people have told me that they'd been down and depressed and just wanted to die. But then a special song caught their ear and that helped give them renewed strength. That's the power music has." – Mary J. Blige (Singer, Songwriter)

"Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and life to everything." – Plato (Philosopher)

"If I were not a physicist, I would probably be a musician. I often think in music. I live my daydreams in music. I see my life in terms of music." – Albert Einstein (Physicist)

"If I had my life to live over again, I would have made a rule to read some poetry and listen to some music at least once every week." – Charles Darwin (Scientist)



Maya Angelou,
Poet and Author

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Dead Men on the Radio

By MH

In tribute to some of my favorite musicians. RIP.

I heard a dead man on the radio
He was singing about his life
He said he was talking to the Man in the Mirror
He told me it didn't matter if you're black or white

I heard a dead man on the radio
He was singing memories of his father from way back when
It was a sad song
He just wanted for his momma to have one more dance
with his father again

I heard a dead man on the radio
He sang of champions, his friends, and Killer Queens
I liked when he spoke of dynamite and laser beams
He was a really great entertainer, by all means

I heard a dead man on the radio
He spoke of Space Cowboys and Jungle Love
He wanted to Fly Like an Eagle
I imagine he is now flying high in the sky above

I heard a dead man on the radio
He claimed to be free like a bird
He asked me to be a Simple Man
I hung onto every word

Stanza 1: Michael Jackson

Stanza 2: Luther Vandross

Stanza 3: Freddie Mercury (Queen)

Stanza 4: Steve Miller Band

Stanza 5: Lynyrd Skynyrd

Rhyme Entry

By ET

If it was up to me, I would take all of my brothers out
the street
Bring them to the other side: to relax, to love, to teach
Provide anything they desire when in need
True meaning of living free, even love for enemies
Stand strong let's do it, do it like there's nothing to it
Better know it, too much love to run through it
Can't lie, I'm afraid of what we will become
If we don't settle our differences and move on as one
God bless our souls and all the things we can't control
Unify to take us further, only seed we lay to grow
We believe in money, trees, and many streets paved in gold
If we believe in others' dreams, we achieve the major goals
Learn to read signs then you'll see signs, it takes a Free Mind
If he tryin' on top of she tryin', then we tryin'
All Lives Matter, and if we believe what we say
Changing from within is the only way

Music

By TR

To me, music means a lot
because the songs I listen to
or the beats of the songs
lift me up.

Music inspires me.
People been through the same things we've been
through, or worse
and put their emotions or struggles in their music.

And also, it's a motivation.
I workout to music every day
and I need to listen to certain songs as soon as I wake up.

No brushing no teeth
or washing my face yet!
"Straight to music" (LOL).

Yeah it has made me feel comforted
because it can ease my mind.
And understood
because I can be missing my girlfriend.
So, I listen to a song that reminds me of her (LOL).

Music plays a role in my life
because it lets me know things can be done all around
the Board.
You can leave an impact if you've got a good fan base
and you can get through to people, through a good beat
or song (my thoughts).

My Jam

By AL

Song: Dear Mama by Tupac

*Lyric: I wish I could take the pain away/If you can make it
through the night there's a brighter day*

I wish I could take the pain away
If you can make it through the night,
there's a brighter day

What more am I to say?

You are my strength and my rock.
My guiding light, when this world
seems to be getting dark.

The times I've stumbled,
you've been my footing on life's narrow
road.

And whenever I slipped, you lent
your hand for me to hold.

I love you more than
you know!

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

A Change is Going to Come

By JM

Song: *A Change is Gonna Come* by Sam Cooke

It's been a long time, but I know change is going to come.

Yes, change is going to come.

So, I look at my situation

as a vacation because all this is just God's plan.

So that's why I just take small steps

until I can take the big steps.

Best believe my journey is not over.

People label me as the bad guy

when all I did was follow the head

of the ones who raised me

but I'm the bad guy.

But as life goes on, I realize I have to live for me and

no one else.

Forget about making someone else happy,

I have to make myself happy.

So I say to that this -

I know six years has been a long time

but best believe change is going to come.

Music

By SC

Music is the joyful sound of life

A thrill of a happy being.

It's the natural song of the free...

Nature, animal or men.

It's the sound of an instrument or

The combination of both

Music is for the soul as oxygen is for the lungs

Only when it's flowing lyrics and its grateful rhymes

Are smoothly in tune creating a symphony

That makes one laugh or cry

Able and capable to revive;

To lift hearts and minds

Music is... pleasing only when her melody creates

The harmony, for she was created by life!

She's pure, sweet like the voice of an angel

Limpid and transparent like the sound of a flowing torrent -

She's unburdened, clear and fair as a starry night -

The climax of sounds that swiftly lingers in the soul

Lifting one up, higher still, to that place

Where both once were experiencing again and again

That togetherness, intimacy, the glories

Thus fulfilling the harmony of being in time and space.

One song to its maker.

Untitled

By BF

Song: *A Change is Gonna Come* by Sam Cooke

400 years of

Slavery and

Yet we shall over

Come why? Because...

We are strong

We are worthy

We are loving

We are brilliant

And

We are black

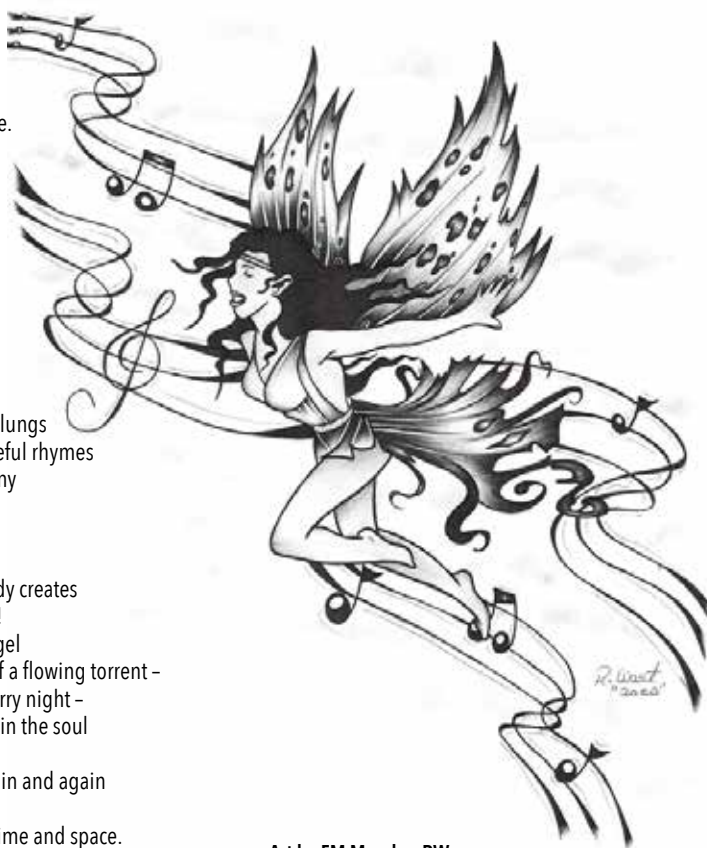
Slavery last for 400 years plus. When will

We learn to love not only ourself but

Each other. We come too far to be push back.

We could win the war if we can only

Win one another. We can do it. With love 4 all.



Art by FM Member RW

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Never Gonna Go A Day Without You

By VC

Song: A Song for Mama by Boyz II Men

Lyric: Never gonna go a day without you

I love you "SO" much
God's honest truth
I'm saddened daily
Knowing I disappointed you
Best mom you could be
Did your part
Rest was up to me
Now your every word
Resonates within me
Your presence was my courage
Your embrace my comfort
Your kisses my reassurance
Of just how much
I meant to you
And who I could be
I cry
I let you down
In tears now
Hurts you're not around
Taken away in front of me
So much I didn't say
Your "I love you"s echo
Gets me thru each day
Doing my best
To be who only you
Knew I could be
Certain
You're watching over me
My every move
Your presence
Deeply felt
Keeping me cool
Life's been rough
Just as it was
For you
One of these days
We'll
Be living
Our
Best life
Never Gonna Go A Day Without You!

Make a Musical Instrument

By MOH

My instrument is called Oud
When the musician play with its strings
My heart moves with it
Like the waves of the ocean
It brings joy and sorrow to the heart
Like a rain falling on a thirsty land
Can't have enough of it
And brings it back to life
Like a rose opened
Beauty when the eyes see it
Fills the soul with joy when smelled its perfume

My Jam

By Sincere Echoes aka SH

Song: Love by Musiq Soulchild

Love / there's so many things / I want to tell you / but,
I'm afraid I don't know how / cause there's a possibility
/ that you'll look at me differently / Love...

I haven't been the man you made me to be. Ran wild
with the will you gave me and did some shameful
things.

Choices, left behind some painful stains and I thought
I walked away blameless shackled to changes; that left
me staggering in my walk

Love, I know it's all my fault and my regrets sit in
the pit of my chest. Surrounded by these shadows
of hopelessness and loneliness holds me closer than
anyone I've ever known.

Love, forgive me! For all those broken homes; the
innocence shattered like broken bones. The emptiness
swallows me whole, so shallow I profited off misery.

Love, help me from these wasted days, clear my slate
and renew my faith.

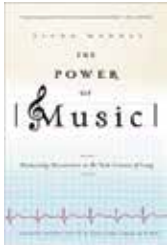
Give new breath to this dust, as you reshape this lump
of clay.

Love, I'm trusting you with everything.

REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

Hello,

There's no difference between us a million miles. In honor of this month's *Connect* theme, I had to greet you guys in my Backyard version of *Hello* by Adele, and whoever has not heard that song yet, please surrender your DC card because that thing cranks LOL! What more can I say about this month's theme, cause music is everything! I don't think there is a human that exists who is not moved by music. Music really just defies words, in my opinion.



In the book *The Power of Music*, it states that "Scientists have found that music stimulates more parts of the brain than any other human function." After reading that, I think that my statement that music is everything is certainly validated! That's not it by far though; the benefits of music are enormous! Researchers say that music has healing abilities. They've found that listening to relaxing music of a patient's choice reduced pain and increased functional mobility significantly. Researchers believe that music eases pain because listening to it triggers opioids, the body's natural pain-relievers. So now we know why, after experiencing a break up or a fight with a significant other, we gravitate towards those slow jams LOL!

Although music isn't something we can touch we can still feel it; it has lots of spiritual elements to it. It's as if music is its own language of emotion, representing different feelings based on our current situations. Sometimes it even seems like a particular song was written literally just for us and whatever our issue is at the time, whether we are happy or sad. I could go on and on about it, but I will simply call music a gift from God to mankind.

