



## ***Just Live:***

### **The Trick Is, You Have A Choice**

**Savvas Fetfatsidis**

*UMass Boston*

You would never know there was an entrance to a club on this street. All you could see is a crowd of about two hundred people pushing their way towards the same direction as if trying to save themselves from some catastrophe about to happen. Where the heck were all these people trying to go? They were trying to get into one of the most exclusive clubs in town. The only way to get into this place was if you knew someone or if you had money to bribe the doormen. The club catered to the tastes of all people from around the globe. It would not be surprising on any given Saturday night to hear songs from Brazil, Italy, India, France or Lebanon. Their motto was, "We are all one!"

At around 12 p.m., a man in a beige suit, smoking a cigarette, squeezed his way through to the door. He looked really sharp. There was a beautiful Latin woman holding his left hand as he hugged the doorman with his right arm, as if they were friends forever. He walked through the hallway shaking hands with every employee he saw. His table was waiting for him upstairs next to the Disc Jockey's booth. After greeting everyone he knew, he sat down

with his woman awaiting the arrival of his friends, ordered two drinks and lit her cigarette. When the drinks arrived they both stood up and walked over to the edge of the balcony overlooking the huge dance floor swarming with people everywhere. As he kissed his girl, he felt like the luckiest man on the face of the earth.

Just a few years later, this same man at one o'clock in the morning on a Saturday night was sitting in the basement of his parent's house screaming to the God who created him, "Why the f--k am I alive? Tell me or I give up on you and the world!"

I am the man in this story.

In this essay I am going to explore the reasons that caused me to have a breakdown that memorable night after battling many months with what I labeled as "clinical depression." I will discuss how music not only helped me get over my "depression," but how it actually helped to make it worse. I will also connect my experiences to the ideas and theories of various important sociological figures throughout its history.

Let us begin with my life just a few years ago when everything seemed perfect. During that time my friends and I would religiously attend this club called M-80's every Saturday night. We went there so often that absolutely everyone knew us. To be even more precise, I knew everybody in there and introduced them to my friends. The reason I say this in such an arrogant way is because it made me feel very powerful being in the position to know the owners of the various huge clubs in Boston. I felt powerful being able to take care of everyone I knew trying to get inside, even if they were not twenty-one years old yet. Thomas Hobbes's theory that humans desire power certainly rang true during that time.

The Disc Jockey was a personal friend of mine. As stated earlier, the music he played at the club came from many different places throughout the globe. Greeks and Italians would sing along and dance to Lebanese and Turkish songs and vice versa.

The club was like a second home to all of us. **Durkheim** would say that we all held some type of a **collective consciousness**. Collective consciousness can be defined as the “totality of beliefs and sentiment common to the average members of society,” (Adams 93) which in turn creates social solidarity or harmony. Most of the patrons were 1<sup>st</sup> generation born Americans, like myself, struggling with the pursuit of money in a place where everyone is supposedly equal. In the club, we were living this American philosophy. The music united all of us under one roof and under one God!

This music transcended into my car and home. As I drove and listened to the tape from the previous Saturday, I would reminisce on some of the highlights of the night and look forward to next week. “Music is powerful at the level of social groups because it facilitates communication which goes beyond words, induces shared emotional reactions and supports the development of group identity” (DeNora, 51). It was this connection and interest with the world around me that I thrived on. Working in my family’s restaurant was not much of a burden back then because of my positive outlook and attitude.

I began to promote my own nights. Almost every night I would be at a different club, meeting more and more people, not to mention more and more women. I can honestly say that I was satisfied with the way my life was developing. I had money, friends, girls, and power... or so I thought!

