

“Hear Us Shout:” Music Celebrating Disability Pride and Liberation
Steven E. Brown, Ph.D.
Center on Disability Studies
University of Hawai‘i

Abstract: An exploration of a sampling of music about disability issues, primarily from musicians with disabilities. The focus of the music discussed in this article is protest, power, oppression, and resilience. References and websites for the musicians discussed are included when available.

Key Words: Disability rights, Disability Culture, music

Crip Music

A beat behind, sycophant, you
Sisyphus, roll and run
again and again
Sybil whistle tune, mournfully
Whistle in the dark
The shoe steps the rhythm
Behind, behind, behind you
With the crutch cane stick beat
The cripple who ripples across
The street with the wheel on the rack
Rackle and giggle the cripple
Till the music stops
We step out
And then, and then, it builds
The sound, and the beat
And the melody of the cane
And the melody of the crutch
And the melody of the wheel
And the tap of the stick
And the tick of ventilators
Dilate, pulse
Push breath through the street
Roll forward and on
The beat in a circle
We move, we move
The line held firm
The song lifting
(Petra Kupperts, 2007)

I use poetry about music and dancing to bookend this essay because music cannot be played in this format. I hope to convey, through these two poems, the feelings of music that attract me to that art form.

I came of age in the US Midwest in the 1960s. At that time, many political, social, and cultural movements captured the public's (and my) imagination: Berkeley, California became the home of the Free Speech movement (which spawned many more activist movements in the San Francisco Bay Area); in the southern states, the civil rights movement; from various locales, the women's movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement. I identified with all these reform-minded activities. Popular music both reflected and stimulated aspects of these various protest movements. During the 1960s, there were a bevy of antiwar songs. Perhaps the most radical was Country Joe McDonald and the Fish's *The Feel Like I'm Fixin' to Die Rag* (1965):

So put down your books and pick up a gun
We're gonna have a whole lot of fun!
And it's one, two, three what are we fighting for?
Don't ask me, I don't give a damn
Next stop is Vietnam

While I identified with all of these reform movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, I did not yet identify myself as an individual with a disability. But in the early 1980s when I became a part of the disability rights movement, I sought various cultural representations of my new movement home, including music. I still do.

When I think of a disability rights song, the first criteria is that the content of the song has something to do with the experience of disability. Frequently, but not always, that content is generated by someone with a disability. Sometimes an individual with a disability creates music that may not initially seem disability-related, yet nonetheless relates, however subtly, to the musician's disability experience. There are also musicians with disabilities who seem to have little to do with the disability rights movement, at least in their music.

This is a survey of music I know, not comprehensive and primarily limited to English language lyrics. It constitutes but a sampler of music that celebrates disability pride and liberation.

I am compelled to begin with Jane Field because I have used her music for many years in presentations. In 1994 Field released *The Fishing is Free*, a classic song collection. The first two lines below are the title song's refrain:

Don't you wish that you were disabled?
Disabled is the better way to be.
When we go out it's really neat,
we're always sure we'll get a seat
Oh, don't you wish that you were just like me?

Field utilizes humor to describe various disability life experiences, including going through the back doors of buildings to get inside, and not having to pay for a fishing license. The trade-offs are clear in the refrain. The breaks one gets from becoming disabled are so compelling that those who do not have a disability will surely want to acquire one. This song collection also includes “Quickie's Goodbye,” a tribute to a loyal wheelchair; a love song, “One Flight of Stairs;” and a classic anthem to our sexuality, “Disabled People Do It!” another presentation favorite.

The nondisabled human service professional, Peter Leidy has recorded three CDs about “human serviceland.” On *The Great Escape*, several songs describe survivors and escapees from institutions. In folk style, Leidy sings the “Darwin Ness Polka” about a man who finally gets out of an institution after “47 years staring at the same walls.” When Leidy sings about Darwin Ness he’s now “been out 20 years and there’s no time to rest.” *The Great Escape*’s title song, tells the story of “Charlie [who] was locked up there at the age of 9, having been found guilty of committing no crime.” At the age of 23, in 1967, “Charlie ran away, he traveled night and day... he took a holiday,” and in what might seem to be a classic understatement, Leidy sings “he’s gone and he won’t be coming back,” because Charlie realizes “at least I know I’m free, may no one ever take that from me.” “The Ballad of Self-Directed Joe,” sung in the style of the “The Ballad of Jed Clampett” (Henning, 1962; also known as the *Beverly Hillbillies* theme song) narrates the tale of a bureaucratic mistake that has made Joe rich. Leidy sings about “choice, control, dignity” and says that though the state sought Joe “he was last seen lying on a beach in Mexico.” Finally, the all-encompassing *Inclusion* states unequivocally “we all belong” and everyone should pay attention because we are “all invited to come along.” Emulating earlier civil rights songs, Leidy intones the disability rights emphasis that “inclusion is about change and change will come.” In case the listener has not figured it out yet Leidy explains, “all means all” and “together we’re better, together we’re strong.”