One more thing: as an example I need only say, "*Sardines hey and porkin beans hey ahaa!*" Now how effective was that? Again, if that did not move you, please revoke your DC card (just kidding, although I can't imagine that not putting y'all instantly at a Junkyard function).

Now for some resources! I am so proud of the Department of Employment Services and how they have stepped up to the plate during COVID-19. They have been lockstep with the residents here in DC, offering job readiness and job opportunities consistently. Below are some very helpful programs and services that you can take advantage of. These are open to every resident of the District of Columbia:

Simple Technology Solutions is providing a one-year IT apprenticeship program that will prepare seven students for a career in Cloud Technology. STS will offer training for one cohort. Upon successful completion of the apprenticeship program, students will begin employment with STS or be placed in employment with one of STS's partner IT employers.



WDC Solar is providing a 6-month pre-apprenticeship training program that will prepare 12 students for a career in solar installation. WDC will offer training for two cohorts. Students who successfully complete the pre-apprenticeship training will transition to available apprenticeship programs or employment.



If you are interested in any of these opportunities, of course, you can reach out to your Free Minds Family, as well as contact the Department of Employment services directly at (202) 724-7000 or visit them on the web at <https://does.dc.gov/service/apprenticeship-dc>

Until we *Connect* again,

Ms. Keela

THE WRITE WAY: MUSIC AND ME

The column where writers share writing tips and prompts to inspire your creativity

By James, FM Member

Hey hey Free Minds fam, James here! It's been a while since I've been involved in a *Connect*, but I had to double back one time. Some may be familiar with me and some may not be. For those who aren't: I'm a Free Minds member, returning citizen, and the 2018 Congressman John Lewis Peace Fellow for Free Minds. Among a few other titles I hold, I'm also an aspiring music artist. It all started at the beginning of a 92-month sentence.

"Sleeping at the top nightmares at the bottom / everybody want to be fly until you swat 'em / But who am I to talk, I ain't pooping roses / we in the same picture but we all have different poses." When I heard Lil Wayne rap those words on his album *Tha Carter 4*, that verse had me thinking to myself, "I can do that! I can put words together in a witty way." And so, I put my pen to the pad. I'd always had a thing for music and I also had the ability to catch on to wordplay as it was being rapped, so I figured it wouldn't be hard to be the one writing the lyrics.

That was in 2012. For about a year, no one knew I was writing lyrics except one of my good men. I was afraid of people not approving of my lyrics and feeling like they were the butt of my jokes. My first time actually rapping in front of a crowd was in 2013, when I was transferred from a Maryland state prison to FCI Allenwood. We used to have rap cyphers there, and I decided to come out of my shell and indulge in one.

I'll never forget: it was in the workout room of the gym. I had the DC homies behind me, and when it was my turn, I could tell people doubted me. I was the youngest person there, I was new to the compound – and I'm from DC, where we're not really known for rapping. I was about 10 seconds in when people started reacting to my lyrics. Guys clapped and nodded their heads, laughed at the witty bars, and some tapped the person beside them as if to say, "Did you hear him?"

Needless to say, by the end of my freestyles, I was given praise for my ability to rap. In Allenwood, I was known for being Lil Jay from DC, the one who beats on his chest and raps. At any given time, a person would approach

me and request a quick freestyle, or even ask my opinion on something they wrote. Many people told me that if I didn't try to make money off of my talents, I'd be a fool. So that's what I'm doing!

In March 2016, I returned to DC with my mind set on being a rap star! It's now 2020 and I'm still at it. Despite some trials and tribulations, hold-ups, and becoming a father in 2018, I still managed to release two albums under my rap handle, JHefna: *Barry Bonds Edition* and *Notice Me*.



It's not easy to get where I want to be, but since I truly enjoy making music it's a little less stressful. Music to me is a stress-reliever, a form of expression, a mood-enhancer, and a part of my life that I cherish. If anyone reading this is an aspiring artist, just know that you have to be dedicated and make every decision count. I'm a little discouraged presently, because I have a single out right now called "Oh Ahh" that people of all ages adore, but Covid-19 is holding up my progress. But I know that in due time, I'll be able to live up to my full potential. Until then, I'll keep working on perfecting my craft. For now I gotta go; the studio is calling my name...

– James, JHefna, Lil Jay

WRITING EXERCISE

There's a subgenre within rap called punchline rapping, where the payoff of the lyric is basically a witty simile or allusion that most people wouldn't have thought of. For example, Kanye West: "Mayonnaise-colored Benz, I push Miracle Whips."

This gives you a genuinely good descriptor for the color of the car, uses the name of a company that makes mayonnaise to land a joke, and lands another joke with "whips," since a "whip" is slang for a car. Try out your own punchline rap!

CONVERSATION WITH SABREA

Dear Music,

I sit in my room having one of those days when I don't feel bad, but I don't feel particularly good. I choose to write this letter to you now, because it is these types of days that I need you the most. My name is Sabrea. I am 22 years old, and you have been a part of my life for all 22 years. I feel like everyone says that music is their life, but music has saved my life many times.

I was born in DC to the sounds of Go-Go and neo soul. My life has not been particularly easy or stable, due to me growing up in the foster care system. The reason I was able to never give up is because of you. I have had some very dark moments in my life, but I persevered because I always had music – from Justin Bieber to Beyoncé, from Whitney Houston to Mariah Carey. When I am in these dark moments I eat, sleep, and breathe you, because it's in these types of moments that I gain the most clarity from you. No matter what I'm going through, I can always find a song that I can connect with in that moment.

When I learned that I'd been given the talent of writing music, it lifted a big weight from my shoulders. I had finally found a way to express my feelings and share them with people around me. It also helped me realize how much I wanted to use music to help people – to let people know that they are not alone, and they never will be.

I honestly believe that music is my destiny. It's helped me gain more confidence, survive, and become who I am.

I listen for the electric guitar when I'm listening to Prince. I listen for perfect vocals when I listen to Beyoncé. With each song, a different emotion and a different message is being conveyed. Today, I am listening to "We Shall Not Be Moved"; it's a song about coming together and fighting for what's right. It was written by The Staples Sisters (top right) during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s (bottom right). I listen to it now and am almost comforted by the lyrics, because in this moment we have all come together to protect and fight for Black lives. But another part of me is saddened by the fact that this song is as relevant today in 2020 as it was in 1960.

But that's what music is: an imitation of life that lives on timelessly. I love you, music, more than anything in the world. Thank you, music, for always being there for me. Thank you, music, for saving my life. Thank you, music, for being a needed breath of fresh air. I hope to create you and share your message.

Love,
Sabrea



SPOTLIGHT ON PUBLISHED AUTHOR

Many of our Free Minds members have published books and we'd like to celebrate their accomplishments! If you have published a book, please send us the title and a short description that we can print in an upcoming issue of the Connect. All books must be available in paperback on Amazon.com. Free Minds will not list books that include explicit sexual material, gratuitous violence, or discrimination against any group of people based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, or disability.

Missives to My Son from Prison by Kevin Burno

Missives to My Son from Prison offers the reader an emotional story of one father seeking to connect with his son, despite the isolating nature of mass incarceration. This short memoir is made up of ten letters Kevin Burno wrote to his son. Burno puts these letters in context, showing what events, thoughts, and personal struggles led to each message.





MUSIC AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: MUSIC AS AN INSTRUMENT OF SOCIAL CHANGE

By Sloane, FM Friend

Music is a universal language, one which gives a voice to the voiceless. This great unifier not only allows millions to find an outlet for expression, but is essential to effective resistance against oppression and injustice. Throughout history, social movements have drawn on the power of song as an agent of coalescence and a weapon against corruption and prejudice as they seek to dismantle government institutions that seem to have every advantage. By drawing on these historical precedents of activism through music in the face of racial injustice, we're able to harness the power of song today.

In the quest for change, danger is a constant presence. Whether it comes in the form of state-sponsored violence or individual antagonizers who fear progress, the push for social justice is oftentimes accompanied by a high level of personal risk. Music helps protesters overcome the uncertainty they may feel as they head out to fight for change, to express their grief for those members of the cause they've lost, and to fortify their minds against the hatred of others. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once proclaimed, "The freedom songs... keep alive a faith, a radiant hope in the future, particularly in our most trying hours," emphasizing the power of music to maintain the momentum of a movement, even when the cause seems all but lost " (Shelton, Robert, "Songs a Weapon in Rights Battle, *The New York Times*).

As people unite in the pursuit of racial justice, organizing mass protests in the face of tear gas and police violence, songs of change are blasted over speakers. Tracks such as Public Enemy's "Fight the Power," Gil Scott's "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," and Childish Gambino's "This is America" have become anthems of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.

As activists summon a sense of communal strength from songs of resistance, they are also able to express profound emotions – simmering after centuries of oppression – that go

beyond words. For the masses of protesters who did not hold any sort of leadership role in the Civil Rights Movement – these unnamed faces in the papers, risking their lives – music was their opportunity to speak out and to express their deepest sentiments.

A young Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) field secretary referred to music as an essential tool of communication, as many members of the movement “could not have communicated with us without music... through songs they expressed years of suppressed hope, suffering, even joy and love” (Shelton). Music crosses all boundaries of race, class, and belief, uniting those involved through the commonality of the human condition. It sets each of us free.

Singing in mass groups can be an effective form of resistance against those in power. In situations of injustice, the odds are stacked in favor of the oppressor, but tyrants will never be able to restrict the power of music. One civil rights activist recounts having witnessed a policeman physically shaking during a police raid of a center for nonviolent activist training; he was overcome by the intensity of music as masses of students sang “We Shall Overcome.” The activist recalls, “These people had all the guns, the billy clubs, the power, we thought. And he was asking me, with a shake, if I would not sing so loud” (“Music in the Civil Rights Movement,” Library of Congress). This communal action is what gave Freedom Songs their power.

When resistance songs become a part of mainstream culture, millions of people are immersed in the sentiments of social justice movements. Artists such as Bob Dylan and Peter, Paul, and Mary wrote songs that became hallmarks of the Civil Rights Movement – songs that received radio play and resonated with young Americans across the country. The Freedom Singers, a music group formed by SNCC, performed at Carnegie Hall; famous musicians toured with Dr. King.

Today, Lil Baby’s new single “The Bigger Picture” tops U.S. charts at #3, receiving millions of listens. Broadcasting a powerful message in support of the BLM movement, Lil Baby has taken action through music and used his voice as a call to action. By making use of his position as a popular artist, he has been able to bring about a change in the national conversation.