When I turned twenty-one, something very life-changing happened to me. I had just broken-up with my longtime girlfriend, but I was still doing fine. On my birthday I threw a huge party on a boat. I partied all night with my friends and also managed to make some money as well. The owner of the boat asked me to take over Friday nights after seeing how many attended the night. I agreed foolishly without really giving any thought to what I was doing. The reason it was foolish was because for

the very first time I would have a bar minimum, which meant that the bar must make three thousand dollars or I would have to pay the difference. Usually, my only expenses would be the Disc Jockey, flyer design and distribution. The two subsequent Fridays were the most terrible nights I had ever organized. On the first night only two people showed up, and on the second night only ten. I could not believe that nobody showed up. To add insult to pain, I owed almost six thousand dollars to a big Russian club owner. I was able to gather five thousand from my personal bank account, and I borrowed one thousand dollars from my parents.

I never promoted another night after that day. I began to feel uneasy about going out and showing my face to people who heard about my unsuccessful nights. It seemed like everybody had heard about my failure and embarrassment. In this business, consistency and trust is a key factor to success. Whenever I would run into people and they asked me if I were still promoting, I would tell them that promoting only gave me a headache and that I wanted to enjoy myself at a club from now on instead of work at one. This type of rationalization is what sociologists call **self-justification** when experiencing **cognitive dissonance**. (Aronson 146) In other words, failing at promoting, which is not consistent with the idea that a man should be successful (cognitive dissonance), caused me to create a different reason for quitting other than giving up (self-justification).

I started working in the family restaurant full time, and as time went by I was going out less and less. M-80’s closed down due to too many liquor license infractions. Their motto changed from “We are all One,” to “We are all None.” Since those days I have yet to find a place where I felt such belonging and comfort except for this one place I will discuss momentarily. I was now between 22 and 23 years old, single and felt as if I was fifty. My daily routine

was work, sleep, work, sleep, etc. I needed something, but I did not know what. I felt like I was in a vicious routine, lacking any real purpose in my life.

In retrospect, after reading Marx, I was able to at least categorize what was happening to me. I was experiencing **alienation**, which Karl Marx defines as the disconnectedness of an individual from his work because it is externalized and outside of himself. "Labour is external to the worker" (Tucker 32), and it is therefore not his own. He calls this "Estranged Labor." He is referring at this time to the negative effects of the Industrial Revolution and Capitalism, which totally changed the way that people lived and worked. Although this "Revolution" was a great success in terms of the national economy, there was an increased awareness and resentment of the negative aspects of industrialization. Before the Industrial Revolution the whole household was involved in production of goods, but now families no longer worked together. Stricter work habits were instituted as wage labor was introduced. Workers were now on a time schedule and looked at as surplus value. This is exactly how I was feeling, but now I realize that my attitude had a lot to do with it.

Although it is nearly impossible to determine, without a doubt, that my work was the major cause of my condition, it was even more impossible to say that it had absolutely no effect on me. When I was promoting I was in control of my responsibilities. I was creating something that I felt was really special. I was creating relationships with successful people from different industries and so on. At the restaurant I was only working for my parents serving the same exact customers day after day. My job eventually became a routine. I was working 12-hour days doing the same exact thing, and repeating "Thank you, have a nice day" about 300 times a day. I felt lost.

Out of the blue, a friend that I hadn't

spoken to in a while invited me to an after hours club. This place opened at 6 a.m. on Sunday mornings until 11a.m. He gave me this pill known as Ecstasy, an amphetamine known to give a person the feeling of empathy and harmony within himself. I didn't know much about it at the time, but since my friend recommended it and everyone in this place was doing it, I decided to take one as well. All I can say is that I have never felt such an amazing feeling in my life. The techno music at the club felt like a genius inventor designed it specifically for me. I was one with the music and with everyone around me. Wherever I looked I saw people dancing, talking, touching, and kissing each other. There were no inhibitions. We were free in this place. We were able to let go of the rules and prejudices in our mind. I was convinced this was what life should be.

