

# Music as a tool for social change: A critical exploration through the lens of Community Education

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## Introduction

Throughout history, music has been used as a powerful tool to aid social change (Reese, 2015). This article will discuss the interconnectedness of music, critical pedagogical practice and community education values, exploring how music functions as a tool for social transformation, collective learning and participatory action.

The choice to use music to grapple with these ideas stems from the opportunity it creates to explore social issues in a creative and widely accessible way. It has been highlighted that music is a universal art form which is engaged with daily by most people (Benjamins et al, 2025). The importance of this is highlighted by international organisations such as UNESCO's Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2021), which states that cultural art, such as music, is an important part of promoting cultural identities.

The use of music in critical community practice is known as 'Community Music', described by Dykema (1969) as 'socialised music' (p.218), meaning that it can have an impact on 'social bonding, cultural transmission, and the expression of social identities' (MacDonald, 2021: 1). Higgins (2024) goes on to discuss Community Music as 'relational practice, vibrating to the tune of the politics of cultural democracy and responding to contemporary and historical forms of cultural and social inequality' (p117). These ideas link to community education practice as it introduces the importance of participatory and inclusive approaches to learning. This aspect of practice is important because community practitioners aim to meet both the immediate needs of individuals and communities whilst also working to address systemic challenges.

An early example of music being used in this way comes from the US Civil Rights movement (1954-1968), where music was used to amplify stories, educate, and inspire racial justice, which not only

contributed to the empowerment of Black Communities, but forced mainstream Americans to confront racial injustice. This genre was later defined as 'freedom music', with songs such as Bob Dylan's 'Blowin' In The Wind' and 'A Change is Gonna Come' by Sam Cooke providing powerful social commentary of the time, and becoming anthems of protest and change. Freire's idea of 'conscientisation' (1974) is present here. This theory gives name to the process of working alongside people, supporting them to understand their oppression, potentially leading to collective action. Freedom music challenges hegemonic narratives by bringing to light the voices and stories of those facing oppression, with the use of music as a platform for social movements being monumental at this time because it allowed for the Civil Rights Movement to grow, foster resistance and build solidarity.

Looking to a more contemporary context, music has been pivotal in engaging young people who are affected by racial injustice in social and political discourse. For example, Black rapper and activist Stormzy writes songs about racial inequalities he faced growing up (Andrews, 2018), with tracks such as 'Vossi Bop' serving not only as a personal expression of hardship, but a social commentary on systemic issues. Stormzy continues to use music as a tool to bring issues of racial injustice to light in a way that connects with a modern audience, whilst acknowledging the struggle many faced throughout time as a result. Brooks (2016) demonstrates this well, stating that 'Black protest music should sting and burn, be hard to digest for some, leave an aftertaste for others...Black pop radicalism should shake our culture to its core'. Rollock (2020) highlights the importance of this work, noting that 'Stormzy's philanthropy is not charity - it's solidarity'. In its most basic form, using music in this way has created accessible political education, a tool to liberate thinking and promote social change.

Using music as a form of identity expression is also a major element to the punk genre. This subculture is characterised by an anti-authoritarian and anti-establishment stance (Hartley, 2020). This was no more pertinent than during the 1980s in the UK as increased unemployment, distrust between people and the government, and growing unrest within the young working-class community saw Punk take on more anti-authoritarian and anarchist tendencies (Worley, 2017). Artists such as The Sex Pistols were

pivotal within the industry at this time, with their music serving as a radical critique of institutionalized Britain. This is highlighted in their song 'God Save The Queen', the lyrics of which take a vitriolic position against the monarchy and nationalism, embodying the chaotic nature of the time (Savage, 1991). Furthermore, their slogan 'No Future' embodies the desolate outlook many had at that time, performing as not only a rebellious ideology but a direct critique of the lack of opportunity and social mobility. Although many believed that followers of the punk movement were intent on being violent and inciting anarchy (Frith and McRobbie, 1990: 57), Marcus (1989) notes that ideas 'did not express a desire for destruction so much as a recognition that the future had already been stolen' (p.8).