As artists spread the message of social justice movements and recount their own personal experiences with injustice, listeners are educated through their creativity and musicianship. For example, rapper Meek Mill has chronicled his experiences with racial injustice from a young age, recounting the corruption and racial bias he faced in the criminal justice system. Now, he uses his success to give back through the Reform Alliance, a nonprofit backed by Mill that works to create lasting change in the U.S. probation and parole systems, as well as freeing those wrongly convicted. Through music, the push for equality becomes a concern even for those who have never been directly impacted by the issues at hand, who have never witnessed or understood the systemic oppression of African Americans.

Today, we have the opportunity to learn from our past, as the U.S. wrestles with its system of policing and is forced to confront institutional racism. By harnessing the power of music, social justice movements have a chance to surmount impossible odds and to unite millions against agents of oppression. We must look to the examples set by history, remembering the capacity of song to be an instrument of change as we seek justice. It’s time for each of us to raise our voices.



MEDITATION: THE CALMING SOUND OF OCEAN WAVES

by Kelli

[A note about guided meditation: This will work best if you and your cellie can take turns. One reads while the other meditates. Then switch. If this isn't possible, try reading through the meditation once or twice yourself. Then close your eyes and focus on what you remember: the main ideas and the sensations.]

We know that you all are experiencing a lockdown on top of a lockdown – being incarcerated during the COVID pandemic – while out here we are only experiencing “lockdown-lite.” As all of us do our best to stay inside though, the one place that my mind keeps going is to the beach. With all the heaviness of the news, the ocean just keeps calling to me. In particular, I want to hear the sound of the waves. I started wondering why I felt this way so much, and did a little research. It turns out there is real science to back up the calming effect that the ocean has on our minds. Studies show that the sound and sight of the ocean is easy for the brain to process, creating a “soft focus,” just like when you focus on your breath in yoga or in a mindfulness practice.

Because your brain switches gears, it can enter into a different state of awareness. Being in this relaxed, meditative state is linked to lower stress levels, improved mental clarity, relief from mild anxiety, and improved mood. So get ready: we're going to head to the beach.

Sit down and get comfortable. Begin to relax your body. Begin with one small area of your body that feels tense. Notice this area of tension as you take a deep breath in... and as you exhale, feel the muscles in that part of your body becoming more relaxed. Breathe in relaxation... and breathe out stress. Continue throughout your body, treating each part with the power of your breath... Picture a beautiful turquoise, blue color... As you continue breathing, you see that blue, and that feeling of relaxation growing... and spreading to other parts of your body... See it growing... spreading...

Now, begin to create a picture in your mind. Imagine that you are at the beach, in the early morning. The ocean is very calm. Most of the water looks very smooth, but you can see small ripples where gentle, peaceful waves roll in toward the shore.

Take a few moments to imagine this scene.

Imagine all the details of this place. The air is cool, comfortable, and pleasant. The temperature is perfect... a calm and mild morning. You feel a slight, gentle breeze on your skin. You smell the clean air, the saltwater and sand. It is so refreshing...

As you look out into the water, you can see waves some distance from the shore. White peaks rise in a line out in the water, growing and swelling, before crashing onto the shore.

You hear the sound of the waves gently breaking upon the shore... Allow yourself to internalize the rhythm... the lull as the wave builds and grows, and the whoosh as it breaks against the sand... again... and again... and again...

It is early morning, and you are the only one here. It feels like you are a part of this place... a calm, safe, good place. The day's light grows brighter as the sun rises into the sky. Seagulls fly over you... You hear their calls, as some dive into the water looking for fish. Other birds fast-walk across the sand, leaving three-pronged footprints in their wake...

The waves are calming... and peaceful... The waves are like your breath, flowing in... and out... in... out... continue to observe the sound of the waves, flowing with the rhythm of your breath.

As you relax, you can enjoy this morning and all of its promise. You feel no worry, no anxiety, no stress. Only the sun on your face, and a sense of total calm...

The breeze... the warm early sunlight... the gentle waves... all of these create peace inside of you. Like this place, you too are calm, peaceful, and beautiful. Stay here at the beach, continuing to breathe along with the waves... When you are ready you can let the image fade, knowing that you can return to this place in your mind whenever you want.



DC PHOTOS By Julia

Since the pandemic started, I've spent a lot of time just walking around Northwest DC near the National Zoo. In some ways, I feel like my physical world has greatly shrunk during this period. But in other ways it's expanded, as I get to know and appreciate the sights around me in ways I hadn't before. That's how I got the idea for this rather different approach to the DC Photos section. As the spaces we inhabit have become smaller, I thought it would be nice to share a window into each of those spaces. So I asked the staff to share photos from the places where they've been spending time in this era of physical distancing during COVID. I hope you all enjoy this.



Julia: I appreciated this panda statue that I found in my neighborhood, appropriately modified with a facemask for the current time.



Melody: We went to Great Falls park in Virginia to get some exercise and outdoor time.



Allen: I have been spending a lot of time in my backyard doing various things (taking care of the yard, reading, playing with the dog and lots of grilling).

continued on page 33

Have a request for the next issue's DC Photos?
Write us at 1816 12th St NW, Washington, DC 20009 and let us know what you'd like to see!

MEMBERS CONNECT: MUSIC

Life's Music
By SM

To me music is like inhaling a breath of fresh air. From the sound of chirping birds to the calming quietness – the tone of the music of life is humbling to the mind. The beat from the stereo, the chattering of voices, the fly buzzing by my ear is the music to my day. We all appreciate hip hop, R&B, country, pop, or whatever we may choose but sometimes we forget the music of life. The meow of your cat as it rubs its fur against your leg. The ferocious bark as your dog chases the mailman. The honking horn from the road-rager. The sound of rain pelting against the windowpane as you look out with a steaming cup of coffee. The harmonic tunes of the ice cream truck as the kids chase it down the street. In our waking moments is the first track of the disc of life. Music starts with our heartbeat which creates the essence of music. What is music without a heartbeat???

An Essay
By VC

Once upon a time I was so innocent, and life appeared innocent too. I was a perfect fit. The sun appeared brighter, nights seemed more peaceful, weather felt less catastrophic, music sounded more innocent/less violent, air smelled more fresh, words appeared more meaningful and heartfelt, water tasted more pure, sports seemed more competitive, and last but not least, people appeared more community-minded and caring.

Then some different sounds intruded, my views no longer looked so bright, and my innocence diminished; I began to realize what was going on at home. People became complex, and the soundtrack to my life changed. I no longer felt like I fit in, no longer was a perfect fit. I found myself trying to comprehend and adjust to the music – to the new soundtrack of life – that overshadowed my innocence,

restraining me in "The Cave" with so many others. "How could they see anything but the shadows, if they were never allowed to move their heads?"

As I aged the lyrics on the soundtrack of my life progressively got more violent, more hostile, and so much more influential, burying my innocence until others felt I was a perfect fit for this new tune. I realize now that my heart was never in it. Those lyrics aren't influencing me anymore; that's why I'm so uncomfortable with where I am today. I was trying to stay in tune with someone else's lyrics, and look where that got me! There's an innocent life that still exists for you, but you have to break the restraints and step outside "The Cave" to see it. You'll be amazed at how bright the sun is, how caring the people are, and how bright the sun is.

Music Essay
by MS

Music is the other half of my soul. Sometimes I feel like Tom Hanks in the movie Castaway and music is my Wilson. It helped keep me safe, grounded. It gave me solace when I was in pain, heart broken, shipped off to another foster or group home. Helped me celebrate my successes, like getting that date for homecoming, senior prom, or a party thrown by the Q-Dogs at said group home, to let you know that it is okay that you are there; have some fun.

Music helps you mark the time. Example: where were you when the song "Computer Love" hit your ears (for you younger Free Minders, you might have heard it in Menace to Society), or "Broken Wings," "Take On Me," "Walk This Way," "Pour Some Sugar on Me," "We Built this City," "Keep on Walking," "Tell Me What Time It Is," "If I Ruled the World"? These are just a few.

All I'm saying is that music is my Wilson, my companion that has helped keep me grounded, so I can weather good

and bad times in my life. It's worked its way into my body. I feel it pull at me as hidden melodies within the lines of my poetry. It pulls me out of my sleep to make beats, for no better reason than to get it out of my system and let it live on a memory card in order to digest it later. Sometimes it shines light in my darkest places. I immerse myself in the sentiments that cause me to write a poem or song.

Music is the other half of my soul, the heartbeat of the Universe that is coded into our D.N.A. Let it find you, and you it.

Music is my salvation,
My chance to emulate God
In melodies & words of my creation,
My soul's connection
To reality
That I have in common with
Other children of Dust, inhabitants of the Earth,
Music is...

Name _____ Date _____

BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES

with Neely

The votes are in and we are so excited to hear your thoughts on the new BAM pick, *Kindred* by Octavia Butler! Written in 1979, this book follows the story of a young African American woman, Dana, as she finds herself unexpectedly time traveling back and forth between her 1976 California home and the pre-Civil War Maryland plantation where her ancestors lived. A commentary on race, gender, and power, this book is sure to leave you with some food for thought.

1. Do you think Dana changes over the course of the novel? If so, how and why?
2. Why do you think Octavia Butler decided to make Kevin white? How do you think this impacted his relationship with Dana and what they experienced together in the novel?
3. The word **kindred** refers to one's family and relations. What are some of the ways family relations are explored in this book? Do you think the title of the book is **ironic** (something that is contrary to what we might expect), **literal** (something that meets our exact expectation), or both?

4. On p. 252, Dana talks about how she sometimes writes when she can't sort out her feelings and then throws away the writing because it was for her, and no one else. Do you ever write just for yourself, with the expectation that no one will read what you write? If so, how does that help you process your thoughts?

5. Octavia Butler once said in reference to Dana losing her arm, "I couldn't really let Dana come all the way back... antebellum slavery didn't really leave people quite whole." Do you think if Dana had not lost her arm, she would have ever been able to fully recover? Why or why not?

Name _____ Date _____

NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: BLACK LIVES MATTER (VOLUME 9, ISSUE 4)

Hey, family! The theme of next month's *Connect* is Black Lives Matter. Obviously this is an emotionally-charged prompt that might bring up a lot of ideas, so here are some prompts to help you start sorting out your thoughts.

(1)

What are three emotions you have experienced in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement? Using direct address, pick one of the three emotions and write a poem addressed to that emotion, writing about how that emotion has impacted your life.

For example, "Dear Frustration..."

(2)

The way a society teaches its children about a particular event says a lot about the value it places on that event. Imagine you are a teacher hired to teach a class of high schoolers about the Black Lives Matter movement. What would your lesson plan look like, and what are some valuable lessons you believe they should learn?

