



# WHO MAKES YOU FEEL

On healing heartbreak and who helps us through.

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY Ella O’Keeffe

What happens when you emerge from the depths of heartbreak? After your bedsheets have become soft and hot from too much body contact and your breath is stale and sweet; the pain has calcified – the edges smooth, rounded by salty tears that rolled down the back of your throat, dislodging it from where it sat, sharp and immediate and high up. Now it is in your guts, they have soured from grief and dehydration, but at least the pain is not so urgent. Suddenly, one day – or one minute – your bones no longer feel heavy, your muscles ache to be moved, you want to look at the sun without a throbbing head and without the urge to turn away. Life kicks up a tempo once again, suddenly the music that let you sink into the swamp of your grief no longer feels as welcome as it once did.

It was PJ Harvey and Nick Cave; Dido, Bob Dylan and Beach House. Each of them encouraging us to choke out the last of the heartbreak – or heartbreaker – in our pools of tears. Breathe them out through rattled breath with the ashes of our relationships. Dido becomes our personal organ chimney sweep. When the pipes are clear, who comes next? They have served their time, done their duty, dug you into the pits of despair and buried you with the cool soil of their melodies. Whose beat will coax you out of your shallow grave and welcome you amongst the living?

We’ve all been in those moments. The ones where sometimes the only way to stop yourself from calling is to listen to a pop song on repeat about not needing someone to complete you, even if it felt like a piece of you rotted when they left. This generally gets categorised as “guilty pleasure” music. Good enough to listen to on repeat – to tell yourself they’re replaceable, and that they don’t know what they’ve missed, and

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that you’ll be happier without them – bad enough to listen to almost exclusively in solitude, or with a select group of friends



who can sing along all the same, because they too have had to clamber out of the trenches to the beat of an Ariana Grande song in their lifetime.

After all, it's called pop music for a reason, and despite its ephemeral and accessible generalisations, one can only deny themselves a catchy, upbeat tune for so long. When heartbreak is concerned, it can often feel like the remedy we need to surface above sea level once again. Perhaps it looks like dancing alone with the blinds closed, moving the blood to your heart so that it can repair quicker, or driving in the car with the windows up screaming the lyrics to a song that somehow feels

as though it was written for this singular moment in your life. Maybe it looks like packing up your house with your girlfriends, each of them coming over and silently separating your things into boxes until someone puts on Nelly Furtado and suddenly, you're reminded that moments like this are a cliché precisely because they genuinely make you feel happy and safe and cared for in a way that is not hinged on the conditions and the complexities of romantic love.

For women, these moments are pivotal in the breakup process. The need for human connection is well documented and studied throughout all civilizations,

and when it comes to modern friendships, the bonds that girls build within the walls of heartbreak are far more vital than the romance itself. There are essential points in my existence where the most important women in my life have packed up their dinners and driven to my house to sleep next to me after a breakup, or settled around the kitchen table to listen to me cry about somebody that I was sure I was in love with. They've taken me dancing when I wanted to climb inside my own ribcage and go to sleep there forever.

We do this because we all know what it feels like, and we'll all need someone – at some point in our lives – to assure us

that our lives aren't going to end because somebody managed to make us feel like we'd been cracked in half.

What is the role of music in helping zip us back together? The healing power of music and sound can be traced back – tried and tested, if you will – to Indigenous and Eastern practices throughout many cultures across the globe. In his seminal book, *Di Anima*, Aristotle wrote that flute music could “arouse strong emotions and purify the soul” and since, we have done copious amounts of research that describes music as a sort of skeleton key that helps us open or reopen the doors of the mind; connecting the hemispheres of the brain and rewiring them to redefine future experiences. Some of the earliest experiments in music therapy have been discovered in preliterate cultures and early civilizations in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Israel, Greek Antiquity, Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Baroque.

Dr Tanya Marie Silveira-Price is a registered music therapist who works heavily in stroke rehabilitation for survivors. She explains to me how this rewiring works from a scientific perspective.