There were dealers in every corner of the club bluntly selling their merchandise, even in front of the bouncers and managers. This kind of relaxed atmosphere led me to believe that this drug could not be too bad for us. Which brings me to a very important question: If this place did not exist, would we have still taken the drugs? **Durkheim** might have said that we would probably not have taken the drugs if things were more **regulated**. In other words, if people started getting arrested in the club it would close down, so management would make sure not to let anyone deal or use inside the club. If there are no drugs, there are no drug users. I, on the other hand would disagree and say that I felt a need to escape my life. Whether I was going to use drugs, drink, smoke, fight someone, steal something or even kill myself, I would definitely have found a way to avoid living the way I was living.

**Freud** would probably say that I was living more in my **Superego** consciousness rather than balancing it with the Id. The Superego in humans controls the beliefs that are conditioned by society such as prayer,

saying thank you when someone opens a door for you, staying quiet in a movie theatre and not driving past the speed limit. The **Id** is the exact opposite. It describes our instinctual character. A person is happier when he or she is in the **Id** because of the freedom associated with that state. He believes we should live in both of these states in order to be balanced. If we spend too much time in one particular state we crave the other and run the risk of becoming pathological.

Society and family have certain expectations for individuals, which I like to call power. This power is an invisible collection of norms, ideas, philosophies and prejudices that an individual learns throughout his life that puts pressure on him or herself to conform with the generally agreed upon way of life. I was conforming so often to the world around me that I craved the childhood feeling of just letting go and being myself. My use of drugs was the product of that desire.

We continued going to this club every Sunday morning for a whole year, every single week. After only a couple of times one pill did not work for me any more. I gradually increased my dosage every weekend until I reached ten to eleven pills per night. We began experimenting with other drugs too. One of my friends blacked-out in the parking lot and nearly broke his head. Another friend went into CVS to buy cigarettes and when he came out he sat in a stranger's car and told him to get out because he thought it was his own car. Despite all these signs of trouble we continued doing what we were doing.

Then, on Halloween night, my cousin passed out in the middle of the entrance line. We were taking mushrooms, a hallucinogen, that night. I quickly grabbed him with a buddy of mine and brought him to the car. He told us to go to club without him and that he was okay, so we did. If the same thing happened today I would stay with him in the car to make sure that he re-

mained okay, but I am glad that I did not because something extraordinary happened to me inside the club that has forever changed me. I experienced the most powerful epiphany of my life up until that point.

I was sitting down inside the club just watching the crowd dance around. Everyone seemed hypnotized to the music and in their own world. They appeared extremely happy, but I began to feel that they really were not. I began picturing what type of life they had outside the club. I pictured how dysfunctional their families might be, and compared them to my life. I could not find a good reason why I was doing drugs. I came from the most loving family in the world. I was not like these people. I pictured how much my mother and father sacrificed for me. I pictured how much they loved me. Then I pictured them being in church praying for the family without a clue that their only son was out burning his brain somewhere. In the pit of my belly a feeling that I can only define as guilt and sadness began to rumble. I realized that I had taken my life for granted all this time. I am proud to say that I never did drugs again after that day. I have heard that most of those "friends" continue to obsessively party on the weekends. Their preferred party place is New York, where the clubs never close, and their preferred drug is now cocaine and crystal-meth. I really owe my life to my family.

Throughout the following year I was a complete and utter mess. Nothing made me happy. Yes, I made the decision to stop using drugs, but I didn't have anywhere else to go from that point. I even stopped going out because I was so used to being high when I was out that it wasn't exciting anymore. I forgot how to have fun. I now feel like I slept my way through that year. My memory ceases to find any important events that happened to me. I thought I would be lost forever. It was during this time that I had my first and only nervous breakdown. I remember looking at myself

in the mirror shaking and thinking that I was going to die right then and their.