(3)

Write a fictional story in which you are able to go back in time to before the Black Lives Matter movement began. How would you prevent more violence from being inflicted upon African Americans like George Floyd? What would you encourage people to do differently, and how would you go about encouraging them?

(4)

Create your own movement, separate from the #BlackLivesMatter movement, about a cause that is important to you. Name the movement #_____ and write a poem about why this specific movement matters to you.

For example, "#AbolishThe13th"

(5)

Try writing a full poetic profile of yourself: imagine you are looking at yourself from the outside in. Starting from your hair and ending with your feet, write about why each part makes you uniquely YOU. Keep it positive!

For example, "My hands turn emotions into ink on paper," "My eyes see the best in every person," "My feet carry me down my path in life."

MEMBERS *CONNECT*: MUSIC

My First Love By JL

I became a rapper at age seven; I guess I learned to rap from the radio. One day, my Uncle Rob began making a beat on his schoolbook by knocking on it with his knuckles. The rhythm took over and out of nowhere I started saying words to the beat, pulling subjects from my imagination and making the words rhyme. This is called freestyling.

I rapped about two cartoon characters getting into a fight; about a girl I had a crush on at school; a dodgeball game I played in; I kept going. Rob may not have been paying attention to me at first, because I'd been rapping for some time before he stopped knocking on the book, rose from his bed and said, "Ahh," as if I had done something wrong. He yelled for my other uncle, Allan, to come to the bedroom. Once Allan appeared, Rob told him, "Listen to this," and began beating on his book again. So I rapped again, this time about a pair of tennis shoes beneath Rob's bed. When we finished Rob grabbed a pencil and a piece of paper, and he and Allan wrote me a rap song. That day I found my first love ever: making rap music.

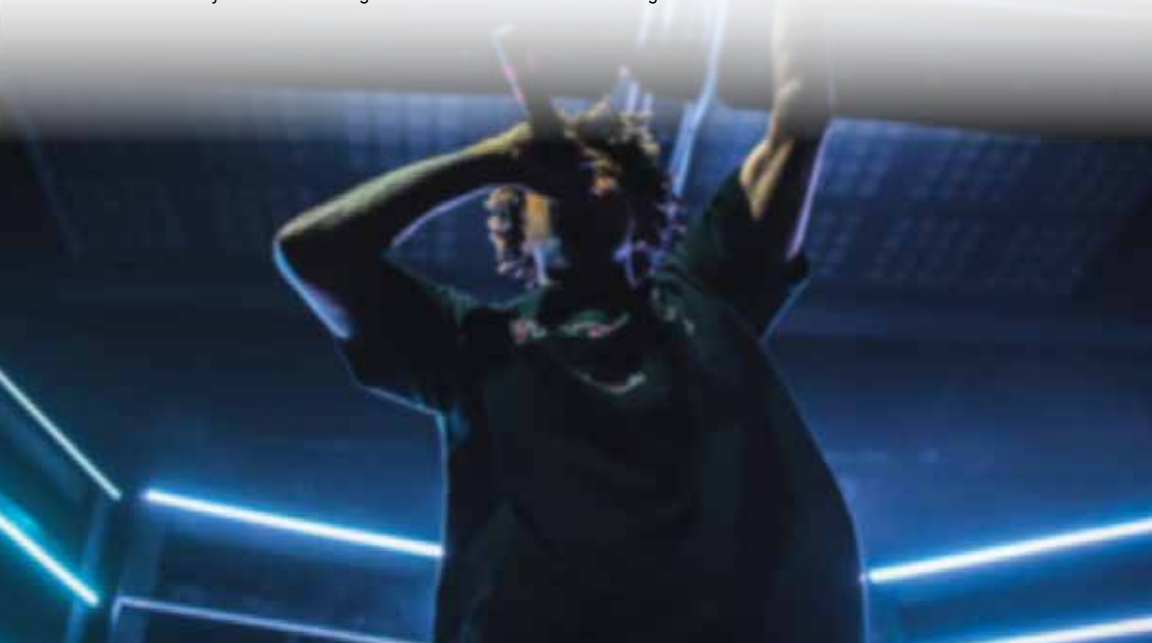
During my late elementary through middle school years, I'd rap alone or with my younger brother, Jay, whenever we were stuck in the house for punishment, bad weather, or once night had fallen. I'd also rap with neighborhood friends whenever or wherever the mood struck (which was often). By eighth grade, I was battle rapping at the middle school against other young rappers from different neighborhoods. Sometimes we'd draw such a large crowd that teachers made us all disperse, because the hallway would be blocked by students wanting to hear which of us

had the best rap battling skills. At the end of the school year, some of us rapped at the eighth grade dance, the students loving our performance and me loving the feeling of being onstage.

I began writing raps after I moved to Kentucky to live with my father. What inspired me to write was boredom; the other children my age lived miles away from my father's house. So I'd write rap lyrics at night and recite them to friends at the high school or on the team bus the next day. I averaged almost a rap song a day.

During college I became a member of a rap group called Triple Threat, which consisted of myself, a brother who went by the name Sheik, and a young white DJ and producer called DS. We were pretty good, entering and winning some of the talent shows on campus and in surrounding towns. We recorded our own rap songs on DS's music equipment, and it wasn't long before females started singing the hooks to those songs whenever they'd see one of us walking on campus. People we didn't even know would give us accolades for a performance we'd done or a song we'd recorded.

Yes, rap was my first love. It banished my lack of self-confidence whenever I'd write, record, or perform; sort of like how being with certain family members liberated me from my fears as a small child. Rap gave me what it gave everyone raised in hip hop culture; it gave me an identity, and provided a forum for me to express my views and feelings undaunted and unmolested.



MEMBERS *CONNECT*: MUSIC

Music
By YA

The universal language that awakens all kinds of feelings in the human heart. Understandable by all kinds of people and races. Speakable by all of those who can develop the art of singing and the ability of those who can rap on top of any rhythm created by others. Different styles, genres, for different tastes.

Music for me is indispensable. I cannot be without music; I tell people it is my drug. I believe fervently that music should be used by those that have the platform to share a positive message, of union and ending what we see happening in our communities. I don't think it's right that singers promote and incite violence and drugs.



Even though I know that many or most rappers come from those neighborhoods and talk about what they have seen and lived, I don't think it's necessary to talk about things that no one would want to see their children do. Many of the kids that listen to the lyrics of their favorite artists want to be like them (or talk like them) because there are many that talk about someone they never were, things they have never done and could never do.

So for those that write or create music, think about the influence you might have over others. Music is what truly makes me feel free. It takes me back to those places where I listened to the "oldies," or it makes me imagine I'm in a different world. Songs that touch the heart, that are funny, ultimately there are songs for every taste.

Música
Por YA

La lengua universal que despierta a todo tipo de sentimiento en el corazón humano. Entendido por todos tipos de gentes y razas. Hablado por todos lo que pueden desarrollar el arte del canto y la habilidad de esos que pueden rapear con cualquier ritmo creado por otros. Estilos o géneros diferentes para gustos diferentes.

La música para mi es indispensable, no puedo estar sin música. Le digo a la gente que esa es mi droga. Creo fervientemente que la música debe ser utilizado por aquellos que tienen la plataforma para llevar un mensaje positivo, de union y dejar ver lo que pasa en nuestras comunidades. No me parece correcto que los cantantes promuevan e inciten a la violencia y las drogas.

Aunque sé que muchos o quizás la mayoría de los raperos vienen de los barrios y hablan de lo que han visto y vivido, pero no creo que sea necesario hablar de cosas que nadie quisiera ver a sus hijos hacer. Muchos de los niños que escuchan las letras o líricas de sus artistas favoritos quieren ser como ellos (o como hablan) porque hay muchos que hablan lo que nunca fueron, lo que nunca han hecho y lo que nunca serán capaces de hacer. So para los que escriben o crean música piensen en la influencia que pueden tener sobre otros. No me malinterpretan, la música es lo que verdaderamente me hace sentir libre, me lleva de regreso a esos lugares donde escuchaba los "oldies" o las que hacen que imagines que estás en otras dimensiones. Las que tocan la corazón, las chistosas. En fin hay música para todos los gustos.

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REENTRY PROFILE: ONTAE

by Kelli

"It's not about me, it's about us!"

*One soul pastor told me reach out like Lecrae/
And you know that's the goal, coming straight from that south side
But that spirit on me, man changed my life/
I'm tired of all this bs, they killing kids/
Need the gun range/
Tell me where you learn to shoot at/
Put the gun down boy, you ain't there
- from Man Time*

Free Minds member Ontae is a gospel rapper. He's been home for just over a year and turns 30 this year. Kelli spoke to him about his calling as a musician.

KELLI: How far back can you trace your love for music?

ONTAE: All the way back to when I was about 4 years old. My favorite song was *Sardines and Pork n' Beans*, by Junk Yard Band [laughs]. As far back as I can remember, I've loved music. When I was a little boy, I was put into foster care, but then my biological family adopted me back when I was 6. I used to get picked on a lot, so I was always getting into fights. I tried to run away, and to punish me, they kept me in my room all the time. I used to just sit in there and listen to these old CD's. Jodeci, Jay-Z, all of them! They used to make me write "I will not" do this – whatever it was – front and back, 30, 60, 100 pages. So you know what? I used that to develop a passion for writing. I'm like, "Let me try to learn something!" Usher's first album? I wrote it all down, word for word, and learned the whole album!

KELLI: When did you know music was what you wanted to do with your life?

ONTAE: I knew for sure when Lil Wayne came out that I wanted to be a musician. Everyone wanted to be like Lil Wayne. When I was 18, I found God, and I found a better way. I grew wiser in my words, in how I speak. I learned how to speak life through my music. I looked at what Lil Wayne and Master P were doing, but I found a way to do it better without hurting anybody or leading anybody in the wrong direction.

KELLI: What is your music like?

ONTAE: Everybody can listen to my music. Even you. Even your kids. It's encouraging and uplifting. I don't curse in my music. It's straight positive. It surprises people when I step on that stage because they think I'm about to say something about guns and drugs and all that. But I don't just write anything. I don't fabricate. I write about what I've experienced: my pain and my suffering, and that of my people. I lost my mother last year. One night two months ago, I had a conversation with my brother Andre. The next morning, I found him dead. This was just two months after my other brother was beaten to death. It's traumatizing, but at the end of the day, I told him I was going to hold it down for him. I'm like, "I got you." I write about my grandmother's grandmother, coming up in the country and picking cotton during slavery. Every day I'm waking up, and I'm motivated to do this because I really believe that God is using me.