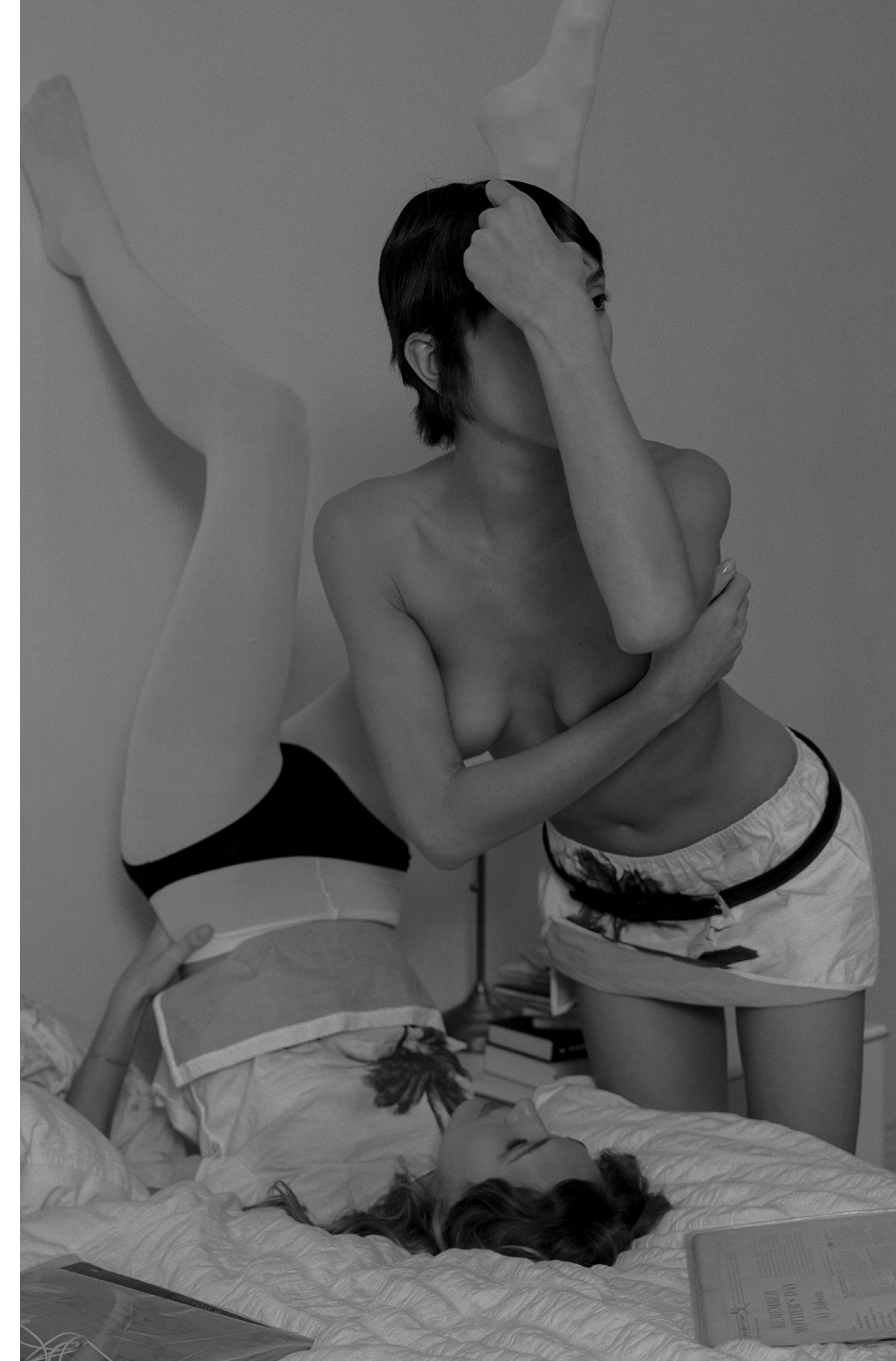
*Whether acknowledged as seminal records like Beyoncé's 2016 visual album, Lemonade, or passed-off pop hits that land themselves in the category of “fluff”, part of the place of women's pop music is to create a direct dialogue with the listener. Some speak clearly; directly; to women's experiences. A compendium of auditory anecdotes that tick off some of our most universal confrontations, and scream in their faces.*

“If someone has had a stroke, generally, they have damage in one side of the brain. We can draw upon music, because it's processed all over the brain to help them with their rehabilitation.” She continues, “If a person has lost function in say, their right hand, because the opposite part of the brain is based on the opposite hand, part of

the brain will be indicating the movement on this side. Because music is processed all over, it can help compensate. So, we use music, first for engagement, to get the person to engage in rehabilitation exercises, either playing an instrument themselves, or following an auditory cue.”

