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Malcolm Gladwell: Why Music Makes Me Cry

The reporter, writer, and podcaster talks music and tears

BY JOSH ST. CLAIR DEC 17, 2018



PANOPLY

While most of us enjoy the upbeat commuting tune, Malcolm Gladwell, the long-time New Yorker staff writer and The New York Times best-selling author of works like *The Tipping Point* and *Outliers*, asks of his music something different: bring me to tears. Gladwell's latest podcast series, *Broken Record*, explores the emotive power of the earworm, employing that same investigative curiosity for which he's become famous — his detailing of the unexpected influence of minutia (exceptions, anomalies, buried news items, unsung characteristics of genius, or observational bites) — this time with the history of music in mind.

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We sat down with Gladwell to discuss his new project, his long-time obsession with country, the challenges of making it in hip-hop, and just why crying beats out laughing.

MH: You've taken on an array of disparate topics over the years, and, from the outside at least, it seems like *Broken Record* is one of your more narrowly-focused projects. What is it about music that you felt you needed its own series to explore?

Malcolm Gladwell: I grew up listening to music, but it was college when I really, really jumped into music (pop music) in a serious way. We would sit around and play music and talk about it, and the talking was as important as the listening. That idea — that the best way to listen to music is to play it and talk — has stayed with me. What we love (Bruce [Headlam], Rick [Rubin], and I), is the idea that you can sit down with someone and they can play a little bit of something and then they can explain it, or riff on it, or react to it, and then play a little more. That struck me as being the most natural way to introduce people to music. So that's really where the idea for the show comes from.

Broken



"Broken Record" is a collaboration among Malcolm Gladwell, former New York Times editor Bruce Headlam, and the famed record producer Rick Rubin. Download now on iTunes.

COURTESY

You've said that some of your favorite episodes of *Revisionist History* have been centered on musical topics. Why is that?

I don't know! I was taken by surprise with that. Randomly, in the first season of *Revisionist History*, I thought, "Oh, I'll do a music episode," because I had this idea about doing something with Elvis Costello. [...] And I just thought of it as another story. And then afterwards I thought, "You know, that was really fun." [...] Music and musicians are so natural. They're just so much fun to interview, because on their chosen subject, they're just way more interesting than you can imagine.

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Why do you think that is? Are they *more* interesting [than other interviews]?

Weirdly — and I have a bias in that I think everyone is interesting — but I don't know why; it just seemed that way. Maybe it's because you're engaging them about their art. And also, they see themselves as belonging to a community. There's an incredible generosity about musicians that is not true of writers. Every now and again if you talk to a writer, they will acknowledge their debts. But they'll almost never say, "I got the idea to do this thing that I wrote about from this other writer" — never happens. Musicians do that as a matter of course. They'll tell you, "I stole this riff from this person." And then I talk to that person about it and we all laugh together. Or [I talk to that person and he/she says]: "We threatened to sue and then we settled it!" They're very conscious of the fact that they belong to a community — a creative community — and they're all sharing and building off each other. [...] My dad (who is a mathematician) used to talk about how mathematicians do this. They'll tell you this is inspired by this guy and then it all goes back to Gauss or to whomever. They have the intellectual family tree worked out.

Saddest song ever written: "Bobby Braddock's 'He Stopped Loving Her Today,' of course"

One of the fascinating things from a listener's end is this idea of how music is *felt* — what makes it so emotional and so sad. How did finding sad music in particular (or the sadness in music) become a curiosity?

Well you know, I'm a sucker for a sad song. If you listen to a mix tape that I made, it's gonna be 85 percent sad songs. I don't listen to upbeat music; I have no idea why. I want my music to bring me down, and I want to wallow in my suffering and pain. So the idea that I would do an episode on what might be the saddest song of all time was natural. Of course I'm gonna do that. If you knew me, you would know there was nothing surprising about that episode of Revisionist History. The only shocking thing is that this wasn't the very first episode I did.

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Bobby Braddock, who Gladwell says performs the saddest song of all time,
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Do you think that the sadness is maybe an engine for creativity, or is it just that you like more downtempo songs?