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In 2017, Chance the Rapper announced that he would have ASL interpreters for his entire tour.



MUSIC AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

By Janet

Hello, Free Minds fam! This article is about a topic that, before I began my research, I knew nothing about: music in the Deaf Community. My first step in doing my homework was to ask myself a few questions and give some answers. And oh man, I discovered I'd made a boatload of assumptions.

Incorrect Assumption #1: Music isn't likely to play a big role in the lives of people who are deaf or have a loss of hearing.

This was an ignorant belief on my part. Music exists in all human cultures, and is associated with particular activities across the globe. A person singing a lullaby, a love song, or playing music related to death or war will use similar sounds no matter what part of the world they come from, even when comparing cultures that have no contact with each other or didn't exist in the same time period!

In addition to music being used to build culture, we each develop our identity as individuals by choosing the music we listen to (and don't listen to). We may express our identity as a member of a larger group by listening to a particular kind of music, and music is at the center of many religious practices (as Pramila's article in this issue shows!). Music also has the power to increase our exposure to and understanding of ideas, people, and cultures outside of the ones we live in and know.

So, what role does music play in the life of a person who is completely deaf or hard of hearing (DHH)? If she can't hear the music, is she excluded from significant parts of life? You may never have given much thought to this question, unless someone in your life is personally affected. You may imagine that a person who can't hear wouldn't be interested in music or get much pleasure from going to a concert or watching a YouTube music video. But you'd be wrong!

Incorrect Assumption #2: All humans have five senses; we use our sense of hearing to listen to music.

Jaheem, a deaf actor, dancer, and music interpreter, says, "It doesn't matter that you can't hear it. You can feel it; we all can vibe together."

Sound is vibration; music is just a series of organized vibrations. When a hearing person listens to music, vibrations

travel through the inner ear to be converted into nerve signal impulses, which travel along the auditory nerve to the brain and are perceived as sound.

But what does a baby who is deaf experience as her mother sings to her? The baby doesn't hear the music as sound; she feels the vibrations. The vibrations are converted into nerve signal impulses just like they would be for anyone else, but in a deaf baby's brain they activate her sense of touch, instead of her sense of hearing. For the deaf, music is processed as something that they feel, as opposed to something they hear.

In both hearing and non-hearing listeners, music activates four parts of the brain to create our memories of music, as well as our emotional and physical responses. In non-hearing listeners, parts of the brain are active in response to music that are not activated in hearing listeners, and vice versa. You could say that non-hearing people don't experience music any less than hearing people do; they just experience it differently, using different senses.

Incorrect Assumption #3: The Americans with Disabilities Act (1991) ensured that all concerts are accessible for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Community.

Ideally, DHH concertgoers are seated at the front of the venue, so that they can have a visual experience: at the front, they can read lips or see an interpreter, and are able to put their hands on the huge speakers by the stage. This provides more direct exposure to the vibrations. Another strategy is to take off your shoes and feel the beat and the rhythm of the vibrations through the floor. Some concertgoers hold balloons in the air, which focuses the vibrations. At concerts that are set up for the DHH community, the speakers may even be turned over to face the floor.

There are new wearable technologies created to produce a "surround body experience," in which the vibrations are felt all over the person's body. This type of immersive music experience is now marketed to both the hearing and DHH communities. The man in the photo is wearing a Subpac, which creates a physical audio experience.



This man is wearing a Subpac, a device that creates a physical audio experience for people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

The demand for better

access to concerts for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Community is growing but many barriers still exist, ranging from difficulties buying tickets, having a safe area set up close to the stage speakers, and getting promoters to provide sign language interpreters. You've probably seen sign language interpreters at the halftime show of the Super Bowl, but not in too many music videos or at concerts. The music and entertainment industry has historically failed to create greater access to music for the Deaf Community primarily because of discrimination, stereotyping, and ignorance... until two individuals created some big changes.

In 2013, an American Sign Language interpreter named Amber Galloway Gallego made a video of herself signing rapper Kendrick Lamar's performance of A\$AP Rocky's "F--in Problem." After the video went viral, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* staged an ASL Rap Battle with Amber and three other ASL interpreters. Each interpreter revealed to a nationwide audience that signing makes visible "the emotion of music, not just words."

In 2017, Chance the Rapper announced that he would have ASL interpreters for his entire tour. This forced all of his tour venues, including some very well-known festivals, to create accommodations. He hired his own team of black interpreters – DEAFinitely Dope, co-founded by Matt Maxey, aka "The Deaf Kanye West" – which challenged other performers to make their music more accessible as well.

"To have an artist say, 'I want interpreters on my show, at every show, and I want deaf people to come in and join us for free' has been just so amazing," says Kelly Kurdi, Matt Maxey's co-founder at DEAFinitely Dope. "To feel like someone cares about them, for one, and for two, to hire a company that is owned by a deaf person."

2020 is looking like a breakout year for deaf musicians making music in their own right as well. Rapper Sean Forbes recently became the first deaf musician ever to break into the Billboard Top 200; his album "Little Victories" hit number one on both the iTunes and Amazon hip-hop charts, and number one on Amazon for nationwide album sales. "The only reason that I'm number one on the charts right now is because of the deaf community," he said. "Without the deaf community that would not be possible. I am extremely thankful and grateful for that."

So, there you have it: music really is the universal language, whether you can "hear" it or not!

IN THE NEWS By John, FM Friend

DEEP DIVE: WHAT'S REAL AND WHAT ISN'T

In every issue, we will bring you an in-depth analysis of a particular topic.

Before the internet, news was delivered to people via three main paths: newspapers and magazines, radio, and television. Owning and operating any of those pathways is very hard: it costs a lot of money to run a TV station, for example, or to pay trained journalists to cover the news. This world of news was far from perfect, but it was more centralized and tightly controlled.

The internet – and more specifically, the world of social media – has changed the world of news dramatically. There are so many more ways to get your news these days. But all the old ways still exist, and in some ways are helped by the fact that it's easy to fire up a laptop and stream news broadcasts, read the newspaper online, or download a "podcast" or radio show to listen to whenever you feel like it.

Citizen journalists and activists have been able to lift up important stories and events, because it doesn't cost much more than the price of a smartphone to record something and send it to millions of people. For a very recent and painful example: 17-year-old Darnella Frazier, who recorded the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis on her cell phone and then posted it to Facebook, provided the most consequential news story of the year.

But the freedom of the internet creates challenges as well, because there is very little control over who gets to offer things up as "news." While many people use that freedom for good, ill-intentioned people have learned to manipulate the level playing field of the internet for nefarious reasons. These folks use distorted

facts, lies, and sometimes straight-up manufactured "fake news" to influence public opinion. Very often, these actors will use targeted data analysis to make sure that the people most likely to be angered by this particular piece of information are exactly the ones who are most likely to see it in their news feeds.

There are many factors that aggravate the phenomenon of completely fake or falsified news. Here are a few:

Bots: These are computer-generated online profiles designed to seem like real people on the internet. They are not all necessarily bad; for example, you might encounter a bot designed to help you with a customer service request, which can prevent having to wait on hold for hours in order to talk to a person. But on social media, bots are often set up to repeat and spread false information. When thousands of bots do this, it can allow things that are not even true to "go viral" and reach the Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram accounts of countless real people – many of whom won't realize the information they're receiving is false.

Deep Fakes and Photo Editing: Technology now allows people to edit photography, audio, and video so well and so seamlessly that things that never happened can appear to be real. It's as if someone made a cartoon, a creation they could make talk and move in whatever way they want – but so realistic you thought it was an actual person. For example, someone producing fake news could use "deep fake" technology to create audio and even video of President Donald Trump appearing to say, "The government is cancelling Christmas!" Did he really say that? Of course not, but incredibly convincing "footage" of him saying it goes out into the world, where bots can help make that same fake clip go viral.

Social Media: Facebook and Twitter are not really news sites at their core. They are platforms for people, businesses, and other groups to communicate with each other about everything from baby pictures to their opinion on the outcome of the Super Bowl. But social media bots, and targeted ads, also use it as a different kind of platform: an ideal place to push questionable or even false news on millions of social media users.



IN THE NEWS (CONTINUED)

By John, FM Friend

There is no perfect way to be sure about the quality of the news you are getting, and in complete fairness, no news is perfect. Facts on the ground sometimes change. Journalists sometimes get things wrong and make honest mistakes. But some news sources are more reputable than others, and developing a keen eye for the telltale signs of false information – developing your “media literacy,” so to speak – can go a long way.

If you see something on social media, don’t assume it is true just because it has a link to something that touts itself as a news website. Remember that while the internet has helped produce a lot of good online sources for information, it has also made it so that any person with a little bit of money can start a news website or even a blog and fill it with misinformation.

One way to help verify if something is true: see if you can find other news sources that have reported the same thing. This is not foolproof, especially about highly partisan issues. But seeing a similar story in several media outlets – especially if one of them is a reputable newspaper, like the *New York Times* or *Washington Post* – means other people have also deemed the story credible enough to write about.

NATIONAL NEWS

Since our last Free Minds News, there have been two major stories in America: our continued struggle with coronavirus, and a reckoning with racism and police brutality in the wake of George Floyd’s killing by Minneapolis police officers.

The coronavirus likely began to spread in America in February, and by March, several states were hotspots, experiencing spikes in hospitalizations and fatalities. In May, cases and deaths finally started to trend downward in many places, and as Memorial Day rolled around, many states were making plans to slowly reopen businesses, churches, and even restaurants and gyms.

This reopening did not go as hoped for. Cases began to spike in new hotspots, like Arizona, Texas, and Florida. California, one of the first states heavily impacted



California beaches reopened, closed, and reopened again amid rising coronavirus cases.



Due to the virus a lot of schools are opting to go online for the Fall semester, while some are reopening for in-person teaching with extreme social distancing and sanitization in place.

by the virus, has seen a second rise in cases, despite an early and wide-ranging lockdown. The continued spread of the virus throughout several parts of the country has jeopardized the ability to open up schools to returning students in the fall, and has prompted some states to reverse course, closing or limiting some businesses after having just reopened them weeks earlier.

There is some room for optimism. The process of finding a vaccine to prevent people from getting the virus has been accelerated to a pace never seen before. Several drugs have shown early promise in producing the necessary antibodies that help the body fight off coronavirus. Some leading national health experts believe it’s possible we could see a vaccine as soon as early next year.

