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The Home for Inclusive Family Living

Music for New Mamas

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COMMENTS

By **Taz Tagore**

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Music, like birth, is an enigma. Neuroscientists can't pin down a specific part of the brain that is dedicated to music. Music moves like an apparition through our brain, lighting up neural circuits here, disappearing, then reappearing elsewhere to work its magic. Similarly, we can't seem to come up with a scientific way to predict how a birth will unfold. Part of the miracle of childbirth is that it is always a surprise. Like childbirth, music's impact is far-reaching. Music touches our physical bodies, stirs our emotions, and awakens our spirits. Birth and music are deeply connected by their ability to transform us long after their tunes have been played.

I've been a student of music for most of my life, and when I found out I was pregnant, one of the first things I did was to create a playlist for my iPod. It was the only way I could express the enormous joy, fear, and anticipation I felt. Words fell short, but music offered a means to express the complex brew of emotions stirring within. The songs I chose were jubilant ("To Zion," by Lauryn Hill), contemplative ("Swirling Beyond Belief," by Dean Evenson), and profound ("Landslide," as performed by Fleetwood Mac).

About midway through the pregnancy, I began working on my labor playlist, as I was sure that music would play an important role in Ayla's home birth. I worked at it for months, listening to my old favorites as well as following others' recommendations into undiscovered musical territory, and eventually settled on a soundscape befitting an experience as profound as childbirth. I chose otherworldly instruments—singing bowls, harmonium, flutes—and female singers with ethereal voices: Snatam Kaur, Morgan Doctor, Hayley Westenra. During labor, each song on the playlist helped me release my grasp on the outside world so I could listen to my body and tune in to my daughter's spirit. Music led me within, to the place where I had the strength and courage to birth my daughter, and myself as a new mother. (See sidebar: "Taz's Labor Playlist.")

Scientific research is divided on the topic of music and childbirth. The introduction of music into childbirth education is believed to prepare mothers and fathers for childbirth, but so far the effects are considered not quantitative but qualitative—that is, unmeasurable. (See "References" for studies by Caryl Ann Browning and M. E. Clark et al.) Similarly, researchers who have studied the use of music during childbirth overwhelmingly agree that music offers effective relief of pain and stress, but the devices used to record changes in a woman's heart rate, blood pressure, and other vital signs have produced statistically insignificant data. Do we need better science and more precise measurement tools? Or are we to conclude that music, like childbirth, can't be precisely measured by science?

As a childbirth educator, I've coached women before, during, and after childbirth. I have a wealth of anecdotal evidence demonstrating that music can have a powerful and positive effect on childbirth. One of my clients,

Sarah, who had chosen to birth in a hospital but wanted a natural childbirth, had, on the advice of her doula, packed in her hospital bag an iPod filled with calming music. She was “overdue” and was therefore advised to stay at the hospital and receive prostaglandin treatments to ripen her cervix. During the first two treatments, she nervously chatted on the phone with friends, paced the hospital corridors, and took short walks with her husband. Feeling frustrated that the drugs weren’t working, she turned to her iPod for help. After Sarah had listened to violin concertos for several hours, she spontaneously dilated to four centimeters. While the prostaglandins certainly played a role in advancing labor, Sarah felt that they worked better when she was more relaxed and psychologically open to going into labor. In this regard, music was as important to Sarah as the drugs.

Another of my clients, Willa, explained that listening to the guttural chanting of Tibetan monks during childbirth gave her permission to make her own primal sounds. Nancy, who gave birth last month, found that music helped her to quickly establish a rhythm for managing each surge or contraction. Even after a distracting cab ride, hearing music helped Nancy reestablish her laboring rhythm in the new environment of a hospital labor room.

Most childbirth practitioners have had similar experiences with their clients. Music can calm a woman’s nerves during an uneasy pregnancy. It can help soothe her fears when the first contractions hit. It can coax her into labor at moments when drugs and words fail. Even during the transition phase, when the outside world has largely dissolved and she is exclusively focused on birthing, music can slip through the cracks in her consciousness and quietly allay her deepest fears.

My own experience with laboring women echoes the findings of a small body of research that I find fascinating: the use of music during the postpartum phase. I, too, have discovered countless ways in which music can help ease the transition to motherhood. In my own life, music helped me manage physical pain, calm my child and myself, and establish my own rhythm of parenting.

