

Giving peace a chance? Music can drive us apart as much as it unites

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John Lennon and Yoko Ono wrote Give Peace a Chance in a 'bed-in' in Montreal. Nationaal Archief/Wikimedia

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September 21 is [International Day of Peace](#), the UN's annual call for a global ceasefire. This year, in the lead-up, celebrities have curated a [Peace Day Playlist](#)

available through streaming services. James Morrison, Yoko Ono, Michael Caine, UB40 and others have nominated songs such as Michael Jackson's Heal the World, Joan Baez's We Shall Overcome and John Lennon's Imagine, alongside One, a Peace Day anthem featuring artists from across the African continent. The premise for the playlist is that music "is a unique vehicle to amplify the message of the day, bringing people together in the name of peace."

For many people, such songs have become associated with anti-war protests and notions of freedom, equality and social justice. But just as music can unite us behind a cause, it can also drive us apart. Music must be deployed carefully if we are to really [give peace a chance](#).

Music is often called humankind's "universal language": an all-embracing and inherently benevolent form of communication. Music can indeed deepen feelings of affinity and social cohesion. But these same qualities can also [strengthen divisions](#).

During the 1990s Yugoslav civil wars, for example, Slobodan Milošević's far-right Serbian regime [appropriated turbofolk](#), a mix of [regional folk and electronic European pop music](#), to promote cultural nationalism for political purposes.

Music played in the flute bands of Northern Ireland has similarly strong and contentious associations. Some tunes were so potent that in some parts of the country, whistling a short phrase has [resulted in violence](#).

[Other research](#) shows some American soldiers used metal and rap music in Iraq to heighten aggressiveness and inspire warlike behaviour. Despite the stereotype of violence and rap and metal music, this is [not a result of these music genres](#) per se, but the bonding qualities of music. As we've seen, conflict can be just as easily fanned by dance and folk music.

Serbian singer Ceca Veličković Ražnatović's music is an example of 1990s turbofolk. **What makes music work?**

We can explain how music brings people together through the lens of [empathy](#). Empathy involves being able to identify other people's emotional states and respond appropriately. It can also involve the capacity to reflect other people's emotions back at them. Empathy, therefore, is both knowing and feeling.

We can see these same qualities when groups come together around music. [Research](#) has shown how making music together can enhance children's emotional skills such as empathy. [The study](#) looked at musical components that promote empathy such as emotionality (music's ability to both induce and express emotions); imitation (the repeated patterns of the music itself as well as in the act mimicking other performer's movements); and synchronisation (exemplified through the sense of a mutually felt pulse).

Some researchers have even suggested making music goes beyond empathy, as performers share emotions, intentions and experiences to such a degree that the [boundary between them becomes blurred](#). When singing or humming in unison with a large group of people, for example, it can be difficult to distinguish one's own voice in the total sound being produced.

Healing old wounds

Importantly, though, feeling belonging with other people does not automatically mean peace. The key to this is whether music is being used to bond people who [already consider themselves to be alike](#), or whether it connects those who for whatever reason consider each other "different".

[Recent findings](#) demonstrate that even brief exposure to music from a particular culture can increase listeners' positive attitudes towards people from that culture. However, this approach

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[has been criticised](#)

for emphasising the differences between groups, reinforcing the boundaries the projects aim to dismantle.

To avoid hardening the borderlines, some projects have harnessed musical styles that are perceived to be politically or culturally neutral. For example, in modern-day Kosovo [Musicians without Borders](#) steer away from popular but divisive turbofolk, connecting youth in the ethnically divided city of Mitrovica through [rock music](#).

Ethnically mixed band Proximity Mine, formed by students of Mitrovica Rock School.

Rock music provided a [similar respite](#) during The Troubles in 1980s Northern Ireland, offering Protestant and Catholic youths somewhere to socialise and enjoy each other's company, despite political disparities. [Research](#) also shows how sharing lullabies across language groups helps people recognise the universal aspects of human nature.

In other places, music can help people confront difference. [Scholars have suggested](#) that music from South Africa's history could provide insight into the experiences of both black and white South Africans before 1994, when the country became an inclusive democracy, ending the final vestiges of apartheid.

In South Sudan [Muonjieng \(Dinka\) songs](#) have long served as avenues for public truth-telling and disclosure of past violent abuses. With civil war ongoing, these mechanisms for peacebuilding could be significant in the establishment of formalised justice systems.

Through his music, John Lennon asks us to "imagine all the people living life in peace." It is not always as simple as that, but when carefully deployed, music can give us spaces to work towards enacting this peace.

The [Peace, Empathy and Conciliation through Music collaboratory](#) will be held at The

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University of Melbourne on September 21–22.

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