

## COMMENTARY

### Palaima: Music's soul, from Achilles to Dylan

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The nurse, actually a nanny, in "Medea," Euripides' tragedy about a mother murdering her children that is as riveting and disturbing as the tragic events surrounding Andrea Yates in Houston, says this about the power of music:

Those singers of old wrote songs

For revels and dinners and banquets

Pleasant sounds for men living at ease.

But none of these singers has discovered

How to use their singing and their instruments

To put an end to grief,

Bitter grief . . .

Yet how good it would be

If music could cure men of this.

Why raise the voice in song at a banquet?

There men already have abundant pleasure

With a joy of its own.

The nurse is searching for some way to soothe the tormented heart and mind of Medea, the mother of the children in her care. Medea is alone and in emotional pain. She has been abandoned by the man for whom she betrayed her father and country, for whom she killed her own brother. Her moods swing violently, and she is a violent woman. The nurse fears that Medea might harm herself and her children. The nurse thinks music might comfort and calm Medea.

The most uncontroversial social role of music, after mere entertainment and delight, is to give solace. Slave chants, field songs, prison work songs, gospel music and basic training songs help sustain human beings in hard times. This is also the essence of real blues and genuine folk music.

Song has played this role since the earliest stages of Western culture. In Homer's "Iliad," not the Hollywood schlockbuster "Troy," the greatest Greek war leader Achilles is broken in the 10th year of war by the failure of Agamemnon to look after the well-being of the rank-and-file troops and by Agamemnon's public insults. Achilles withdraws himself and his soldiers from battle. When Agamemnon sends an embassy to try to reconcile with Achilles, they find him in his tent with his lyre singing 'the famous deeds of men.' Achilles here is singing about other battles, about similar hardships, atrocities and injustices. That is, Achilles was singing the blues to ease his worried mind.

The South by Southwest Music Festival has filled Austin with musicians from all over the world. This might be a good time for them to ask themselves what it is they are doing with their talent and for audiences to wonder what they are seeking in music.

At events connected with the Instruments of Freedom week at the University of Texas recently, the consensus was that music was no longer playing the social role of voicing ideas. There was a good deal of nostalgia for the 1960s.

Part of the explanation, of course, is corporate control over what music gets distributed and played. Hopes were expressed at a panel of Austin music leaders that independent studios and the Internet would provide much needed diversity and freedom of expression. But there is just as great a risk that electronic distribution of music by any musicians with a computer would become a modern Tower of Babel, with listeners struggling to hear the few voices that might speak meaningfully to them.

Rather than criticize musicians for being socially and politically unaware or unconcerned, it might be better to look at ourselves. During the early '60s when Bob Dylan was writing and singing socially conscious political masterpieces, he had two sources of his genius.

First, a deep and sympathetic understanding of traditional folk and blues music and of the realities of poverty, sorrow, injustice and hardship these songs reflected. His hero Woody Guthrie had sung out graphically about the massacre of thirteen children burned and shot by union-busting National Guard in Ludlow, Colo.

Second, an audience of citizens who were speaking out for social change (civil rights, the war on poverty, women's rights, the Vietnam war). Dylan did not create these movements. He reflected the attitudes of those citizens who were committed to making change. He wrote "Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" in September 1963, inspired by newspaper accounts of a racist killing that he read during the civil rights march on Washington the month before.

Music can only lead us where we are already going, and to lead us, musicians need to know where we have already been.

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