

# Music, Healing, and Transformation

By Jeanne Mackey



*(Jeanne Mackey is a musician, community-builder, and workshop leader with a lifelong devotion to personal and societal transformation. Since moving from Ann Arbor from Washington, D.C. in 1995, Jeanne has been involved in a range of community activities, including directing Sacred Song, performing with the band Songcatchers, co-producing the "Love Makes a Family" and "One Song, Many Voices" benefit concerts, organizing community grief rituals, and leading workshops on Nature as Teacher and Women at Midlife.)*

It was my dad's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration. He had Parkinson's disease. His memory was fading, and his thinking had slowed. But his face brightened as the family band assembled to entertain the roomful of friends and relatives in the church basement. We led Dad to his seat on the stage as my brothers and nephews set up on drums, bass, and electric guitar. Five-year-old niece Tricia picked up a tambourine as I approached the microphone with my acoustic guitar. Dad pulled a harmonica out of his coat pocket and started us off on an upbeat rendition of "Autumn Leaves." As he played, you could feel peoples' perceptions of him start to shift. They began to see him, not just his illness. By the end of the evening, he was joking and talking, looking more like his old self than he had in a long time.

Throughout my life, I have experienced music as a powerful way to strengthen connections and open our hearts. Music is and has been my beloved companion, a lifesaver at times. I know how it feels to give voice to the songs inside, and I love helping other people make that discovery.

When I first played the piano as a little girl, music seemed magical to me. When I was an angst-ridden teenager, it helped me express the pain and anger of being an outsider. As a socialist-feminist political activist, I found music was a great way to bring people together—and more fun than attending all those organizing meetings. When my friend was diagnosed with cancer, music helped us come together in healing circles. When I moved to Ann Arbor after 20 years in Washington, D.C., music helped me find community. After September 11, it provided a way to gather kindred spirits to express our values of peace, justice, and cultural diversity.

Like any intimate relationship, my connection with music has changed and grown over the years. In the beginning, I just wanted to explore the sounds and express myself. Then I learned how great it felt to share the songs with others, the alchemy of doing it in a large venue. At times I got caught in an anxious scramble to "make it." Sometimes I sang songs that were political speeches put to music.

Years later, the lyrics took a back seat for awhile as I deepened my understanding of different musical forms, like jazz and rock. Lately it's been a lot about building community.

This past winter, I was reading an article by my teacher Myron Eshowsky about resonating hope in this time of fear in the world. Of course, when I hear the word "resonance," I think of music. I decided to bring together a group of friends to record an album of simple, rhythmic chants. I chose songs that foster hope and a sense of commonality. The songs are simple enough for novice singers to incorporate into the soundtrack of their lives, and give lots of rooms for seasoned singers to embellish. It's been a rich and deeply satisfying process—from conversations with the various songwriters around the country, to the rehearsals and the recording day itself at Temple Beth Emeth/St. Clare Episcopal Church. This September, we've planned a celebration of the release of the CD, "Home to the River of Love," where we'll teach the chants to the audience and sing them in circle with accompaniment on flute, harp, percussion, guitar, and sitar.

Although the piano was my first instrument, the guitar was where I found my voice. I learned harmony by singing along with the Beatles. When I first put Bob Dylan's "Highway 61 Revisited" on the turntable in our Oxford, Ohio living room, I immediately started memorizing all the songs. The finger-pointing anger, dark humor, and thinly veiled bitterness in Dylan's voice and lyrics fed my repressed adolescent soul.

When I discovered the women's movement in the 70s, I searched for feminist songs, but found just a few, like "Don't Put Her Down; You Helped Put Her There" by Hazel Dickens. It was when I moved to Washington, D.C. that I learned how music can build community.

I moved from Ohio to D.C. in 1974 to join Source, a living/working collective that wrote organizing manuals for social change. Source was part of a wave of collectively run businesses in the area. It was an exciting time that I'm grateful to have been part of. There was a definitely a shadow side to it—we could be harshly judgmental in our fervor to make change. But there's much to be said for our dedication and creativity. We were so passionate about creating a just and peaceful world. We believed we could do it—and soon! The economy was such that small businesses were actually sustainable, which is less and less the case today. We would come up with ideas and make them happen. That experience still serves me well.

After we finished the Source catalog on health care, I met my next door neighbor, a singer/guitarist named Mary Trevor. She had just come out as a lesbian, and I was exploring. We became a musical duo, singing for social justice and feminist events in D.C., and toured on the newly-forming women's music circuit.

*"Whether it's a love song or only lonely blues,  
Woman, you know you got to face the music.  
Face the music, though you can't be too wary,  
For it leads you on a merry dance."  
—"Face the Music" by Annie Dinerman*

Mary and I played at hundreds of benefit concerts. Sometimes magic happened at these events, as we sang in community, expressing our common vision, our hopes, our longing. Because we were so marginal in terms of mainstream society, it was exhilarating to give voice to our shared dreams in this way. We felt we had created a liberated zone where for one evening, we got a taste of how

it could be—this world we wished to bring to birth.

