

## MUSIC, MEANING, AND EMOTION: A CASE STUDY

Luis Botella

FPCEE Blanquerna, Ramon Llull University, Barcelona, Spain

*This paper discusses the emotional power of music in the specific sense of its potential use as a means to achieve (a) emotional regulation and (b) meaning making in constructivist psychotherapy. A case study of a client for whom music was a significant part of his life and his psychotherapeutic process is discussed so as to exemplify the paper's main thesis.*

Keywords: *Music, emotional regulation, meaning making, personal construct psychology, constructivism.*

The emotional power of music has been recognized for centuries. In fact, music has always been used primarily as a profound and immediate means to evoke emotions, from the melancholic sadness of an aria to the patriotic pride of a national anthem. Given the significant role that emotions play in psychotherapy in general and in psychotherapeutic change in particular, it's not surprising that sometimes, for some clients, music becomes a meaningful topic in therapy.

In fact there are a number of people that, despite not being professional musicians, are extremely moved by music and for whom music play a paramount role. They are the kind of people whose life seems to have a soundtrack. They can easily remember the music that accompanied their most cherished memories, and listening again to these particular pieces of music can evoke in them profound emotional experiences associated to such memories.

What follows is a case study of one such client. My attempt in discussing this case is to illustrate to what extent music can sometimes be incorporated into constructivist psychotherapy not only as therapeutic in itself, but as a vehicle for meaning making and emotional regulation.

### CASE STUDY

Adam is a 45 year old man. He works as a computer graphics designer for a large corporation. He is divorced and has four children aged 15, 12, 9, and 5. He came to therapy initially because he felt he was in the middle of an "emotional tur-

moil". He described in detail how his marriage ended up in divorce two years before, when he realized that his feelings towards his wife had changed and that he was not able to communicate at a deep emotional level with her. They both were in couple's therapy for 10 months, but Adam complained that his wife only made minor changes in the relationship and returned to the same communication difficulties in a matter of days. Adam realized now how he had also been contributing to such difficulties--basically by having renounced the possibility of any change many years ago. He said he had felt quite lonely in the last years of his marriage, that he thought his wife had become incapable of understanding his need of a more profound emotional communication and that this only got worse because of the need to focus constantly on the everyday needs of their children. Adam also said that he loved his children immensely, and that his divorce made him feel somehow guilty and sorry for them, but that he thought it would be better for them to see both their parents happy, even if separated, than unhappy together.

Adam's "emotional turmoil" was triggered by a series of recent events that he described as follows. After his divorce, he became acutely aware of his unfulfilled emotional needs and began to look for support in some of his female friends. His relationship with one of them (Rachel) became more and more intimate to the point of his falling in love with her, and he was quite sure that his feelings were mutual. However, these feelings of mutual attraction and love were not easy to incorporate into their previously friendly

relationship because Rachel was just married and in fact quite shocked by how things were evolving between her and Adam—even if she could not deny that her feelings were certainly, and to a certain degree, mutual. So far, Adam and Rachel had not had sex, nor any other form of intimate physical contact, and they both were quite reluctant to further intimacy until they could clarify their relationship.

The significant role of music in Adam's life and worldview became obvious to his therapist because of the frequent use Adam made of fragments of song's lyrics to make sense of his life, and because of his repeatedly referring to himself as an "80's New Romantic". Because of such significance, I decided to make a deliberate and systematic use of music in Adam's therapy. Of course this was not music therapy at all, but rather an invitation to explicitly explore in therapy a domain of experience that our client clearly felt was very meaningful.

Thus, it became clear in our sessions with Adam (a) that he used music to regulate his mood and emotional states; and that (b) many of his favorite songs lyrics helped him to make sense of what was happening to him. It also became clear that Adam's musical tastes excluded classical music and jazz (he said he had not a "trained ear" for these particular genres) and were focused instead around pop rock in general, the 80's British "New Romantics" and specifically Duran Duran. Apart from this specific band, whose members are already into their forties, some of the others that Adam listens to are made up of musicians almost 20 years younger than Adam, and in fact Adam and his children share some of the same preferences. Nevertheless, he does not feel at all a need to justify his liking rock bands of a younger generation, and he stated repeatedly in therapy that music is the language of emotions and it transcends age, gender, ethnicity, and even almost words. The role of music in Adam's life is so relevant, that after reading Oliver Sacks' book "Musicophilia" (Sacks, 2007) he kept referring to himself jokingly as a "musicophilic".