On an emotional level, Silveira-Price explains how deep the link is between music and our autobiographical memories, and the ways that it can be leveraged when dealing with neurological rehab, specifically with memory issues and dementia. “Sometimes, there are people that I've worked with who

are not able to have a conversation. But if you find a particular piece of music that was important to them at a particular time, suddenly, they're able to speak because they're literally transported back in time because of the autobiographical memory,” she explains. “I was recently working with a person who has had a lot of anxiety post stroke, and we found a particular song that he really loves. After doing some mindful-based work, and including that song, this particular aspect of his anxiety has now become managed within a matter of weeks.”





Learning that music can bridge the gaps in our neural circuitry gives context to the ways our brains react to music, and how our auditory cortex and auditory thalamus converge with dopamine to create a positive or memorable experience via music. In other words, it can quite literally help us rewire our brain after heartbreak to give us points of emotional stability when it feels as though our lives have been upended.

Athanasia Spathis is a sound healer who explains that much of the effect music has on the body comes from the frequency the sound is played at. “Before the Industrial Revolution, all instruments were tuned to 432 hertz, which quantum physics has proven is the vibration that the Earth sits at,” she tells me. “This is why that frequency is used in sound healing, because it’s very enriching and nourishing for the body.”

She explains that this comes down to the state that our brainwaves enter into when we hear sound at certain frequencies: “What happens when you’re in a deep meditative state is that you enter a brainwave state called theta. So, the theta brainwave state is the state just before we fall asleep. It’s a state of consciousness where you’re not quite asleep, and you’re not quite awake. In that brainwave state, what happens is that your serotonin levels are put on pause to some degree, and the body is in a deep state of relaxation.”

When we are in this state of relaxation, new neurons are being built, or existing ones repaired, based off sound. “It has been proven that each one of our organs vibrates at a different frequency, so what sound healing does, is that it helps to retune the body and allow it all to work in harmony,” Spathis says.

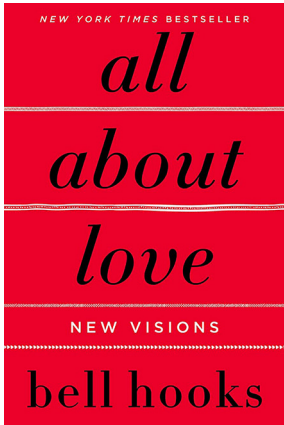
While sound and music are regarded differently within these modalities of healing, understanding the background, wherein our bodies are able to process it and utilise it to bring ourselves to equilibrium, feels especially interesting. It is not likely that Robyn’s *Dancing on My Own* is being played at 432 hertz. However, anything that is both “familiar and preferential” will always be the music that does us the most good, over any genre that is “supposed” to make us feel a certain way, Silveira-Price notes. With this in mind, why is it that the pop music canon, especially when made by women, feels like a “guilty” pleasure?



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(HARPER COLLINS)

There are many signs in our current paradigm that point to the assumption, through anthology and criticism and histories, that some of music’s most worthwhile stories have been created by men. Within the realm of pop music, this canon feels especially prevalent, leaving little room for the profound impact women’s pop music has had on complete generations. Whether acknowledged as seminal records like Beyoncé’s 2016 visual album, *Lemonade*, or passed-off pop hits that land themselves in the category of “fluff”, part of the place of women’s pop music is to create a direct dialogue with the listener. Some speak clearly, directly, to women’s experiences. A compendium of auditory anecdotes that tick off some of our most universal confrontations, and scream in their faces. Others whisper into our most intimate emotional worlds, cradling us in the knowledge that we are not alone in the depth of our feelings, and the depth of the loneliness that can, at times, be at the centre of the human experience. It is, most certainly, at the centre of heartbreak.

This piece began as a love letter to daggy pop songs and the women who will scream them at the top of their lungs with you to get you through your heartbreak. As it developed, I experienced my own heartbreak – one of those horrible, unbelievable moments for a writer of almost literally speaking things into existence, but one that offered a moment to reflect on these ideas. I had forgotten, momentarily, what happens when your heart is first broken. When, in the initial days of grief, it is quiet. Nothing can prepare anyone for the pain, and feeling it, using music to drop into it, becomes a form of masochism. So, you abstain for a period of time, titrating your emotions until you feel physically capable of wading into the swamp. I had forgotten what happens when your ears are ringing, and your body is rigid, and you’re sure that you’ll never want to hear music again – at least not while you feel like this. Silveira-Price calls it the music that “brings us back to neutral,” breathes life back into our broken bodies and sets us on the right path forward. Perhaps, it can serve as a love letter to this kind of music, instead. Not specifically pop music, or music written and created by women, or music that makes you want to shake your ass, but music that offers the right amount of healing because it’s *your* music. The music that brings you back to life. 🎧



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