Protests continue around the country following the

IN THE NEWS (CONTINUED) *By John, FM Friend*

death of George Floyd, calling attention to racism in America, particularly in regard to the nation's legacy of brutal and racialized law enforcement. One idea that has gained traction is "defunding" the police: the idea of reducing how much we ask police to do, cutting back the police budget accordingly, and then investing that money in community solutions to help support families and prevent harm and other negative social outcomes.

SPORTS

After a prolonged absence, sports in America have returned with cautious approaches; the eerie sight of games being played without any fans present is becoming commonplace. The first US team sport to return to play was women's soccer, with the National Women's Soccer League playing a tournament called the Challenge Cup, in what has come to be called a "bubble," where all of the games are played in controlled locations with strict rules on who can come in and interact with players and personnel. Anyone entering the bubble must quarantine on the way in to ensure they do not have coronavirus. The Houston Dash completed a major upset to win the Challenge Cup – their first trophy of any kind. Perhaps most importantly though, no players or staff tested positive during the tournament.

Major League Baseball has agreed on a 60-game season that is currently underway, though some early coronavirus outbreaks on particular teams have left doubts as to whether or not this experiment can truly work for any meaningful length of time.

The National Basketball Association and National Hockey League are trying to wrap up their 2019 seasons in a "bubble."

The hockey playoffs are underway now, and the NBA is finishing up some regular season games before beginning the playoffs in a few weeks. The NBA, for its part, has pretty much moved into the Disney World Resort near Orlando, Florida as its chosen "bubble." All games for the rest of the season will be played there, with no fans present.

The WNBA season is also underway in a Florida "bubble." Some players, including Mystics star Elena Delle Donne, have opted out of playing for health concerns.



Demonstrators kneel in a moment of silence outside the Long Beach Police Department in California during a protest over the death of George Floyd.



The Houston Dash take the trophy in the NWSL's return to sports.



Major League Baseball returned without fans, but with fan cutouts instead.

MEMBERS CONNECT: MUSIC

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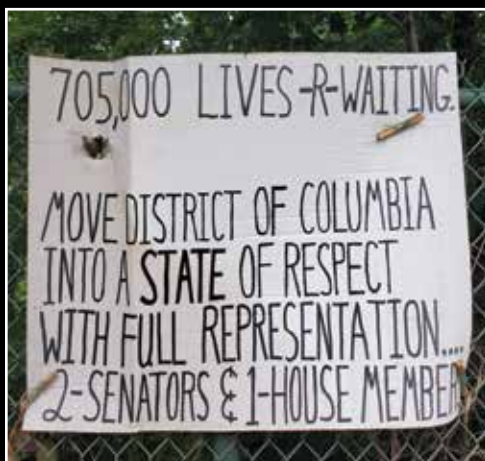
Music and 
by "Sun" aka DS

Music and I are in a relationship, she's my main Thang but I cheat with Books. I love reading too! Music has always played a Major role in my life. A positive inspiration to me behind the walls. Anita Baker whispering Sweet Love in my ear. Beanie Sigel telling me the truth "what ya life like" mine is real. What Lupe Fiasco say? "Freedom ain't free around my way." But like 2pac "still I rise." We outlaws, immortal words of warriors, living like I was ready to die physically. "Biggie," the only life after Death is Mentally, I'm Notorious, I was innocent. Beyond a "Reasonable Doubt" Jay-Z. The Judge still played me, played we. All I can do is "fight the Power" Chuck D, "Cell Therapy" who's dat peeking in my window?" Goodie Mob, Music still influencing my thoughts, words and melodies soothing me; searching for peace, searching for purpose, this system a circus. But I'm "illmatic," Nasir Jones Blackman keep planets in orbit "ODB" aka Russell Jones, Duckin the agents, Duckin the clones. Feelin like Patti Labelle "on my own." Momma they killed god on TV again. If we were made in his image then call us by our names. "On and on," Erykah Badu, "what they do what they do." We forgot our Roots, still glorifying Black on Black murder, "Trap Trap" Rick Ross, if he the Boss then ye are gods, children of the most high God Psalms 82; 6 Ask Mary Mary / Stay woke "RedBone," you 2 old to be Childish Gambinos / plus Gotti was racist / they killin black folks and launching "space ships and rockets," Eightball and Mjg / My UZI weigh a ton "criminal minded," you've been blinded KRS I.

I ain't done yet I ain't done yet, RZA Resurrect the Righteous "Black Mind." Meet me at the "crossroads" to life. "Bone Thugs" / Young Thugs still seekin / you bring the Drugs "weeknd" "i'm go "bring the pain" Method Man "In the End," Linkin Park, it's just me and Music.

DC PHOTOS *By Julia*

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Tara: These signs in Columbia Heights are homemade by members of the community, all using recycled materials. I go here often just to see what new messages are there. They make me feel uplifted.



Michael: I got a chance to escape city life and spend some time on Lake Michigan.

Have a request for the next issue's DC Photos?
Write us at 1816 12th St NW, Washington, DC 20009 and let us know what you'd like to see!



DID YOU KNOW?

The Importance of Music in Religions

By Pramila

Music is an important part of life. Everyone has their own unique taste in music, and like snowflakes, no two playlists are the same. Music is a form of art that everyone can listen to no matter race, religion, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status or culture. Music can bring about strong emotions. How a person responds to a piece of music depends on their life experiences and how they were brought up. In this piece, I want to discuss the importance of music in different religions around the world.

Islam

Muslims believe that the Divine created melody and the harmony of life. They think that Allah created the universe and everything within it for Allah's own happiness. There was nothing in the beginning until Allah willed it to existence. "They see the whole universe as a symphonic orchestra full of sound, rhythm, tones, beats, and form synchronized for perfect melodious harmony in unison, precisely and perfectly composed, directed and conducted by its Creator, Allah, with many sounds, movements, rhythms and beats in specific arrangements in the various forms of nature. It is the most magnificent of any musical composition and is composed as a gift of Allah's great love for mankind" (*The Importance of Music in Different Religions* by Ruth Parrot). See the image on the top right of the connecting page for a depiction.

Controversy in Islam Over Music

There is a debate in Islam about whether or not to allow music in their religion. Some Muslims don't condemn music itself but condemn the behaviors that are shown as a result of the music being listened to. The behaviors that arise when people listen to certain kinds of music is unacceptable to some within Islam. Some Muslims believe that only vocal music is acceptable, but that instrumental music is forbidden, while others believe that instrumental music is permissible as long as it is being used only in specific situations. "Tradition often cited by the first group of scholars to justify condemnation of all musical instruments and music, according to some scholars, are considered either as spurious, or phrased in such a way solely because of their associations with drinking, dancing, and sensuality" (*"The Importance of Music in Different Religions"* by Ruth Parrot). While many agree that "all forms of music that contain pagan, sensual themes or subliminal messages are clearly forbidden, the latter group of scholars considers all forms of music free of such themes and messages as permissible" (*The Importance of Music in Different Religions* by Ruth Parrot).

Whirling Dervishes

In Sufism, a sect of Islam, there is a practice common in Turkey and other parts of the Muslim world called whirling dervishes. I found out about this practice through my mother, who told me a story that was related to my ancestors and was passed down to her from her mother. She told me that my great-great-great-grandfather owned a factory in the Czech Republic that produced fezes. Fezes are hats made of felt worn primarily by people in Western Asia and North Africa, where Islam is very

common. Whirling dervishes wear long white clothes and spin in a unique manner, as if they were in a trance-like state. The dervish practice has been around for more than 700 years as part of Sufism and the Melevi Order, a Sufi order originating from Konya, Turkey.

When the Ottoman Empire fell after World War I, the dervish practice was forbidden, and Sufi organizations were made illegal. Most of them closed but two major ones remain today, one in Konya and the other in Istanbul, Turkey. In 1953, the Turkish government allowed the Whirling Prayer Ceremony and since then, this performance has attracted thousands of tourists from around the world. The whirling dervishes originally did this ceremony on a weekly basis as a remembrance of God. Many people, including Melevi musicians, women, and non-resident dervishes chanted the Melevi prayer silently in their hearts. "While whirling, the dervish's arms are open with his right hand directed to the sky, representing his readiness to receive God's beneficence. The dervish's left hand is turning toward the earth, representing his willingness to convey God's spiritual gift to those witnessing the Sema" (*A Brief History Of The Whirling Dervish* by Feride Yalav-Heckerroth).

Judaism

Jewish music varies around the world; sometimes it's religious and other times it's secular. The music in the Temple in Jerusalem was used as the base for early forms of music in synagogues. There was an orchestra and it had twelve instruments as well as a choir of twelve male singers. In the Bible, it is mentioned that David played the lyre, the Psalms, the Song of Solomon, and Joshua's trumpet. Eventually, the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, and music was forbidden. Later on, some of the regulations were lifted and liturgical poems called *piyyutim* were established. The Cantor or leader of the synagogue sang the poems to melodies that were either selected by the writer or himself.

In the modern era, music remains an important part of Jewish worship. In a traditional synagogue, there is singing and chanting. "Different melodies are used for the prayers and Torah readings on weekdays, Shabbat, and holidays – these form a calendar in song; someone who knows the melodies well can tell exactly what time of year it is by hearing the melodies of the prayers and the songs of specific festivals" (*The Importance of Music in Different Religions* by Ruth Parrot). Some Jewish communities will play instruments while more traditional communities will only use their voices during holidays, as it is prohibited to play instruments during those times.

Culture is intertwined with religion, so Jewish people make use of songs from their culture. The "Sephardic Synagogue are of Moroccan and Iraqi origin, the Ashkenazi Synagogue uses German or Russian melodies. Some congregations prefer traditional music whilst some use popular, new melodies. The service is led by a Cantor, who



Saraswati, a Hindu deity

has undergone formal training in 'Chazznut,' the art of the Cantor, and will decorate the melody of the prayers with embellishments and ornaments in order to bring out the meaning of the words. Other religious music includes melodies utilized to heighten devotional fervor, especially melodies of *Hassidim*, followers of a traditional branch of Judaism which emphasizes simplicity and sincerity rather than intellectual achievement, and religious poetry" (*The Importance of Music in Different Religions* by Ruth Parrot).

Hinduism

Hindus have always enthusiastically welcomed music and performance as part of their religion. One reason as to why music is so important to Hindus is because music is depicted in Hindu mythology. Many deities in the Hindu religion are portrayed as musicians, and their musical performance has been shown to be associated with extraordinary events. In general, musicians from South Asia have devoted their time to Hindu deities and saints through displays of song and dance, even when the situation is not considered religious. "Furthermore, instrumental music that is devoid of religious song texts is commonly associated with concepts of 'sacred sound' (nāda-brahman), providing further evidence of relationships between Hinduism and music" (*Hinduism and Music* by Eben Graves).