Perhaps, the two best-known singer-songwriters who focus on disability in their music are Jeff Moyer and Johnny Crescendo. Moyer, who is blind, lives in Ohio. He first gained notice in the late 1970s as the resident musician of the 1977 sit-in at the San Francisco Federal Building. Until recently, this was the largest take-over of a US government building in US history. Demonstrators demanded the government implement regulations to enforce a law known as “Section 504,” that is widely viewed as the first US law protecting the rights of individuals with disabilities (Brown, 1994, p. 61, DREDF, 1999). I often play Moyer’s song, “For the Crime of Being Different” which focuses on his brother who was institutionalized because of a developmental disability:

For the crime of being different,
for the crime of being slow
For the crime of not quite fitting in,
we sentence you to go
Where you will be with others
who are also of your kind
Far, far away from city lights,
out of sight and out of mind.

The sentence is quite final,
there can be no appeal
You have no right of protest,
no defense nor free man's bail
Within the institution,
away from prying eyes
Drugs and grinding tedium will become a way of life.

Through the power of the people
and in the wisdom of the State
We sentence you to go away
and live your star-crossed fate
Perhaps in time these walls will fall,
these prisons will be shunned
But til that time this sentence stands,
the State's will shall be done.

For the crime of being different,
for the crime of being slow
For the crime of not quite fitting in,
we sentence you to go
Where you will be with others
who are also of your kind
Far, far away from city lights,
out of sight and out of mind.

© Jeff Moyer 1986, Used with author permission

Originally from England, Johnny Crescendo now makes his home in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. A founder of DAN, the Direct Action Network, modeled on the US street activist group ADAPT¹, that focused first on accessible transportation, and now works to get people out of nursing homes and other institutions, of the US, Johnny's songs relate tales of disability pride, protest, and rights. (<http://www.johnnycrescendo.com/page6.html>). His song, "Not Dead Yet" protests physician-assisted suicide:

I'm lying at the gates of heaven
I'm not dead yet...
Doctors popping in with pills like a graveyard junkie...
Assisted suicide is funky...
My mother and father know what's best
They want to kick Joey out of the nest...
I'm lying at the gates of heaven
I'm not dead yet...
I was kind of amazed to see St. Peter roll up in a wheelchair
I said "hey Pete, I want to go back."
He said 'go and give shit to Dr. Quack."

I'm lying at the gates of heaven
I'm not dead yet.

Robin Surgeoner is another English singer who, with two other musicians, is known as Angryfish. Their CD, *Barbed Wire and Pot-Holes*, meant to be played loudly, narrates the story of a man's awakening from being a person with a disability to being a member of an oppressed group and learning what he can do to change the world for the better. It is the first complete story CD I have encountered by a person with a disability about the disability experience.

Also in the loud music genre, Beethoven's Nightmare, based in Honolulu, bills itself as the first deaf rock'n'roll band in the world. Their CD, *Turn It Up Louder*, features the following partly satirical lyrics from the title song:

If you're looking for a good band
Check us out
Check us out
If you're looking for a good band
Count us in
If you're looking for a good sound
Hear us shout
If you're wondering what we're all about
We're the only deaf band in the world
If you can't understand all the words all we need to do is
Turn it up louder
Yeah, turn it up louder

Beethoven's Nightmare "listens" to the vibrations of the music, as do audience members who may be deaf. They were recently featured in a Public Broadcasting System documentary, *Through Deaf Eyes* (<http://www.pbs.org/weta/throughdeafeyes/about/index.html>).

Musicians have also addressed what might be considered more subtle disability issues. The late Kim Palmer succumbed to Multiple Chemical Sensitivities in 2006. An excerpt of her 1993 "Allergic to the 20th Century" appears below:

Industrialized, deodorized, volatized for my demise!