A key aspect of Punk ideology is the emphasis on DIY Ethics, defined as creating your own cultural space using whatever resources are available, especially in response to gaps in mainstream culture (Spencer, 2008). This approach has empowered marginalised groups by offering alternative routes for expression (Barker, 2013). It aligns closely with community education values like inclusion and participant-led practices, particularly Asset Based Community Development (ABCD), which focuses on community strengths over deficits (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). By challenging deficit-based thinking through music, participants can reflect on their identities and social contexts. The radical nature of this ties into contemporary community practice, which must remain political to promote social change. As Shor (1992) notes, critical pedagogy seeks to dismantle power structures and foster agency. Music, especially within this genre, becomes a vehicle for voicing injustice and inspiring collective transformation.

However, the idea that music can create real social change is contested. Adorno (1944) argues that music is part of a commodified culture industry, promoting false consciousness rather than critical awareness: 'the culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises' (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944, p.111). This suggests music may give a sense of involvement without enabling genuine change. Curtis (2021) supports this, noting how the industry fosters individualism, undermining collective action. I contend that neoliberalism plays a key role, promoting new-managerial

ideologies that prioritise individual over collective solutions. Harvey (2005) explores this, and it's reflected in how music today often markets personal and social struggles rather than analysing or addressing them. As Giroux (2004) notes, this raises concerns about whether music can support liberation or simply glamorises struggle within mainstream media.

Although it is true that how an individual engages in cultural activities is autonomous, this can lead to collective transformation as individuals gain a shared understanding. As stated by DeNora (2000), individuals interpret and construct their social reality through music, but 'it is in collective engagement with music that its potential to reshape the social order emerges' (p. 101). This relates to Hegel's (1820) notion that individual agency and freedom is only understood when placed into the context of a wider society. From this, music becomes more than a form of personal expression, but a process used to critically engage and reflect. This idea also moves beyond general critical pedagogical practice, moving into critical heutagogy. Described as the theory of self-directed learning (Hase and Kenton, 2000), this concept is relevant here as it supports the idea that, when individuals engage with music, they are not simply consumers but are actively cultivating knowledge and capacity.

In grassroots community practice, theoretical frameworks help practitioners understand the role of music in critical community work. Kunst (1969) defines ethnomusicology as 'the study of music in its cultural context', and Nettl (2005) expands on this, viewing music as a cultural phenomenon tied to society, other art forms, and the environment (p.3). When applied to critical pedagogy, this means tailoring music practice to specific communities. Feminist ethnomusicology, for example, highlights music as both a gendered and cultural experience (Koskoff, 1987), reinforcing the need for inclusivity and intersectionality in practice. Feld's (1996) concept of 'acoustemology' - blending acoustics and epistemology - further supports this by emphasising listening and storytelling as key cultural and educational practices. This offers practitioners a bridge into a potentially powerful, creative, inclusive and informal educational practice which chimes with the values of a more radical purpose at the heart of community education.

This idea urges practitioners to consider the ‘sonic identities’ of communities - formed through shared cultural and environmental experiences (Croce, 2018). Schafer (1977) highlights how modern soundscapes, both literal and metaphorical, reflect societal unrest and division. Understanding the multitude of voices and narratives behind these ‘soundscapes’ can help practitioners grasp how individuals think and feel, shaped by what they’ve been ‘forced to listen to’. This aligns with Gay’s (2000) concept of culturally responsive pedagogy, recognising that personal cultural soundscapes influence how people engage with the world. Practitioners must therefore validate the emotional and cultural realities of participants, especially when shaped by dominant ideologies or societal ‘noise’. Music becomes a powerful tool here, offering a non-verbal outlet for expression (Buber, 1970) and, as Bandura (1987) suggests, helping participants build confidence and a sense of agency beyond the musical space.