I have a thing about how crying is much more interesting than laughing. Anyone — even a baby — can make you laugh. [...] If I said to you "make me laugh," you could make me laugh. But if I said to you "over the phone right now, you have five minutes, make me cry," you can't do it. I'm not gonna cry. Crying is way harder than laughing. Making someone cry is way harder than making someone laugh. So a song that can make you cry strikes me as being an extraordinary accomplishment. The degree of difficulty involved in tears has always fascinated me. It's a challenge; you gotta work at it. I think that's part of it. And then the consequences. I can make you laugh right now, but you'll get over it, and 30 seconds later you may have even forgotten you laughed. But if I made you cry right now, you would go home and speak to a friend or girlfriend and you would say, "oh my god, in the middle of this random interview with Malcolm Gladwell, I started crying." It would be an event in your life that you would share with your friends — with some degree of surprise and horror.

"The degree of difficulty involved in tears has always fascinated me."

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Is music particularly good at making you cry?

Clearly. Well, I think that ears are good at this. The way to make someone cry is not in what you show them; it's what you make them listen to — that's really the key to tears. You can make someone cry with a photograph, but it's super hard. You can way more easily make someone cry with a song or poem, or something you say to them.



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What makes music so sad? What is it about that medium?

I tried in that episode of Revisionist History called "The King of Tears" — I tried to answer this question. I don't know if I satisfactorily answered it. But I started by asking the question of why country music is particularly good at making you cry, and I said it was because of its specificity. For crying, you need to have an emotional topic, but you also need detail; you need to hang experience on specific details if you're going to be moved to tears. And that's something that comes very naturally to country musicians.

One might normally think of country music (at least that cowboy hat country music) as being more hyper-masculine. And yet what we see with the songs that you profiled is that country music has this rich history of actually wanting you to cry, or, at least showing men in pain.

We did an episode [of Broken Record] with those three great Nashville songwriters [Bobby Braddock, Don Schlitz, and Don Henry]. They were really part of this revolution in Nashville in the '70s where they were moving towards giving a more complete picture of human emotion and human experience in music. And they started telling a different kind of story, a more emotionally complex story. And I think you see that now in country music. It's moved beyond pick-up trucks. It's not the same country music of the '50s and '60s. You know, one of my favorite songs is Mary Gauthier's "Drag Queens and Limousines." It's incredibly sophisticated. She's talking about her coming of age and all the emotional and personal compromises that you have to make if you want to assert your identity. It's a super super complicated, sophisticated song. This is not the country music they were writing in 1965. This new richer music I'm really drawn to, and I think it's so irresistible.

Mary Gauthier "Drag Queens In Limousines"



Have you learned anything about creativity from interviewing singer-songwriters? Does creativity flourish there differently?

Huh. I don't know! I mean, what's most interesting to me about country, for example, is that there's a system. There's a world in Nashville of songwriters who know each other, who collaborate, who get together, who all live within a 20-minute drive of each other, who hang out in the same bars; there's a place where it happens. It's like writing code in Silicon Valley. And I find that really fascinating. Whereas if (and I could be wrong) you're in the rock and roll world (and you're probably in Los Angeles), there isn't the same concentration or cultural structure in place to help you do your craft. And I think that structure makes a big difference. When that structure is in place, it's a lot easier for people to create and to be rewarded for their creations — and to be recognized. I could be wrong, but my sense of Nashville is: if you write a great record, somebody will make it; if you write a really good song, somebody will make a record out of it or sing it in some public forum. [...]



Gladwell onstage at OZY Fest 2018 in July of 2018 in New York City.

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I was listening to a show recently about what it means to break into the world of hip hop — and it's hard. Insane amount of competition. If you're an unknown kid living with your parents in Boise, Idaho, and you have some beats or something you want to show the world, there's not an obvious way to do. Whereas in country, there's a more obvious system in place.

"In country music, there's a system [...] It's like writing code in Silicon Valley."

