

The Role of Music in the Men's Movement

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Most of us have heard media comments about men's gatherings where men go off into the woods to howl at the moon and bang on drums. Such characterizations tend to trivialize and cast a cynical glare on events which I believe have great importance and significance, especially for men, and generally for our culture.

In a unique kind of way, men's groups and men's gatherings are rediscovering the meaning and importance of folk and traditional music as a grass roots phenomenon. They are reclaiming the use of singing, chanting, and drumming for themselves as truly folk music. This means placing less emphasis on the domain of the performer, so that the performer/audience dynamic moves more towards a paradigm of a music facilitator working with a group of participants who wish to use music, and especially singing, chanting, and drumming, to create a strong group experience. These kinds of group experiences are an essential means for men to accomplish several goals which are at the very heart of what the men's movement is all about.

These goals include the need for men to get out of their heads and into their bodies and into their feelings. Men need to find a more wholistic view of themselves and their place in society. Men need to reduce their isolation and move towards a more collaborative and less power-driven style of relationships in all aspects of their lives. Men need to re-sensitize themselves to the more intangible dimensions of human experience in order to reconnect with themselves, each other, their loved ones, and the Natural World. Men must stop denying how dysfunctional behaviors and attitudes are wreaking havoc in their own lives, in marriages, in families, and in companies, thus threatening the whole fabric of our culture. In a collective sense, we are just beginning to come to terms with the possible implications of our societal malaise.

These "folk music" activities do in fact help men move towards these kinds of goals. Robert Bly, one of many popular spokesmen for the men's movement, suggests that personal change and transformation can only take place in what he calls "ritual space." By this he means a context in which there is respect, safety, trust, and a clear acknowledgement of that which is sacred in both a personal and transpersonal sense.

Drumming has become a common feature of men's gatherings because it very quickly moves men into a more physically "grounded" state which can handle more intense feelings and can move men into a state of consciousness that reduces isolation and alienation while encouraging a sense of belonging and creating a pool of psychic energy which empowers everyone present.

There is also a strong shamanic aspect to drumming,

which assists expression in addition to the many benefits already discussed. The chants are often repetitious and have a strong ritual quality, which again contributes to the men feeling more connected with themselves and each other.

My own background in this kind of "folk music" goes back to the 1960s, when, like many people in those days, I was exploring various religious traditions, particularly those of Asia. I became familiar with Hindu Yogic mantras, Buddhist sutras, and Jewish niguns, as well as Gregorian chant and other more well known Christian musical forms.

In 1988, I met Doug von Koss, who came to Calgary to co-lead a men's "mytho-poetic" weekend retreat. His repertoire of chants from all over the world really amazed me, and his ability to get men singing their hearts out was awesome. He did work with many songs and chants from Western sources, often incorporating gesturing and movement as part of the process. I found it quite wonderful to see him introduce chants from very different cultures (Africa, India, Bali, and Thailand, to name a few), and, what was even more remarkable, to see the men responding in deeply emotional ways to songs and chants quite foreign to their cultural backgrounds. In this sense, I felt then as I had in my earlier explorations of sacred music, that this kind of "folk music" is truly universal in its appeal to the human soul.

The kind of work with music that Doug von Koss does is representative of an important aspect of the "mytho-poetic" stream of the men's movement. In July 1993, I attended the Mendocino Men's Conference in California, which has been held annually for about 12 years and usually attracts some of the key leaders of the men's movement. I was struck by how important the singing, chanting, and drumming were in creating the powerful atmosphere of the conference. Again, there was a strong international and intercultural flavor to these musical activities, there being present leaders from West Africa, Central America, and other far-flung places.

In the late 1980s, Tim Wilson, a producer with CBC's IDEAS program, did a couple of radio features on the emerging men's movement, which included the sound of drumming and chanting along with some explanation of their role in "men's work." Doug von Koss has issued two audiotapes of men chanting, which give a good idea of the kind of singing and chanting that go on in men's gatherings.

From my experience, I would say that music plays an essential role in putting some "soul" into the men's movement, to what is and will be a difficult and challenging process of change that men face both individually and collectively in the years ahead.

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