*"And the ones who've gone before us will show us the way.*

*And the ones who follow after will welcome the new day.*

*And the ones who've gone before us will join in the chorus,*

*When we do, when we make it through."*

*—"The Ones Who've Gone Before Us"  
by Dorie Ellzey Blesoff*

We wanted to change the world so desperately. So we got into the usual human troubles as we struggled to find the One Right Way to go about it. Mary Trevor and I ended our musical partnership over political disagreements. I tried

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to stay mad forever, but I missed her. We reunited in the early 80s with a focus on songs of working women. We added a band name, "Lifeline," a drummer and a bass player. I got a Fender Stratocaster and a wah wah pedal and we began performing at labor conferences and women's and social justice events around the country.



Jeanne Mackey performing at a political rally in Washington, D.C., in the late 1980's.

Lifeline had a great run as a women's rock band. We shared the stage with some wonderful musicians, like Pete Seeger and Toshi Reagon. We were loud, we had a beat, we had attitude. What we had lost was subtlety, which is one of my strong points. And as I approached age 40, I had to face the fact that I still had my day job as a part-time editorial assistant.

A friend recommended that I see Lucille Kinlein, a healing practitioner who did applied kinesiology, where your body answers yes and no questions. I asked if my main work is

as a performing musician. The answer was no. Is my main work as a teacher? Yes. As the tears began to fill my eyes, Lucille said quietly, "Let's ask if part of your work is as a performing musician." Yes.

It felt true, that my main work in life is teaching, and that music is part of how I teach. Saying it out loud was a turning point. Within a year, I had left the band, quit my day job, and was pursuing a master's degree in social work in order to become a psychotherapist. I had always felt drawn to psychotherapy's power to spark personal transformation. The weight of the responsibility scared me, but I decided to go for it. I continued to perform sporadically with a group called Harmony Bones (named after an acupuncture point).

Photo by Pattie Postel



When I started my first social work internship as a counselor in a county methadone clinic, I was overwhelmed by peoples' pain. I could no longer deny that some amount of suffering is an unavoidable part of life. I had seen too much to attribute it all to systemic injustices. This spun me into an existential/spiritual crisis. In the midst of it, I got a call from my dear long-time friend Diane. She had been diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer.

During the next year and a half, Diane fought for her life. I helped organize monthly gatherings where we used music to focus our healing intention—simple chants that we could easily sing together. As we sang, we passed a glass of water around the circle, charging it with our loving energy. As Diane drank the water, we prayed that her body and spirit would be restored to balance.

Diane died in 1992. Although she did not receive the physical healing that we all longed for, she clearly experienced profound healing on a soul level during the course of her illness. At Diane's memorial service, we sang one of her favorite songs, "Gracias a la Vida" (Thanks to Life) by Violeta Parra:

*"Thanks to life that has given me so much.*

**It felt true, that my main work in life is teaching, and that music is part of how I teach. Saying it out loud was a turning point.**

*It has given me laughter and it has given me tears.  
Thus I can tell the difference between joy and pain—  
The two things that make up my song;  
And your song, which is the same song;  
And the song of all people, which is my own song."*

In the depths of my grief about Diane and the enormity of suffering in the world, music helped me connect to something transcendent, something that enlarged my soul, where I experienced one-ness. I began to realize that music was one of my strongest connections to Spirit. The natural world was another.

I was raised a Lutheran. It just didn't work for me. The way I interpreted the teachings, it seemed that you had to be perfect to be good. So I figured I must be bad. God was a strict judge, always looking over my shoulder. "He sees you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake—he knows if you've been bad or good." I'm still plagued by those concepts of absolute good and evil.

As I searched for spiritual answers, I felt drawn to practices

and beliefs that had a more organic view of morality than what I was raised with. I first learned about shamanism from a dear friend in D.C. She went to a weekend workshop with Michael Harner through the Foundation for Shamanic Studies. She described using a drum beat to alter her consciousness and journey into "non-ordinary reality" where she met various spirit guides in animal and human form. The idea of finding the magickal world that co-exists with ordinary life was both enthralling and scary to me! Over the years, I moved through some of the fears and began to believe that I might actually have loving allies in the spirit world. Over the last several years, I've been studying and practicing shamanism and peacemaking with Myron Eshowsky, the founder of Pathways Foundation for Peace and Healing.