You've mention *similarities* before, how the specificity of country music (its community, its vocabulary) is very similar to hip hop and rap.

Yeah, the demographics and geography of rap and country music are very similar. I just looked at the top country songs and top hip-hop songs of all time and noted that, unlike in rock and roll, the writers of all of the most well-known songs are geographically concentrated. Virtually every songwriter of note in Nashville is from not just the South, but a very specific part of the South — basically Appalachia: Georgia, Kentucky, Tennessee West Virginia. And hip-hop remains a coastal, urban phenomenon; it's New York City, it's the LA metro area. (There are also pockets in Atlanta and Chicago). If you look at a map of great hip hop, it looks like the map of great country music: it's very specific in terms of where it comes from. Whereas rock and roll is all over the place. And the argument I made was that geographical concentration makes it easier to speak in a specific way, because you know who your audience is. You know they share a lot with you. And so you're rapping for people in your neighborhood; you're writing country songs for other people who grew up very similar to the way you grew up. And that makes it easier for you to communicate complicated ideas in a sophisticated way.

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Janelle Monae

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That's so fascinating. Can you almost find a political fault line with music preference? The specific vocabulary, the in-group mentality, the speaking to themselves – that could be describing American politics.

Others may have thought about this much more than me, but my sense is: I don't think so. [...] When it comes to music, I think that people's minds are pretty open. A lot of reasons why people in certain parts of the country listen to country music and not hip-hop has little to do, I think, with race or ideology. They just don't hear a lot of hip-hop. Access is huge. If you think that the new Janelle Monae album is amazing (as I do), the next question is: who gets to hear it? And if you're a working-class white mom of three kids living in rural Georgia, what is your opportunity to hear Janelle Monae? The stations you listen to might not be playing it. Are you on Spotify and randomly searching for new stuff? Similarly, if you're living in Long Beach and you're a huge hip-hop fan, who's playing you the new Avett Brothers album? No one is. But maybe you'd love it! I think you would! I think that woman in rural Georgia would love Janelle Monae! If she heard it. But she never hears it. Back in the day, when there was a lot less music and where there were a couple of outlets that reached everyone, everyone liked a lot of this stuff; everyone liked the Beatles. I think it's a function of how fragmented our different ways of accessing music has become. I don't think it means anything more than that.

"Last song cried to: Elvis Costello's 'Indoor Fireworks.' The older I get, the more painful the song."

Do you think that maybe it could work in reverse, though? Like if you have a greater dispersion of genres you might actually make people, you know, relate to each other a bit more.

It's interesting. I'd be much more convinced of the causality in that direction than I would the other. I think with music and musical taste, you're disarmed when you hear a song. You have no reason to dislike a song. You're like: convince me. And also, you have an opportunity with music to hear something more than once. And no one ever made you feel ashamed for changing your mind about a song. Whereas if I told you I changed my mind about abortion, you might say "WHY? WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" But if I told you "I really like Chris Stapleton now and I didn't like him for years," you'd say, "fantastic!" (You would think that's a good thing). So there is something wonderfully disarming about music; maybe it could be a kind of goodwill ambassador.

In one of the *Broken Records* episodes Nile Rodgers speaks of music as this kind of salvation. And music always has this religiosity to it. We're all religious in the sense that we worship something. What does Malcolm Gladwell worship?

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Well, I don't know if I worship music. Worship is very much a hierarchical thing. It's paying allegiance to something greater than yourself. And I don't think of music as being greater than us. What's so appealing to me is that it's part of us. I know I can't write the music of my favorite musicians, but when I listen to their music it doesn't feel far; it feels like part of my identity. And that's the opposite of worship. I worship things that are much grander. I find it much easier to worship — and maybe "worship" is the wrong word; I would I have an "awe" for — Steph Curry. But I don't have awe, weirdly, in the same way, for a singer. I feel like it's a different kind of relationship. I'm not even sure my position is rational, but that's just the way I've always thought about music — as being something much more personal and identifiable. Whereas I know that I can't even dribble a basketball. So I have no option but to be in awe of Steph Curry.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

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