There were several scenarios in which music helped me cross a difficult

threshold. The first occurred in the first weeks of my daughter's life. There were countless moments when she was unsoothable: Diaper changes, nursing, bouncing or walking in a sling—nothing offered comfort. Each time one of my calming techniques failed, I grew more impatient. Finally, in tears, I put aside my checklist of baby-soothing techniques. I breathed deeply, then spontaneously began to sing. I chanted "Om." I sang "Kum Ba Yah." I hummed Vivaldi's *Spring* concerto. I felt myself relax. And just as in the in-flight oxygen-mask scenario—first you put on your own mask, *then* you put a mask on your child—I sang myself into a state of calm in which I was capable of soothing my newborn.

Another personal experience with music therapy unfolded as I suffered through a prolonged period of blocked milk ducts. Listening to music while nursing helped me transcend the physical pain and focus instead on the life-giving exchange taking place. When I nursed without music, I found myself oscillating between crying from the pain and worrying that I couldn't breastfeed. Music helped me rise above my pain and my fears to a place where I could envision my ducts slowly opening. For the first 12 weeks of Ayla's life, I used one hand to cup her head in nursing position and the other to hold the remote control for the stereo. When the music flowed, so did my milk.

A third experiment began once Ayla had begun to settle as a baby and I had emerged from the bliss bubble of new motherhood. The calls of the outside world were urgent—friends wanting to catch up, unanswered e-mails, grant proposals waiting to be written—and distracted me from mothering Ayla. On some days, instead of mothering Ayla, I felt as if I were merely managing her with the aid of such devices as her bouncy chair. When I felt myself drift away from her, music helped bring me back. African folk songs, Celtic lullabies, and the gentle sounds of Zen flutes and waterfalls became the soundtrack to our playtime. Music helped me tune in to my daughter rather than being distracted by the noise of everyday life.

Oliver Sacks has published scientific papers and popular articles and books about music and the brain. In his book *Musicophilia*, he writes of music's capacity to unlock our creativity and intuition. Although I aspire to parent

intuitively, as a thinking person, I'm susceptible to the seductive "answers" offered by parenting books. Here again, I've found that music is an important enabler. When Ayla's behavior baffles me and I'm not sure what to do, music helps set the tone for intuitive exploration. With a soothing tune playing in the background, I try this, then that, without succumbing to anger or frustration. Eventually, I do something that works. My daughter ceases to make dissonant sounds. She laughs. My heart sings with joy. And in this way, we make music together.

TAZ'S LABOR PLAYLIST

Snatam Kaur: "Ek Ong Kaar," from Shanti

Morgan Doctor: "Drolma-La," from Is This Home

Dean Evenson: "Swirling Beyond Belief," from Healing Waters

Krishna Das: "Om Namah Shivaya," from Heart Full of Soul

Caitlin: "Om Mani Padme Hum," from Sacred Mantras

Ali Farka Touré & Toumani Diabaté: In the Heart of the Moon

Various Artists: Dream Therapy

SoundScapes: River

TAZ'S BREASTFEEDING PLAYLIST

Michael Maxwell: The Elegance of Pachelbel

Kikujiro: Original Soundtrack (Various Artists)

Putumayo Presents: French Café

Ry Cooder & V. M. Bhatt: A Meeting by the River

Everything But the Girl: Amplified Heart

Ismael Lo: Iso

TAZ'S POSTPARTUM PLAYLIST

Putumayo Presents: Dreamland: World Lullabies & Soothing Songs

Louis Armstrong: The Best of the Decca Years

Les Nubians: Princesses Nubiennes

Dean Evenson: Healing Waters

Van Morrison: Days Like This

Gotan Project: La Revancha del Tango

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Taz Tagore is a mother to Ayla (17 months); the founder of the Reciprocity Foundation, an award-winning nonprofit; and author of a music and mothering blog, "[Labor of Love](#)".

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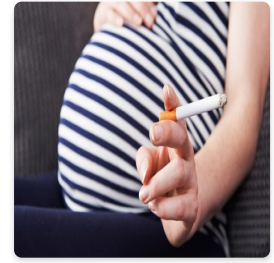
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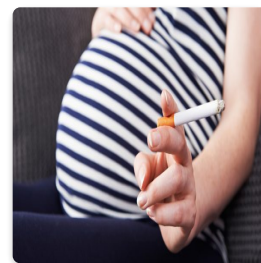
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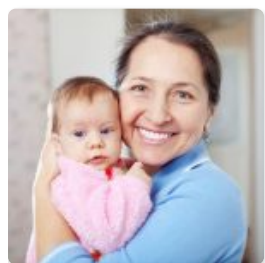
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