Another opening in spirituality came through the School of Lost Borders, founded by Steven Foster and Meredith Little in Big Pine, California. Steven and Meredith led wilderness rites of passage in the form of a 4-day solo fast in nature with three taboos: no company, no food (except water) and no shelter. Everything that happened during the fast was viewed as communication with Spirit and a mirror of one's life challenges. I undertook my fast in 1998. When I returned from the four days and shared my story, I offered the chant that came to me in the desert:

*"Gonna keep my feet a-movin' (don't hold back!)  
On a path of freedom (don't hold back!)  
Gonna walk in beauty (don't hold back!)  
Trust where I'm coming from (don't hold back!)"*

Pattie and I left D.C. to relocate in Ann Arbor in 1995. I couldn't find a job as a therapist in Ann Arbor, so took a position in the adult outpatient department of Community Mental Health in Howell. Meanwhile, I sought opportunities to connect with other musicians.

I knew a couple of people in Ann Arbor. One was Elise Bryant, a gifted playwright, director, singer, and community organizer. Soon after our move, Elise invited me to be part of a benefit concert to raise money for her upcoming trip to Africa. It was called an Evening of Sacred Song. I couldn't imagine a better introduction to Ann Arbor than this project, which combined spirituality, social justice, and music. It was an eclectic, racially and spiritually diverse mix of professional and amateur singers. The concert was such a success that we decided to make it annual December event. It has become an alternative holiday celebration, with each year's proceeds going to local nonprofit organizations. After Elise left the area, I co-directed the group with Rhonda Bantsimba until 2004. Rhonda and I also organized and performed in a benefit concert at the Ark in 2001—our response to September 11. We called it "One Song, Many Voices."

I first heard Kathy Moore sing with Stephanie Ozer when we shared the bill at a women's labor event in Lansing back in the 80s. I was mesmerized by the beauty of Kathy's voice, her musical virtuosity, and the heartfelt emotion that she expressed so eloquently. I contacted her after moving to Ann Arbor, and we developed a friendship. We performed for a few years with Don and Matt Allen as "What's Inside" and more recently, as the improvisational group "Songcatchers" with Laz Slomovits, Don Allen, and Tim Twiss. Kathy's idea for Songcatchers was to make music

out of silence, to listen and respond to one another and communicate with music rather than talking. There were times when the music took us all to a place we'd never been—times when the music became prayer.

Just as there were new musical influences in Ann Arbor, there were spiritual influences I hadn't been exposed to. I met ShuNahSii Rose in Sacred Song and studied and practiced goddess spirituality with her circle of women for several years. I learned from ShuNahSii that spirituality can be joyful, playful, and outrageous. I loved how we celebrated the earth holidays and the way the rituals touched all our senses: the lush colors of the altar, the sumptuous food we brought to share, the circle dances, and always the singing. ShuNahSii had a knack for coming up with the perfect chant to comple-

ment whatever magickal work we were doing. Once again, I was experiencing the power of simple rhythmic singing.

*"Free the heart, let it go; what we reap is what we sow!"*

—Diana Earthmission

My interest in chants led me to take a workshop with Kay Gardner at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival in the late 90s. Kay was a pioneer in women's music who was passionate about music's ability to heal and connect. She started a group in Bangor, Maine called Women with Wings, made up of a mix of professional and amateur singers who compose and perform chants that invoke the sacred. After the festival, I got together with my friends Lisa Marshall Bashert and Ayron Smith-Douglas to form Women with Wings West. We gather once a month to sit in circle with other women and share songs that are sacred to us. Lisa, Ayron, and I also produced the Love Makes a Family concert at Pease Auditorium in 2002, a successful fundraiser for the Ypsilanti Campaign for Equality.

Working as a psychotherapist became more difficult as managed care and budget cuts changed the landscape. I ended up with a small private therapy practice and a part-time computer trainer job at the University of Michigan. This gives me time to take on the community and creative work that calls to me. Current projects include the CD release concert, a community grief ritual in September, and the newly forming Pathways clan group in Ann Arbor. Through it all, music continues to inspire, comfort, amuse, and sustain me.

A year after my Dad's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, he took a fall and was moved to a nursing home for a brief period. When the hospice nurses stopped to check on him, he pulled out his harmonica, offering a shaky but enthusiastic rendition of "Camptown Races" for their entertainment. The next night, my brother phoned to tell me Dad had passed on.

*"I got the call last night, just around midnight.  
I went out on the porch and waited.  
I felt him there as a strong wind blew,  
And the wind chimes sang all around me.  
I had never seen a shooting star in the wide  
Michigan sky;  
But one went racing through the dark that night.  
Was it a miracle? So many miracles.  
Always a miracle."*

—"Always a Miracle," by Jeanne Mackey & Dan Bilich

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The "Home to the River of Love" CD release celebration and community sing will take place at Friends Meeting House, Saturday, 7:30 p.m., September 24. For more information, contact [mackeyj@umich.edu](mailto:mackeyj@umich.edu) or call 734-975-8791