I will focus my description of Adam's therapeutic process around these two interrelated top-

ics: (1) music and emotional regulation, and (2) song's lyrics and meaning-making.

## **MUSIC AND EMOTIONAL REGULATION**

Regarding the first one, Adam described in detail in therapy how he was almost constantly listening to music even when working. He used to wear his earphones when he walked to his office, plug his MP3 into his computer loudspeakers as soon as he reached his office, and turn his radio or CD player on whenever he was at home. He said that his mood could be quite transformed by the music he was listening to, and his therapist invited him to carry on an experiment consisting of increasing his awareness of what particular mood states could music evoke in him. So, Adam was invited to pay attention during the week to (a) his mood state previously to having it changed by a particular song; (b) his mood state after that; and (c) what in the song he thought could induce such a change.

Adam came to the next session with a considerably large amount of information regarding this particular—keep in mind that he was almost constantly listening to music and also almost constantly in the middle of profound emotional experiences. Adam and his therapist spent this whole session in a deliberate effort to reduce such an amount of data to a manageable one. The therapist did this by using an *ad hoc* adaptation of Grounded Theory Methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) consisting in grouping Adam's mood states into a fewer series of superordinate categories (together with Adam) by carefully considering their commonalities. Because of the clinical and applied focus of our work with Adam the method in this case did not go beyond *ad hoc* content analysis, but we have used the same procedure in a more systematic and complex way in our research projects.

The image that emerged is summarized in *Table 1*. Some of the terms in the table need to be more clearly defined because they are quite idiosyncratic to Adam's use of his personal constructs about music and songs. Such a more detailed definition became possible because Adam's therapist had a certain level of musical

knowledge and was able to help him identify structural musical elements to make sense of what otherwise were pre-verbal constructs.

Thus, Adam was able to identify *torch songs* as sentimental love songs in which the singer laments a lost love. Typically, they are slow tempo songs with little or no intrusive instrumentation or production effects. Adam mentioned Duran Duran’s “Someone Else not Me” as prototypical of them. (A more detailed analysis of some of these song’s lyrics is included in the next section of this paper).

Table 1: Adam’s description of his mood states pre- and post listening to music and of the kind of music originating the changes in his mood.

Pre-Music Mood	Kind of Music/Song	Post-Music Mood/s
Sad	Torch songs in general	Melancholic
	Disco/dance	Happy
	Love songs with a happy ending	Hopeful
	Unrequited love songs	Angry
Anxious	Slow tempo ballads	Relaxed
	Love songs with a happy ending	Hopeful
Happy	Songs about Rachel	Sad
	Unrequited love songs	Angry
Neutral	Torch songs in general	Melancholic
	Disco/dance	Happy
	Love songs with a happy ending	Hopeful
	Unrequited love songs	Angry

By *disco/dance* Adam referred to songs with a strong establishment of a grooving rhythm (usually by means of drums, bass, or both) and a

faster tempo. This combination creates a propulsive rhythmic feel that almost inevitably makes listening active and motoric. He mentioned many examples of this, among them the more dance oriented recent tracks produced by American rapper Timbaland for Duran Duran, like “Skin Divers”.

*Love songs with a happy ending* were according to Adam those that celebrated the power of love against all odds. In general, its main structural difference with torch songs apart from the obvious one regarding lyrics, is that the tempo is usually faster and that both instrumentation and production effects create a more ecstatic and romantic feeling. As an example of this Adam mentioned Eurhythmics’ “The Miracle of Love”.

*Unrequited love songs* were those in which the singer complains about an unfulfilled or unsatisfactory romantic relationship but, unlike torch songs, not in a melancholic way but in an angry and self asserting one. The lyrics of some of them can in fact express quite explicitly the anger that such feelings carry with them, as in the example that Adam mentioned: Simple Plan’s “Time to Say Goodbye”. Accordingly, musical, performance and production effects tend to create a feeling of anger and emotional intensity.

