The Public Health Relevance of *Contagious Rhythm: Infectious Diseases of 20th Century Musicians*

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In *Contagious Rhythm: Infectious Diseases of 20th Century Musicians*,¹ Sartin argues that “Musical innovation is...often accompanied by diseases of neglect and overindulgence, particularly infectious illnesses, although risky behavior and associated infectious illnesses tend to decrease as the style matures.”¹ Sartin could have added that his narrative shows how the illnesses of musicians, from classical to rock-and-roll, reflect the changing patterns of infectious disease, from the “probable neurosyphilis” that killed Robert Schumann to the HIV/AIDS that killed Freddie Mercury. In a tangential way, the article also charts the changing attitudes toward sexuality over the years.

The article does not seek to suggest that all musicians are susceptible to contagious disease or die young. The contributions by Spencer,² Haaga,³ Herer⁴ and others suggest that this is a continuing debate. And after all, musicians do not live in isolation. In his study of urban South African music and musicians, Coplan⁵ argued that it is problematic to “isolate form or process from its total context.” Thus, while apparent that many successful musicians who entertained urban South African blacks in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s succumbed to alcohol and tuberculosis, statistics show that the prevalence rate for tuberculosis among urban black South Africans was also very high.⁶

Sartin’s suggestion that ravages to famous musicians from contagious diseases were more likely at the beginning of each wave of innovation, chimes in with the nature of popular (and some classical) music: an initial intense period of adulation by the public, followed by a slow descent into familiarity or, more usually, obscurity. By virtue of their function, creativity and public expectation, musicians may thus come to occupy, by adulation or acclamation, roles in society which give them certain exalted, but more often than not, transient privileges. In Europe this sometimes translated to musicians occupying various entertainment positions at the courts of kings and queens; in the USA, it conferred certain, if limited, advantages on black musicians; and in Africa, musicians have been known to criticize kings, presidents and dictators and get away with it by virtue of their popularity.

Successful musicians, as depicted in popular theater and imagination, live lives which ordinary people aspire to, and in living these “aspired-to” lives, musicians

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may take risks and play with the “fire of the gods.” As the many contributions on the subject show, one can never be sure what exactly makes people take risks.^{7,8} Some of the risk-taking has roots in socio-economic and personal causes; for example, the Sick Cell anemia that may have contributed to Miles Davis’ narcotic addiction,⁹ the mixture of post-independence corruption and social conditions that molded Fela Kuti, or the unique social conditions in 1980s Britain that produced punk musicians.

Perhaps as idolized individuals, musicians are exemplars and trendsetters. Yet trendsetters or not, classical or popular, they remain mortal, susceptible to microbes and degeneration.¹⁰ Indeed, some find that during their period of fame they are able to exercise their inclinations to be free spirits unconstrained by societal norms. However, these privileges were and are enjoyed by a relatively few musicians; the usual lot of the musician is the frustration of the under-appreciated and under-paid artist. Both the frustrations and privileges have contributed to musicians falling prey to, as Sartin puts it, “risky lifestyles”. It is probably equally true to say that the stresses and demands to be creative and “expand the mind” or relax the nerves provide additional incentives to seek risky release.

Sartin’s engaging narrative should not be read as a dry history text or as an exercise in decoding past and current musicians’ individual foibles and illnesses. There is public health and clinical relevance here, whether in the provision of information to aspiring musicians, the use of star musicians in public health campaigns, or the realization, via the suffering of our mortal idols, that infectious disease affects us all.

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