What do you think of this topic? Did you learn anything new? How does music play into your faith? Does music hold significant value in your life? If so, in what ways?

REAL WORLD OF WORK: TO LOVE AND BE LOVED

By David, FM Member, as told to Kelli

David was just 17 years old when he was sentenced to 35 years-to-life in prison. On December 31, 2018, through the District's Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act (IRAA), David was released after 25 years behind bars. One recent Friday morning, Kelli caught up with him to talk about his new career working with young people. David was preparing to take a group of 15 DC youths on a weekend retreat to Ocean City, as part of his job as a Credible Messenger with the DC Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS).

KELLI: When you were little, what did you want to be when you grew up?

DAVID: I went through so much struggle as a kid; I was abandoned and passed from household to household. So I really never had an opportunity to focus on what I wanted to be. When you're in a desperate state of mind, you never even realize the importance of planning a career. You just want to survive. So I can't really put my finger on nothing that stands out that I wanted to be, you know? Really, I just wanted to be loved.

KELLI: As you grew older behind bars, how did your goals for your career develop?

DAVID: When I was growing up, I had all these counselors, psychiatrists and case managers, all trying to tell me what to do. But I couldn't mirror them. I couldn't look at them and see myself. They could never say *they* went hungry. Or *their* mother and father were on drugs. When I was in prison, I started teaching victim impact classes. I saw the effect that I could have on people because of what I'd been through, and that made me want to reach out to youth. I knew I could give them a mirror, so they could say, "Yeah, you been through what I been through. You understand." It helps people to open up. I realized I wanted to affect society. I wanted to work with youth that went through things that I went through. I wanted to give someone a mirror.

KELLI: How did you get your job?

DAVID: When I first came home I worked cleaning streets, doing construction jobs, whatever I could get. Then, about three months after I got home, a friend helped me get an interview and I got my first job working with DYRS through the East of the River Family Collaborative as a Credible Messenger. It's exactly the opportunity that I was dreaming about.

KELLI: Tell me about your job.

DAVID: I'm a transformative mentor for kids under the supervision of DYRS. I have a caseload of seven youth that I work with every day. My job is to help them transition into adulthood, introduce them to positive programs and job opportunities, and talk them through crises that are inevitable in their lives. The majority of my work is talking one-on-one with these kids, to give them somebody they can trust. We take the kids on field trips and getaways, like this beach trip, because getting away from home and the neighborhood is so important. We also promote community-building. So for example, during the COVID outbreak, I'm working at two schools to provide breakfast and lunches to kids who rely on those meals. We also do cookouts and put together back-to-school book bags for the kids in the neighborhood.

KELLI: What is the most challenging part of the job?

DAVID: Well, there are a lot of substance abuse and mental health issues among this population. That can make it harder to reach people. You've got to be patient. It's a big challenge just to get them reeled in and get them to trust you in the first place. Once you do, you only have so much time with them, before they go back to their environment. To be honest, it can just swallow them up! You may be making progress with a kid for two weeks straight. But then you miss one day, and you lose them. Kids this



age don't understand consequences and they are easily influenced. I make sure to give the kids my personal cell number and tell them to call me any time, day or night. I will come back out to talk to them any time they need me.

KELLI: It sounds like an enormous responsibility!

DAVID: Absolutely. You got these youth copying you, so you have to be a role model. I'll tell you a story. We were taking a group of mentees to visit the African American History Museum. One of my coworkers, also a mentor, was driving and a random dude hit her car. She got out and they got into an altercation. When you work with these kids for a while, they get extremely attached to you, right? The dude was up in her face, cursing her out. These kids jumped out of the car and started surrounding him. They were ready to defend her. All these little boy mentees are now trying to show off! I realized right away this could turn into a big crisis. Kids this age just react. We had to focus and get these kids under control because if they hurt someone, or if they get hurt, it would have been our fault. We put them in harm's way. The police came. It was crazy. I had to have a talk with my coworker and remind her that she needed to focus on her responsibility. We are mentors, and so we have to think of the kids first and always exercise self-control.

KELLI: What do you love most about your job?

DAVID: I know for a fact that I can't reach them all, but when you walk a youth all the way through and see that progress and change in them? I take them to get their ID, their Social Security card, their birth certificate, then take them to job readiness classes. We'll go to an actual job interview together and they get so excited about answering the questions right, and then they get the job! That's empowering, man! I see the change in them, and see that light come on. I get to see where they came from and then where I took them. That's beautiful!

Some nights when these kids are with their buddies, they will call me and say, "Man, can you come get me? I really don't want to do this and they trying to get me to do it." Their first instinct is to call me. Can you imagine how good that makes me feel? I see how I'm changing the course of their lives.

KELLI: Well, it's obvious that you are good at what you do. What do you think makes you so good?

DAVID: My experience is what makes me good at this job. Growing up in this environment, and going through all the things I went through, it allows me to understand them. I know how confused they feel because I've been there. It's as simple as that.

KELLI: Since this is our Music issue, close us out here by sharing your favorite song with us!

DAVID: Music is so powerful! It can take you right back to a specific place or time, right? My mother was on drugs when I was growing up and she used to disappear on me a lot. When she would be around though, she always sang this one song to me: "Lady," by The Whispers. It brings back good memories. I love that song.

Free Minds is beyond proud of all that David does in the DC community, sharing the love with our youth. David, you are loved by all of us!

JG'S WORDS OF WISDOM

THE SOUNDTRACK OF MY LIFE

Music is the language of the universe. Music connects people all over the world, boosting their vibrations. Even if the lyrics don't catch you and speak to you, the beat will – capturing the emotions or sentiment of whatever situation you may be facing, or whatever struggle you may be enduring, and letting you know that you're not alone.

Scarface, Tupac, and Kevin Gates have gotten me through many rough days in prison. Future and Moneybagg Yo have pushed me to finish some workouts that I would much rather have tapped out on. Nas and Talib Kweli have helped motivate me to eagerly pursue education. If there was a soundtrack to my life it would include, but not be limited to, all of these artists. Of course, there would be an R&B section of its own; it would probably be a double disc album with Anita Baker, Aaliyah, and Ella Mai expressing the love of my ideal woman.

Music speaks to the social conditions of any given time. It's conscious, even when it isn't trying to be. Thank God for music, for it has been and will continue to be a constant companion of mine.

What's on the soundtrack of your life?



BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

The Free Minds long-distance book club

Kindred

(what I learned from the book about the past, present, and what can be in the future)

with PJ



See page 21 for discussion questions on *Kindred* by Octavia Butler. Here is an essay inspired by the book, from FM member PJ.



At a time like this – when I'm going through a period in my life that's enlightening, challenging, and all-consuming – it was with unique interest that I read *Kindred*.

As I start to evaluate and compare what was written in the book to today's "new and improved" innovations of bondage, exploitation, racism, and superiority complexes, I realize how un-ironic it is that

an African American male in 21st-century America can relate to a work of historical fiction written by an African American female, about her unique perspective on the African American Experience in the 19th and 20th centuries. In both time periods, there's a consistent effort to maintain one race's mindset of superiority over another race of people, and to maintain the inferiority of the latter group of people (by way of so-called justice, incarceration, and discrimination in employment and housing.)

That being said, what's most important is the African Americans understanding of where we were, where we are, and what is needed (and isn't needed) for us to move forward, combat racism and unify, to become more prosperous, now and in the future.

In this book *Kindred*, in the chapter "The Fight" (part 5), the author wrote of the main character's return to the 19th century plantation: "The road was farther away than I had expected...It didn't look alien any longer, but that only made it more dangerous, made me more likely to relax and make a mistake." Coming from the 20th century, this character was in a wooded area, unfamiliar to her; she walked on, not sure she would recognize the person who in the 19th century was her enslaver – or her way back to him. Along the road, she saw a house similar to the enslaver's, but better; two "white" men (who paid her no mind), and three "black" women (who greeted her). She returned their greeting.

She continued on the road, thinking of other slaves she'd

known (she considered herself free, since she was coming from the 20th century). She'd come to separate herself from the 19th century slaves and how time had passed for herself and them. When she walked up on the house of the enslaver, out of the lonely woods, she saw a yellow light filling the downstairs windows of the house. She was startled to catch herself saying wearily, "Home at last."

In part 13 of that chapter, she'd escaped the plantation only to be captured and returned to the plantation, where she was whipped. Afterward, she wondered if she should try to escape again, comparing herself to other women such as Harriet Tubman (who did escape her plantation and return, after freedom, 19 times to free others). She wondered why she'd taken a beating again, and was frightened at the thought that sooner or later she would try again to escape. Her thoughts said to her, no matter how she tried to avoid them, "See how easily slaves are made?"

I – an African American man, having done 26 years in this country's penitentiaries, jails, and reformatories before being released into society for 8 days, only to be reincarcerated for no cause of my own – find myself asking a similar question: Reevaluating myself, reanalyzing this country, how I live, and my next move. To be sure, coming to terms with what it means to be ignorant and lost, enslaved (both mentally and culturally, through insight and lack of a proper one), enlightened via self-education (outside of formal education), and finding a new awareness is an ongoing, painful, but strengthening and character-building, sustaining "walk through the woods." But it's important to not become complacent, blithe, myopic, selfish, impatient, partial, or indignant while on the journey.

One of the greatest challenges is accepting help. Like in centuries past, what can help you can transcend outer appearances – and likewise what can hurt you (it's important not to lose sight of the forest for all the trees). Study, so we can see home, and not what we wish was or think is home. Let's learn our lessons – and never forget.

REENTRY PROFILE: ONTAE

continued from page 27

KELLI: How are you going after your dream?

ONTAE: I was making music in prison. They called me Generation Change because it's about breaking the curse from here on out. Now I'm known as Righteous. I was 30 days from coming home when a guy came up to me and said, "Hey: you do music, don't you?" I asked him how he knew and he said, "It's in your eyes. You got the swag and everything." He told me about a guy on the radio named EZ Street, who has a Music Industry Academy that teaches people on probation and parole. I knew right away I wanted to do it. Signing up was the first thing I did when I got home. EZ Street has not only taught me and supported me, but I see him as a father figure and a role model. I'm still participating, learning the business and recording.

KELLI: What has been your biggest success so far?

TRAYON: Through the Academy last October, we opened up for the Back Yard Band. It was an honor to be on the stage with those guys! The Mayor and Councilman Trayon White even came out.

KELLI: What is the biggest challenge in pursuing music?