*Slow tempo ballads* were a quite straightforward category in Adam’s repertory of listening preferences. The main difference with torch songs according to him was that in this case these were not love songs, but songs expressing peaceful or comforting feelings about anything else. Adam mentioned some New Age tracks as an example of this category—and in this case with no lyrics.

And finally, *songs about Rachel* (a name that Adam did choose as a pun on Maroon 5 album “Songs About Jane”) were songs that he immediately associated with her because of a series of reasons. As an example he mentioned Simple Plan’s “I Can Wait Forever” because it was often played on the radio of the bar where they used to meet in the beginning of their relationship. In this case, songs in this category shared almost no structural elements, because what defined them was their role in Adam’s emotional memories.

Such a detailed analysis would probably have been no more than an example of stylistic irrelevance were it not for Adam's important insights after devoting some sessions to reflect on it. Specifically, Adam realized to what extent music could regulate his mood and emotions, but also a series of more relevant points. He became aware that some of these mood states were not exactly helpful to him, because he became almost incapable of paying attention to anything else than his emotional pain when he entered them. Thus, the use of laddering technique helped him realize that melancholy led him eventually to inactivity, anger to somehow destructive attempts to radically run away from Rachel instead of trying to clarify things with her, and sadness to crying and withdrawal. (Happiness, hopefulness, and relaxation were not problematic).

Adam also became aware of something apparently obvious but that he had not realized before: because he always used the 'Randomize' mode in his MP3 player, he was constantly shifting from one mood to another as songs belonging to different categories were being played unexpectedly.

These insights, however important, would only have led to Adam's using music as a form of emotional self-regulation in a more thoughtful and controlled way. This was undoubtedly a worthy and useful therapeutic goal for him, but both he and his therapist had the feeling that Adam's presenting complaint was far beyond emotional self-regulation and that it had deep connections with his meaning making processes. This is where song lyrics became important because they played the role of dominant cultural narratives with a very powerful way to exert their influence over Adam's life: the power that music has to affect us directly and to escape almost any form of rational barrier.

### **SONG LYRICS AND MEANING-MAKING**

Thus, at this point the therapist asked Adam to choose a few song lyrics that he found prototypical or illustrative of his "emotional turmoil", and that led him to some of the problematic mood

states he had identified in the previous phase of his therapy. (Adam was a proficient English speaker, and even if therapy with him was conducted in Catalan, he had no problem with understanding his favorite song's lyrics.) Adam chose three songs mentioned before: (1) Duran Duran's "Someone Else not Me"; (2) Simple Plan's "Time to Say Goodbye"; and (3) "I can Wait Forever" (also by Simple Plan). Their lyrics are as follows:

#### **Someone Else not Me**

*Written by Rhodes, Le Bon & Cuccurullo.  
Source: Pop Trash, 2000, HR-62266-2  
© Hollywood Records, Inc.*

Now while the beat is slow  
Here in your arms I sway  
Now that the light is low  
Something I want to say  
I guess you've known it for a while  
But I mean trouble  
I only want to see you smile  
And I burst this bubble  
The hardest thing is to let go  
When love is real...  
Like a flower loves a bee  
But I know you're meant to  
Give yourself to  
Someone else not me  
And I could carry on with you  
Does that sound crazy?  
I think you feel the same way too  
And you can't face it  
The hardest thing is to let go  
But it's not defeat  
When you set somebody free  
And I know you're meant to  
Be yourself with  
Someone else not me  
Can you let go?  
'Cause that's love that's real  
Like a flower loves a bee  
And you know you're meant  
To give yourself to  
Someone else not me  
Somebody else not me

Meant for somebody else not me  
Somebody else not me

### **Time to Say Goodbye**

*Written by Simple Plan.  
Source: Simple Plan, 2008, 7567-89952-0  
© Atlantic Recording Corporation*