Music is already widely used by community education practitioners to explore social issues and inspire change on both individual and community levels (Education Scotland, 2012). Bartleet’s *Dimensions of Social Outcomes* (2023) offers a useful framework of four dimensions of transformation through music. For individuals, it supports 'personal transformations' (Heard and Brydie-Leigh Bartleet, 2024: 2), such as cultural connection and well-being, promoting social integration and dialogue through 'relational transformation' (2024: 2). Combined, these lead to 'community transformations' (*Ibid*: 2) at the meso level, fostering collective identity, belonging, and social cohesion. These layered outcomes show how music can support both reflection and participation, encouraging critical engagement with social issues. This links to Freire’s idea of 'authentic thinking', which occurs through critical collective communication, not isolation (p.77).

This is important because it highlights the potential that music can be both an active and reflective tool in community practice. Regeliski (2009) describes music as 'social pedagogy' as it can hold the power to educate through dialogue, lived experience and social interaction. Furthermore, the use of community education values and principles can ensure that music and other art-based practices are not *passive*.

Clover (2006) highlights that using music can support people to engage in critical dialogue and reflection, leading to transformation. Small (1998) coined the term ‘musicking’, describing not only the physical act of creating music, but engaging with it in any form (p.9). This idea links well to community education practice and its emphasis on identity, belonging, and participation. However, some argue against its effectiveness. Creech et.al. (2013) argue that there is a lack of long-term data to suggest that positive outcomes have lasting impact on participants after they have participated, highlighting the need for increased long-term studies into community music within critical community practice.

Matarasso (2019) notes that short-term funding cycles and instrumental policy agendas undermine community-led cultural work. The transformative potential of community music is often limited by funding instability, which hinders long-term planning and impact. Government responses vary: Arts Council England has prioritised economic outcomes, which some argue compromises grassroots practice (Belfiore, 2022). Similarly, while the Scottish Government faces these pressures, there is growing recognition of the value of cultural participation (Creative Scotland, 2020). I argue that Scottish initiatives often reflect a more critical pedagogical approach, particularly through programmes like Sistema Scotland. Inspired by Venezuela’s El Sistema model, it engages communities experiencing poverty through long-term, relationship-based orchestral work that promotes collective action and community development. As Borchert (2012) points out, its focus on building resilience and life skills echoes the demands of global capitalism, linking closely with critical community practice.

The following examples of Community Music practice demonstrate the tangible impact of music as a tool for social change.

### **Musicians Without Borders**

Musicians Without Borders (MWB) is a global organisation founded by justice-focused musicians from the Netherlands, working across continents to support those affected by conflict through ‘peace building for social change’ (MWB, 2025: np). Their *Music Leadership* programme operates in countries like

Palestine, Rwanda, El Salvador, and Northern Ireland - regions marked by division and trauma. The programme builds the skills of young people and educators, aiming to empower participants to later train others. Green (2008) highlights the value of such informal, peer-led learning, which encourages cooperation and shared goals (p.14). MWB's work is grounded in key principles, such as non-violence, echoing Cage's (1961) view of music as a tool for peaceful dialogue. The organisation embraces collaboration by co-designing programmes with communities rather than imposing them. However, while MWB claims not to fall within the scope of Community Music, and to work according to local needs, it's important to critically assess the implications of a Western-led organisation working in culturally complex, post-conflict contexts (Triandis, 2000).

### **Dovetail Orchestra**

In a national context, the Dovetail Orchestra in Bristol engages refugees and asylum seekers in collaborative music-making, aiming to build connections, support musical learning, and provide a welcoming space (Dovetail Orchestra, 2025). The project encourages cultural fusion and empowers participants, with research, noting positive impacts on members' wellbeing (ARC West, 2025). Unlike critical pedagogy, the organisation leans towards an andragogical approach, focusing on adult, self-directed learning shaped by participants' lived experiences and cultural values. As Knowles (1980) highlights, adults need to understand the purpose of learning and take responsibility for it (p.43). While the orchestra supports wellbeing on a micro-level, it does not address the broader systemic issues faced by participants, such as legal status and access to services. This raises concerns about 'instrumentalisation', where community arts are used more as engagement tools than valued for their intrinsic worth (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007). Similarly, Garnham (2005) warns against reducing culture to a function of social policy (p.27). From a critical lens, Dovetail's impact could be deepened by integrating collective action and focusing more explicitly on challenging marginalisation, as Mayo (1999) advocates for radical adult education grounded in lived experience and aimed at social change (p.95).