My journey back to the consciousness and sanity of reality began when I started to listen to music again. One of my sister's friends was having a birthday party for her son and asked me to play a few songs on the guitar for them. I was extremely excited because it had been a long time since I played in front of anyone. I immediately began listening to the radio to see what songs were in at the time. The song that really struck me the most was "Higher," from Creed. The song described the way I felt for a long time. The song soon became the anthem to my life. Music on a general level mirrors us as individuals and as part of a culture (Norberg 6). I became convinced that I was not the only one feeling this way. The song goes as follows:

*"Higher"* (words and music by Creed)

*When dreaming I'm guided to another world*

*Time and time again*

*At sunrise I fight to stay asleep*

*'Cause I don't want to leave the comfort of this place*

*'Cause there's a hunger, a longing to escape*

*From the life I live when I'm awake*

*So let's go there*

*Let's make our escape*

*Come on, let's go there*

*Let's ask can we stay?*

*Can you take me Higher?*

*To a place where blind men see*

*Can you take me Higher?*

*To a place with golden streets*

To me, this song represents a celebration of escape from reality, such as sleep. As I listened to the song I drifted away imagining a different, magical, peaceful world where you can do anything you want, even fly. The scary part was that I could not help

thinking that the feeling of escape they are singing about can be permanently obtained by death. This song held two contradicting functions in my life. One was that others shared my thoughts and feelings, which made the way I feel normal in a way, therefore comforting me. Two, it caused me to constantly crave an escape from the world. The more I dwelled on this unrealistic world the more distant I was becoming from the people around me. Nothing made sense. The world ceased to have a meaning for me. "Music can have a very powerful influence on our emotions, moods and behavior" (Hodges 36). According to Hodges, in Nazi Germany, music was carefully selected for use at mass rallies to generate appropriate patriotic emotions. I now believe that a similar phenomenon was happening to me with Creed's music.

I continued listening to Creed's music thinking that they would lead me to answers for the mysteries of my life. Another popular song called, "My Own Prison" is about being a prisoner within your own mind and body.

*"My Own Prison"* (words and music by Creed)

*A court is in session, a verdict is in*

*No appeal on the docket today*

*Just my own sin*

*The walls are cold and pale*

*The cage made of steel*

*Screams fill the room*

*Alone I drop and kneel*

*Silence now the sound*

*My breath the only motion around*

*Demons cluttering around*

*My face showing no emotion*

*Shackled by my sentence*

*Expecting no return*

*Here there is no penance*

*My skin begins to burn*

*(And I said oh) So I held my head up high*

*Hiding hate that burns inside  
Which only fuels their selfish pride  
(And I said oh) We're all held captive  
Out from the sun  
A sun that shines on only some  
We the meek are all in one*

This song is about wallowing in your own misery and sin. For a person who is depressed this song can have drastic effects on his mental health. Taken to heart, this song can spark a person to begin questioning himself and his actions to a compulsive level even if there is nothing wrong with him or her—like it did to me. There is no sign of hope or of resolution in the song, which meant that there was no resolution in my life. I was listening to this and other self-loathing songs that influenced my attitude for many months. I did not realize what was happening to me until a close friend told me sincerely that he thinks the music I listen to is really affecting me and that I should try listening to other genres.

I took my friend's advice and I began listening to different music, totally boycotting groups that sang about the abstract dimensions of the mind and life. One such group is called Vaya Con Dios. Most of their songs are upbeat and have a certain walking and finger-snapping rhythm to them.

*"Nah Neh Nah" words and music  
by Vaya Con Dios*

*I got on the phone and called the girls, said  
Meet me down at Curly Pearls, for a  
Ney, Nah Neh Nah  
In my high-heeled shoes and fancy fads  
I ran down the stairs hailed me a cab, going  
Ney, Nah Neh Nah  
Ney, Nah Neh Nah  
Ney, Nah Neh Nah  
Nah Neh Nah*