I just don't want to waste another day  
I'm trying to make things right  
But you shove it in my face  
And all those things you've  
Done to me I can't erase  
And I can't keep this inside  
It's time to say goodbye  
On the first day that I met you  
I should have known to walk away  
I should have told you you were crazy  
And disappear without a trace  
But instead I stood there waiting  
Hoping you would come around  
But you always found a way to let me  
down  
It's time to say goodbye  
(I just don't want to waste another day)  
It's time to say goodbye  
(Cause things will never be the same)  
It's time to say goodbye  
(You make me think I need to walk away)  
It's time to say goodbye  
It's time to say goodbye  
After all the things I've done for you  
You never tried to do the same  
It's like you always play the victim  
And I'm the one you always blame  
When you need someone to save you  
When you think you're going to drown  
(Think you're going to drown)  
You just grab your arms around  
Me and pull me down  
It's time to say goodbye  
(I just don't want to waste another day)  
It's time to say goodbye  
(Cause things will never be he same)  
It's time to say goodbye  
(You make me think I need to walk away)  
It's time to say goodbye

It's time to say goodbye  
Now I'm gone  
It's too late  
You can't fix  
Your mistakes  
I was trying to save you from you  
So you scream so you cry I can see  
Through your lies  
You're just trying to change me  
(Trying to change me)  
Somewhere in the distance  
There's a place for me to go  
I don't want you to hate me  
But I think you need to know  
You're weighing on my shoulders  
And I'm sick of feeling down  
So I guess it's time for  
Me to say goodbye

### **I Can Wait Forever**

*Written by Simple Plan.  
Source: Simple Plan, 2008, 7567-89952-0  
© Atlantic Recording Corporation*

You look so beautiful today  
When you're sitting there it's hard for me  
to look away  
So I try to find the words that I could say  
I know distance doesn't matter but you  
feel so far away  
And I can't lie every time I leave my heart  
turns gray  
And I want to come back home to see  
your face tonight  
Cause I just can't take it  
Another day without you with me  
Is like a blade that cuts right through me  
But I can wait, I can wait forever  
When you call my heart stops beating  
When you're gone it won't stop bleeding  
But I can wait, I can wait forever  
You look so beautiful today  
It's like every time I turn around I see your  
face  
The thing I miss the most is waking up  
next to you

When I look into your eyes, man I wish  
that I could stay  
And I can't lie every time I leave my heart  
turns gray  
And I want to come back home to see  
your face tonight  
Cause I just can't take it  
Another day without you with me  
Is like a blade that cuts right through me  
But I can wait, I can wait forever  
When you call my heart stops beating  
When you're gone it won't stop bleeding  
But I can wait, I can wait, I can wait for-  
ever  
I know it feels like "forever"  
I guess that's just the price I gotta pay  
But when I come back home to feel your  
touch makes it better  
Until that day there's nothing else that I  
can do  
And I just can't take it, I just can't take it  
Another day without you with me  
Is like a blade that cuts right through me  
But I can wait, I can wait forever  
When you call my heart stops beating  
When you're gone it won't stop bleeding  
But I can wait, I can wait, I can wait for-  
ever  
I can wait forever

Adam had already identified the mood changes induced by these three songs that he frequently listened to. "Someone Else not Me" made him feel melancholic every time he listened to it, "Time to Say Goodbye" made him feel angry, and "I Can Wait Forever" made him feel sad. He had also already identified the structural and stylistic elements in the songs that contributed to such an effect over his mood, and was in the process of learning how to use them not at random but deliberately to try to regulate his mood swings.

However, even a cursory glance at the songs' lyrics makes it obvious that despite the relevance of musical elements as a way to immediately evoke emotions; in this case the semantic ones are also quite relevant. We invited Adam to reflect on the meaning of each one of the song's lyrics, so as to help him reflect after that on why

this had such a powerful effect on his mood and, more importantly, his construction of events. What follows is a summary of Adam's reflection on each one of the songs' lyrics.