## Vox Liminis

In Scotland, Vox Liminis is an incredibly poignant example of critical pedagogical practice that highlights the effect that music has on emotion and wellbeing. The organisation works to explore ‘the role that the arts can play in shaping a more just society’ (Vox Liminis, np). This idea is well documented by theorists. For example, Habermas (1987) discusses the concept of ‘lifeworld’, ‘made up of a culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretive patterns’ (p.124), where meaning is created through the lived experiences of individuals. The organisation works in this realm by restorative justice and arts-based practice to challenge dominant narratives around crime and criminal justice, allowing people to tell their story through creative means. One of their projects, ‘Distant Voices’, explores crime, punishment and reintegration, using song-writing as a creative expression of these processes and struggles. By pairing Scottish song-writers with participants, the project has facilitated the creation of many songs and albums that highlight and humanise the complexities of life before, during and after punishment. Furthermore, the programme works to resist the narrow, target driven frameworks that are often used within criminal justice interventions. Lowe (2020) critiques these for prioritising measurable outcomes over actively listening and engaging in dialogical approaches. In contrast ‘Distant Voices’ remains grounded in co-production and lived experience, utilising music as a tool that participants can use to reflect their own stories, values and experiences of the system. This echoes Freire’s (1970) idea of prescriptive approaches to education, in which ‘the educator’s role is to regulate the way the world "enters into" the students’ (p. 76). Instead, the organisation utilises dialogical, emancipatory practice, grounded in critical community practice.

A clear connection among these projects is the work they do to raise cultural capital. Bourdieu (1997) discusses the notion of cultural capital as the level of knowledge, life experiences and skill a person has in relation to the dominant culture. However, the projects in question look to push beyond the acceptance of presiding ideology, engaging participants in practice that allows them to reframe knowledge. Hall (1990) discusses culture as the site of struggle in this context and highlights how using

music as a tool for cultural expression allows marginalised groups and individuals to foster and reclaim cultural identity. However, there are some counterarguments to its success. Whilst music can be used as a tool for inclusion, it can also be used to exclude individuals and communities. When music, or the ability to participate in arts-based practice, sits within the dominant culture, it can alienate those who cannot, or struggle to, participate due to social, cultural, and economic barriers (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Kemmis (2006) adds that even well-intentioned practitioners may inadvertently reinforce inequalities if cultural justice is overlooked.

However, if handled sensitively (and critically), this disconnect can be viewed as a strength respectively. As noted by Dewey (1938), reflection must be used as a bridge to connect understanding of issues and the action taken to challenge them. Music is both a deeply personal and universal experience and offers a powerful tool for this reflection (p.256). When used in critical community practice, music becomes more than a passive creative outlet; it transforms into a tool that can support dialogical approaches and support progressive social change.

In conclusion, music as a tool for social change strongly aligns with the values of community education. Playing, listening to, and interpreting music can help individuals and communities explore identity, build relationships, and engage with social issues. As List (1979) notes, music can be used to address non-musical problems (p.2), showing its broader social value. However, for community music to remain meaningful, it must be rooted in critical and pedagogical practice to avoid tokenism. Practitioners should continue to use participatory methods to spark dialogue, encourage reflection, and deepen understanding of social issues. Drawing on broader pedagogical approaches can also help keep practice relevant and critical. As Phelan (2023) states, music-making can inspire civic imagination and support more sustainable social connections, reinforcing its role as a powerful tool for transformation in critical community practice.

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