ONTAE: Investing in yourself. Nobody is going to hand anything to you in this business. You gotta grind. Sometimes you might put out songs that you think are hits, and you might not get hits. But you gotta keep going, keep writing, keep striving. And I have to have a regular job to pay the bills. I want to take care of my family, but that takes away from

creativity, writing, and time at the studio. But at the end of the day, this is what I want to do and this is my passion. I'm never gonna give up.

KELLI: What would you tell other musicians coming behind you?

ONTAE: If you're going through it, and music is your passion, trust and believe. Don't give up. Keep going, keep writing. If you're in prison, keep doing what you do. God has a plan for you. You don't have to be a writer. You may be a beat maker, a videographer, a photographer, a producer, whatever it is. DC has lots of resources, not just for musicians but for everyone. Utilize them. There is a way. Keep your head up and don't give up!

KELLI: What does music mean to you?

ONTAE: Music's been a mentor and a counselor to me. It's helped me understand others and be understood. When I feel some type of way, I need that pen and pad. I'm able to express myself through music, even when it feels like I can't trust nobody. I can speak to others through music. It makes me hopeful, because I have something to stand on and something to live for.

This is my calling – using music to pick my brothers up from the hood, because God called me out of the hood to do something great. I'm going back into the hood to raise others up; I'm not about self-gain. I'm all about building others up. I wanna reach out to touch millions of lives. It's not about me, it's about us.





AROUND THE WORLD: A VISIT TO OSLO, NORWAY

By Michael

Sunrise – at 9 am! – in Oslo, Norway

Back in November, before non-essential air travel was basically shut down by the COVID-19 pandemic, I had the opportunity to spend Thanksgiving in Norway with a friend of mine from school.

When I was locked up, I used to think that having a felony record meant I could never travel outside the US ever again. But – just like many guys think they can't ever vote after they get out – that's not true! So when my friend Tina said I could come stay at her house in Oslo for a week, I jumped at the chance.

Norway is an oil-rich country in northern Europe. In fact, it's so far north that part of it is inside the Arctic Circle. There's even a Norwegian island where it's actually illegal to leave town without a way to defend yourself against polar bears, because they're so common in the area.

Being so close to the North Pole means that sunrise is very late and sunset is very early. When I was locked up, I used to tell myself that I would wake up to watch the sun rise every day after I got out. Well, life didn't really work out like that. But being awake for sunrise is a lot easier when the sun doesn't come up until 9:00 am, which is exactly what happened while I was in Norway! But there was a downside, too: sunset was at 3:30 in the afternoon.

With all of that darkness, Norwegians have learned that sometimes in life you have to make your own light. One of the ways they do that is by being absolutely obsessed with Christmas lights and Christmas decorations. During one day of my trip, I visited the town of Drobak. It's home to the official Christmas House, built in 1877, where it's Christmas 365 days a year. Drobak is the only place in Norway where it's legal to have special signs on the streets warning drivers to watch out for Santa Claus!

On Thanksgiving, my friend Tina had a few of her friends over to join us for dinner. Like most Norwegians, all of these friends spoke perfect English. (All education is free in Norway for everyone, citizen or non-citizen, even college and graduate school.) I got talking to one of the guys sitting across from me and asked him what he does for work.

"I'm a correctional officer at the prison near here," he replied.

I'm sorry... you do what? Did I just fly more than 4,000 miles to end up breaking bread at Thanksgiving dinner with a CO? But it wasn't like I could get up and storm out of the house, so I got talking to the guy.

It turns out that the correctional system in Norway is very different from ours in the US – even when it comes to little things. For example, there is a law in Norway that every building built using public money must have public art on its grounds or its walls. And because prisons are built with public money, every prison in Norway has huge, impressive pieces of public art done by some of the leading artists in the country and from around the world.

The more I talked to this man, the more I learned that I'd been wrong to judge him so quickly. COs in Norway operate more like high school guidance counselors. They're assigned a small caseload of men, who they meet with regularly to talk about goals and figure out ways the CO can best support the guys he's working with, including connecting them to a wide variety of social services and programs. I could tell he took his job seriously, but



The Norwegian Parliament Building, built in 1814



The Oslo Opera House, complete with walkable roof

he also took the humanity of the men in the prison seriously and didn't define them by their mistakes. That man may not have been who I'd expected to see around the Thanksgiving table, but I have to be honest: I learned more sitting at that table than I did during the rest of my trip combined.



An example of public artwork on the wall of a Norwegian prison

The inside of Drobak's year-round Christmas House. You can see an example of the town's famous "Santa Crossing" sign on the right-hand side of the photo!

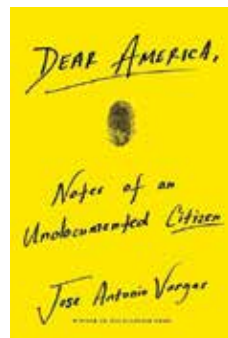
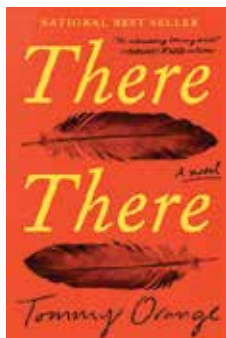
WHAT WE'RE READING

By Neely

#OwnVoices is a hashtag on social media used to highlight books that were written by authors who share the marginalized identity of the main character they are writing about. Free Minds is dedicated to reading these types of books and uplifting the voices of communities that are often silenced. Have you recently read a book like this or any book that left an impression on you, good or bad? We want to hear about it! Send us your thoughts (approximately 100 words) and we may feature your book in the next "What We're Reading."

- **Emily, FM Friend: *There There* by Tommy Orange**

I recently finished *There There* by Tommy Orange. It's told from the perspective of a group of Native Americans who all have different relationships and attitudes toward their cultures and families. The title, *There There*, actually comes from a quote from the famous novelist Gertrude Stein, who grew up in Oakland, California. As an adult she tried to return home and found that it was completely different. She said, "There is no there there." I loved this book because it dealt with the struggles of defining your identity and it definitely gave me a lot to think about!



- **Julia: *Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen* by Jose Antonio Vargas**

I just read *Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen* by Jose Antonio Vargas. This is a short, compelling memoir about the author's experience growing up in America as an undocumented immigrant. His family sent him to America from the Philippines when he was a child. He was raised by his grandparents here in the US, and hasn't seen his mother (who is still in the Philippines) in decades. Jose became a journalist and one of the most well-known undocumented activists, who continues to use his platform to speak out for immigrants' rights.



- **Imanee: *Creativity, Spirituality & Making a Buck* by David Nichtern**

Currently I am reading *Creativity, Spirituality & Making a Buck* by David Nichtern, an entrepreneur and Buddhist teacher. In his book, David discusses how to generate success in all aspects of life, and how spirituality and creativity can intersect to create a more emotionally and monetarily profitable life.

- **Kelli: *On the Come Up* by Angie Thomas**

On the Come Up is by Angie Thomas, the author of *The Hate U Give (THUG)*, and is every bit as good as her first book. 16-year-old Bri Jackson's dream is to follow in the footsteps of her father, who was a rising rap star before he was killed. Failure is not an option after Bri's mother loses her job and the family faces homelessness. When Bri's breakout song causes violent controversy in the community, she is unfairly defined by the racist assumptions of others. Using her voice to fight back, she tells the world who she truly is.

- **Neely: *A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Woman Confronts the Legacy of Apartheid* by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela**

Gobodo-Madikizela is a Black South African woman who interviewed Eugene de Kock, a white South African who was the commander of death squads during the apartheid (a time of severe oppression and violence towards Black South Africans). This series of interviews took place after apartheid ended and while de Kock was serving a life sentence for crimes against humanity. It is a powerful book exploring forgiveness and reconciliation between victims and perpetrators of violence and how a grieving country can heal and move forward together.

FAMILY TIES

continued from page 4

MICHAEL: Now that you're back on the outside, how did you and your sister come to be living together?

CRAIG: When I was coming home and needed a place to stay, she went ahead and moved into a new place so that I'd be able to have my own room. She said, "You can come and stay with me," because she didn't want me staying with anybody else. Plus, I just feel more comfortable staying with her.

MICHAEL: How does living together when you were young compare to living together now that you're both grown?

CRAIG: I think it's similar: she gives me space, I give her space. A lot of times I distance myself even from her, just by coming home and going straight to my room and shutting the door. I'm just used to being confined. I'm definitely not trying to be cold or anything, but I'm more at peace when I'm by myself, to be honest. When I was locked up, I'd see guys who couldn't take being alone, but I was always cool with it. I can keep my mind clear and say, "Okay, I'm in here. What am I going to do? I'm going to read, lay back and just think, workout. I'm not going to let nobody see me sweat or think they're breaking me." And that's kind of what it's like now, even on the outside – just out of habit.

MICHAEL: Are there still times when you and your sister

kick back and talk?

CRAIG: Yeah, definitely. Even more now than usual, because of the pandemic. She hasn't been working as much, and I haven't been working like that either. So, we're able to spend time. We talk a lot. We might bring up the past every once in a while – the good times, though. We're not about dwelling on the bad times, just the good. We talk about what's going on in my life and in her life.

MICHAEL: Is there anything else you want to speak on?

CRAIG: It's just good to be out here, trying to be a voice for people who can't speak for themselves – the people that are still inside – because when I was locked up, people were a voice for me. I remember the days when I didn't feel like people were fighting for me, and it didn't feel like I could do much from inside. So, it makes me feel good about myself when I'm able to be a voice for people in there, whatever the situation may be. And it's important to take the opportunity and let people on the outside know how it really is inside and what it's like coming home. Because right now, with everything that's going on in the world, everybody's struggling. But we can't let that stuff get us thinking negative or giving up hope. We just have to stay focused and keep a positive mindset.



FREE MINDS BOOK CLUB & WRITING WORKSHOP

1816 12th Street NW
Washington, DC 20009

NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: BLACK LIVES MATTER

Our Loyalty issue mentioned that next issue's theme would be Purpose, but we've decided to change that. Too much has happened lately, including the passing of Congressman John Lewis, a lion of the civil rights movement and social justice activism. Instead, our theme for the next issue is Black Lives Matter. (For those who wrote in on Purpose, don't worry: we'll run that theme after BLM!)

Activism has a long and proud tradition of using poetry to help bring about change. We've already been getting a lot of powerful submissions on this topic, so keep them coming! Tell us what Black Lives Matter and the legacy of John Lewis mean to you. How do you try to live the principles of the movement in your life? In what ways would you like to see others, including society as a whole, do the same? Don't be afraid to dream big and be aspirational: tell us about your vision for a world in which Black Lives Matter.

Until then, take care and **KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!**



Give us a call when you get out: (202) 758-0829