*Someone Else not Me identifies almost perfectly my situation with Rachel... It's unbelievable how Duran Duran had been able to express what I could not have expressed better about myself! The only difference is that the song seems to entail a level of physical intimacy that I've never had with Rachel by saying "here in your arms I sway"... I've never swayed in her arms... and probably never will... But I'm quite sure that she's meant for somebody else not me! And (yes, sounds crazy!) I'm also sure that our love is real. It feels as if life had been playing tricks on me... I was married to someone who seemed incapable of loving me, and now that I find somebody who loves me, she's meant for someone else! I would rather not have reached this level of emotional intimacy with her... I don't know whose fault it was; maybe I should have stopped that or maybe she should. It doesn't matter much, it doesn't help, but I cannot stop thinking about it.*

*Time to Say Goodbye is an angry song, I know it. I'm almost ashamed of seeing myself mirrored in those lyrics. She just does not deserve my being so angry... but I cannot deny my anger here in therapy. There are so many things I don't understand and she does not want me to understand. So many questions left unanswered... Has she been playing with my feelings and giving me hopes of something she never meant to happen? Is she so cynical or so afraid of what others would think of her as to go on with her husband despite her feelings for me? Or maybe her feelings were just a lie? If so, why? Why is she so afraid of herself when she knows I would have done anything for her? That's why this song describes so well my feeling that I should have known better and*

*walked away months ago! I guess I cannot deny anymore that I'm really angry and tired of suffering!*

*I Can Wait Forever makes me so sad! It's one of the songs I associate to the first weeks of getting to know Rachel better... and it was so wonderful a time! I thought then, I sincerely did, that I will be able to wait forever. Then after so many conversations with her I understood that there was nothing to wait for. I know she's confused, but her running away from this confusion left me hanging from the thread that we once formed together. And what am I supposed to do know? Wait and not be tired by waiting as in Kipling's poem? Sounds so chivalrous and aloof that it's just absurd! I'm sure my life must go on... but I'm still trying to make sense of this period and learn from my painful experience so as not to make such a mistake again. And still... this song has a very powerful effect on me... makes me cry every time I listen to it, takes me back to a time when everything seemed to make sense and I was so stupid as to believe it will make sense forever!*

Therapy with Adam involved a lot of emotional support to him, as well as a lot of narrative reconstruction and meaning making. Adam felt the urgent need to understand what had happened to him, even more than to do anything specific about it. He stated repeatedly during therapy that he needed to make sense of the past so as to be able to foresee the future—a constructivist dictum in itself!

In this process, music kept playing a very significant role in Adam's life. He kept using it as a means to achieve emotional regulation and also as a powerful source of meaning via the poetic power of its lyrics.

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

Both meaning making and, to some extent, emotional regulation have been traditionally re-

garded as a goal in constructivist therapies. With the insightful contributions of narrative therapies, the role of language and narrative construction in both of these processes has been highlighted and increasingly understood.

Language is not just a means to make “rational” sense of what happens to us, but also a powerful form of meaning construction in itself, with strong emotional implications and contributing to bridge the gap between the past and the future in the sense of helping us anticipate the future by understanding our past experiences. Given the prevalence of English as the international *Lingua franca* in many domains, and especially in popular music, it is not unlikely that those who are moved by this kind of music and use it as a way to make sense of themselves are also inadvertently using a number of cultural narratives implicitly embedded in the lyrics. This point would certainly deserve further consideration, and it constitutes in fact a growing body of research within the realm of music semiotics.

Given the also very strong emotional power of music, and its association with words in the case of songs with lyrics, it is not surprising that it can play a significant role in both the emotional and the meaning making aspects of some of our client's lives. However, traditional psychotherapeutic schools have approached music rarely, and mostly as a therapeutic technique (i.e., music therapy) rather than as a vehicle for understanding client's constructions.

As this case study exemplifies, music can also be incorporated to psychotherapy in the sense of better understanding our client's meaning making processes (by means of working with lyrics as if they were poems, i.e., narratively) and also as a means to help them achieve a higher degree of emotional regulation (because of the power of music to evoke profound emotions).

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Luis Botella*, PhD is Professor of Psychotherapy and Director of the Psychotherapy Service at Ramon Llull University in Barcelona, Spain. He has been investigating constructivism and Personal Construct Psychotherapy for more than 20 years, and has developed an interest in popular music and meaning making in the last five ones.

*Email:* [LluisBG@blanquerna.url.edu](mailto:LluisBG@blanquerna.url.edu)

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