PARDON-MOI, DON'T MIND ME
I'M JUST ALLERGIC TO THE 20TH CENTURY
PARDON-MOI, DON'T MIND ME
I'M JUST ALLERGIC TO THE 20TH CENTURY

Take me back in time where I'm away
From pollution's contribution to our modern day
Where doctors don't just look at me and scratch their head
And there aren't any flame retardants in my bed
And no-one at MacDonald's eats what I can't

Appointing me the ultimate renunciant
Where I can hide from the hydes to save my hide
Formaldehyde, benzaldehyde, pesticide, I'm paralyzed!

PARDON-MOI, DON'T MIND ME
I'M JUST ALLERGIC TO THE 20TH CENTURY
PARDON-MOI, DON'T MIND ME
I'M JUST ALLERGIC TO THE 20TH CENTURY

Elaine Kolb, who wrote the first ADAPT anthem, "We Will Ride," (1994) sings the song in a folk/spiritual style:

We will ride
We will ride
With the strength of human justice on our side
By the grace of God above
Our battle cry is love
And we will ride
We will ride
Far too many people have been suffering too long
We won't accept excuses
Right is right and wrong is wrong
And it's wrong to try and keep us waiting for some charity
So let's get ourselves together here and now, you and me.

There are many other musicians with disabilities who focus on disability issues. Their work may often be found on www.youtube.com by searching the phrases, "disability" and "music." "Making Love in the Handicap Toilet," (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AmJ6FDj9R1k>) is a video by "Boys on Wheels," fronted by the Swedish comedian, Jesper Odelberg.

In the 2006 collection, assembled by England's Robin Surgeoner, Lindsay Carter's "Useless Eaters" uses the Nazi phrase for individuals with disabilities to address today's bioethics discussions:

If just one gene's out of whack
They're looking to abort us...
They call us useless eaters
With fucked-up DNA
All we want is the chance
To show you how we love our lives
But the movers and the shakers
Are scared that we'd change your minds
We're not gonna let you wipe us out
We're here to stay
Our genes are fine
Our DNA is A OK...

Our lives aren't a tragedy
Your life without us is

Music has the ability to be soothing or rousing, feelings needed at various times during the struggle to overthrow oppression and attain rights. Music may also be educational, and I hope that this sampler of disability rights music has been. It can also be inspiring. I conclude, as I began, with a poem. This is one I published in 1995 after I learned, along with many others, to enjoy dancing from our wheelchairs:

The Wheelie

There's a new dance craze makin' the rounds
Don't matter bout the speed or sounds.
Going to boogie in a new space
Cranking it up with a different pace.
First thing ya gotta do
Is be prepared for something new.
Gotta get off your heels
And move onta your wheels.
Take your chair onta the floor
Make them rhythms roar
Wheelies speed and soar.
Skid your wheels
Hear the squeals,
People watchin' ya twist
Wondrin' what they've missed.
Make a splash
Roll 'n' slash
Send your chair onta the floor
Make them rhythms roar
Wheelies speed and soar.
Do the wheelie
Be a big dealie
Do the wheels
No need to stay on your heels
Watch the sidewalls soar, flash and more
Them dancers diggin' to their core.
Listen to them rhythms roar
Wheelies speed and soar,
Be prepared for somethin' new
It's a craze catchin' on
with more than a few.
Off your heels
On your wheels
Slip 'n' slide 'n' ask for more
Make them rhythms roar

To a new folklore.

Steven E. Brown, an editor of the *Review of Disability Studies* and assistant professor of disability studies at the University of Hawai'i is also the co-founder of the Institute on Disability Culture (<http://web.mac.com/disculture/>), a poet, essayist, and speaker. A collection of essays, *Movie Stars and Sensuous Scars: Essays on the Journey from Disability Shame to Disability Pride* is available at many online bookstores. He may be contacted at: sebrown@hawaii.edu

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Musician Web Sites

Angryfish: www.angryfish.co.uk

Beethoven's Nightmare: <http://www.beethovensnightmare.com>

Elaine Kolb: <http://community-2.webtv.net/DREAMprod4U/ElaineMarieKolb/>

Jeff Moyer: www.jeffmoyer.com

Jesper Odelberg: <http://www.odelberg.se/>

Johnny Crescendo: www.johnnycrescendo.com

Kim Palmer: <http://www.angelfire.com/az/ox/>

Endnotes

¹ (American Disabled for Accessible Public Transit was the initial acronym, then changed to American Disabled for Attendant Programs Today, after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. Several years ago, the group decided to stop trying to fit the letters to any acronym. For history of ADAPT, see www.adapt.org)