



# Songs from a window



## Bob Heath

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**In this article music therapist Bob Heath reflects on the meaning of music, songs and songwriting in expressing our emotions, both in helping those facing a personal bereavement and when revisiting words written by the dying, such as in David Bowie's final album, *Blackstar*.**

I've been in love with songs and lyrical poetry for as long as I can remember. I grew up in a house that was full of music; breakfast with The Beatles on the radio while Wagner belted out from the gramophone in the 'best' lounge. When I started my first band at the age of 12, with sister Jane on tennis-racquet guitar and brother Pete on biscuit-tin drums, I was already trying to write my own songs. My obsession with poetry was to follow soon after when Mr Boothby, my English Lit. teacher, recognising a kindred spirit, began filling my arms with poetry books. C Day Lewis, WH Auden and the great Robert Frost amongst many others. So now my head was not only full of musical structures and harmonic chords but also images and feelings and the words to describe them. I became a songwriter and I've never stopped being one.

Rolling forward in time some thirty-odd years finds me on placement as a music therapy student in a high security residential Mental Health unit. My client, Joan\*, is a young woman whose closest friend has recently committed suicide by jumping from the 6<sup>th</sup> floor of a local car park. Joan tells me that she can't cope with the grief and that as soon as she gets a chance she intends to do the same. She has started bringing CDs to our sessions, they're all by the same band, a *Death Metal* outfit

from the States who play dark and jagged music accompanied by apocalyptic lyrics about self-harm and death. The music fills the room with hopelessness and I am beginning to feel helpless in the face of the onslaught. Joan has told me that these songs are the closest things she's got to being able to express how she really feels. I know this feeling well, I have my own huge catalogue of songs that I feel, at times, could almost have been written for me. But I also have my own songs, my own authentic attempts to tell the truth.

'What if you were to write your own song Joan; do you think you'd be saying the same things?' I asked.

'I can't write songs!' she replied angrily.

'I think you can,' I replied, 'Let me show you how to start.'

Joan's song was called *Come Away Sane* and in it she not only describes her shock and horror at the death of her friend but also her sorrow and loneliness and, in the final verse, her desire to be well enough to go home and see her children again. Joan did indeed go home and, having qualified as a music therapist, I have used songs, songwriting and lyrical poetry in my clinical work ever since.

Over the last fifteen years or so my studio, my laptop and, if I'm honest, my head have become the repositories of many hundreds of works composed by people who, by and large, had never imagined that they might write songs to express their feelings let alone have the opportunity to share them with others. And yet, in truth we are just doing something that human beings have been doing since the dawn of time. There is nothing new in

our desire and need to express our feelings, particularly at times of great loss and there is certainly nothing new in mankind's propensity to seek out creative ways of doing so.

We live in a world full of songs; we can access them on pretty much every digital device known to man, even a thing called the 'cloud' which is even more esoteric than its name; you can see clouds. And they're everywhere we go, whether you want them or not, jangling or crooning away in the background as we pick up our groceries or try on a new pair of jeans. They become unwelcome intrusions, we stop listening and they begin to lose their meaning. But the song remains the same; it's our relationship to it that changes. Until, that is, there is an event. A personal loss perhaps, a national tragedy or the death of the songs creator.

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When the news broke that David Bowie had died on January 10<sup>th</sup> this year my mobile phone had started pinging long before I made it to the shower. The number of people who were expressing their grief didn't surprise me but I was surprised and moved by the depth of feeling, not just amongst my friends but it seemed, by millions of people throughout the world. His final album, *Blackstar*, had just been released and the airwaves and social media were buzzing with commentaries on the content, the songs. I heard a presenter on R4's Today programme commenting that one of the songs on the album made it pretty clear that he knew that he was dying. She wondered if Bowie had intended *Blackstar* to be his gift to us from beyond the grave, his final contribution to his huge musical legacy.

Within a few short moments of the news breaking the world was really listening again. Some with completely fresh ears, others revisiting familiar material but listening in a new way. Between 1967 and 2016 David Bowie released 26 studio albums all of which in some way reflect his authentic approach to living and dying and *Blackstar* is the most profound example of this. Perhaps this goes some way to helping us understand why his death has had such an impact on so many people. In a world that shuns almost every attempt to engage in a real, meaningful dialogue about loss and death here is David Bowie approaching his own death with openness, honesty and authenticity. Every song on this album seems to ache with a desire to tell the truth, to celebrate and to mourn, and in the end to say goodbye. It is a beautiful work of art and a deeply human record.

Working with the dying and the bereaved provides us with a window into the souls of people for whom authenticity becomes less of a personal choice and more of a necessity. We become familiar with the rawness of grief, the presence of despair and the longing for atonement and peace. We invite our clients to tell us what is often the untellable and to trust us to hear it without judgement and to hold it without prejudice. We encourage them to embrace their new shape and to re-engage with a world that has become a new shape too. I suspect that most of us lean on some form of creativity to help us facilitate these sometimes difficult encounters. We might refer people to meaningful stories, pictures, poems and music in an effort to support them in a search for meaning. We seek out the symbols that can help us to say the unsayable. Human beings have always done this, the symbols may change but the need for them is ever present.

My symbols have always been songs and poems and so, unsurprisingly, most of my clients will be encouraged to search for theirs amongst the music and language that has meant, or could mean something important to them. By encouraging them to create their own songs and poems I hope to provide opportunities for people to not only express some of their most difficult feelings but also to shape them in a way that they can begin to re-engage with meaning and a sense of future.

In a recent session I was encouraging my client whose son had died less than a year ago to begin the process of re-engaging with hope. These were tiny, gentle steps as his unexpected death had left her with a profound sense of despair and hopelessness. Despite her initial resistance she had begun to listen to music again, some of which they had shared and loved together, and had started writing about the experience. The following week she arrived with her poem; *Hope*:

*Time must pass, slowly, slow.  
Listen, the first faltering chords.  
Hope, timid, hesitates  
Stirs, stalls, starts  
Softly humming  
Begins to harmonise.*

*Hope hesitates.  
Hope begins, slowly.  
Slow.*

(‘C’; 2016 Used with full permission)

I read this poem often and with her permission have shared it with other clients. Amongst my many diagrams and explanations of the Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) I sense that this short poem is becoming one of my most valuable, authentic and helpful assets. ■

\* Names and locations have been changed to protect anonymity

Stroebe MS, Schut H (1999). The dual process model of coping with bereavement: rationale and description. *Death Studies* 23 197-224.