*When I pushed the door, I saw Eleanor*

*And Mary-Lou swinging on the floor,  
going  
Ney, Nah Neh Nah  
Sue came in, in a silk sarong  
She waltzed across as they played that song,  
going  
Ney, Nah Neh Nah  
Ney, Nah Neh Nah  
Ney, Nah Neh Nah  
Nah Neh Nah*

*It was already half past three  
But the night was young and so were we,  
dancing  
Ney, Nah Neh Nah  
Oh Lord, did we have a ball  
Still singing, walking down that hall, that  
Ney, Nah Neh Nah  
Ney, Nah Neh Nah  
Ney, Nah Neh Nah  
Nah neh nah*

This song celebrates life! "Nah Neh Nah" symbolizes action itself, for the sake of itself. What the particular action is isn't important. What is important is that we continue moving (living). The lyrics combined with the strut of a cool beat cause me to bob my head to smile. I now understand that I do not need to question everything I do. After listening to other Vaya Con Dios songs like, "It Must be Love" and "I Don't want to Know" nothing bothered me for a whole month. I was productive, positive and enjoying every minute of it.

Originally this paper was going to only analyze the effect of music on the individual and society, but as I was writing I began thinking more and more about the last few years of my life, and how much I've grown and changed. Finally putting this journey into perspective turned out to be very important for me. I have learned that being aware of a problem is the first step in solving it, but we should not make the problems our life. I am now looking at the family restaurant in a much more positive way and have taken many responsibilities

on my shoulders. One day that store will be my own family's bread and butter, so I will take care of it with all my strength.

I believe that in society people of similar statuses and backgrounds are most likely to experience certain similar struggles. Each person deals with those struggles in their own personal ways and at their own pace. For me, family, friends, work, music and love are the core influences of my character. It was important for my character to go through this mental and spiritual suffering. It helped me to become a better and stronger person. In each society there are powerful forces influencing us, so the more we know about society the more we can deal with it. The old proverb that says that "seek, and you shall find," is the truth. In any given situation you can find positive and negative aspects. The trick is to know you can choose between the two. Sometimes I still need to remind myself to just relax and enjoy the ride of life because one day it will come to an end.

Hodges (ed) *Handbook of Music Psychology*, San Antonia: IMR press.

Norberg, Eric. (1996). *Radio Programming*. Published by Elsevier Science Burlington, Ma

North, A.C., Hargreaves, D.J. and O'Neill, S.A. (2000). The importance of music to adolescents, *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 70, 255-272.

Scheel, K.R. & Westefeld, J.S. (1999). Heavy metal music and adolescent suicidality: an empirical investigation, *Adolescence*, 34 (134), 253-273.

Sloboda, J. A. (1999). Everyday uses of music listening: a preliminary study. In Suk Won Yi (ed) *Music, mind and science*. Seoul: Western Music Institute

Tucker, Robert C. (1978) *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, The Marx-Engels, Reader, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* W.W. Norton, New York.

Songs:

"Higher" by Creed

"My Own Prison" by Creed

"Nah Neh Neh" by Vaya Con Dios

#### REFERENCES

Adams, Bert N. (2002) *Classical Sociological Theory*. Sage Publications, Inc. California.

Aronson, Elliot. (2003). *The Social Animal 9<sup>th</sup> ed.* Worth Publishers, New York.

DeNora, T. (2000). *Music in Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University. Press

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Selected Essays*. (1982). Viking Penguin Inc. Canada. *Self-Reliance*, pg. 175 - 204

Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and its Discontents*. (Part of the readings for Soc 341, Fall 2003, UMass Boston )

Fromm, Erich H. (1941). *Escape From Freedom*. Fitzhenry & Whiteside Ltd., Ontario, Canada

Hansen, C.H. & Hansen, R.D. (1991). Constructing personality and social reality through music: Individual differences among fans of punk and heavy metal music, *Journal of Broadcasting and Media*, 35(3), 335-50.

Hodges, D.A. & Haack, P.A. (1996). The influence of music on behaviour. In D.A.