

## **“When I Get Low, I Get High” The Portrayal of Addiction and Recovery in African American Music**

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Important experiences in the life of a people are expressed through the cultural media of language, music, literature, dance, and art. As part of a larger project focusing on the history of addiction and recovery in African American communities, the authors investigated how the experiences of addiction and recovery have been portrayed within African American music. Through the major Internet web sites specializing in musical lyrics, we identified 145 songs released between 1924 and 2006 that focused on alcohol and other drug (AOD) intoxication, addiction, or recovery. The review spanned the genres of blues, jazz, rock n’ roll, rhythm and blues, rap and Gospel music. This article summarizes the findings of that review and explores implications for the treatment of African American clients.

### **“Blues And Booze” (1920s and 1930s)**

Isolated reports of African Americans addicted to alcohol date to the late 1700s, but sobriety was the norm within African American communities until alcohol-related problems significantly increased during the era of American Prohibition (the 1920s) (Christmon, 1995). This shift followed mass migration of African Americans into northern cities in the early twentieth century, diminished influence of the traditional Black church, and the infusion of alcohol into African American communities. During Prohibition, White criminal syndicates placed their bootlegging operations, speakeasies, cabarets, after-hours clubs, houses of prostitution, and gambling joints in predominately Black communities (James & Johnson, 1996). As alcohol and its related problems seeped into African American communities, local musicians detailed the stories of those problems in song. Ma Rainey lamented in “Blues and Booze” (1924) that she “spent every dime on liquor”, but that she had to “have the booze to go with these blues”. Ida Cox in “Booze Crazy Man Blues” (1928) expressed fear that her “sweet daddy” was going to let booze carry him to his grave. As the 1930s approached, Bessie Smith expressed the pain and isolation that could follow on the heels of liquor, champagne and wine in her riveting blues rendition, “Nobody Knows You When You’re Down and Out” (1929).

The 1930s brought growing concern about alcoholism and its effects on the individual and family in such songs as Lonnie Johnson’s “Low Down St. Louis Blues” (1931), Lucille Bogan’s “Drinking Blues” (1934), and Scrapper Blackwell’s “Bad Liquor Blues” (1935). Joshua White confessed in “Pigmeat and Whisky Blues” (1935) to waking with a snake “crawlin’ out that whiskey bottle, talkin’ just like a natural man” and ends his song with the pledge “I ain’t gon’ drink no more liquor, doggone my whiskey-drinkin’ soul.”

The music of the 1930s also signaled new drug patterns in the African American community. Cab Calloway’s “Kickin’ the Gong Around” (1931), “The Man from Harlem” (1932), and “The Reefer Man” (1932), as well as Jazz Gillum’s “Reefer Head Woman” (1938) signaled increased marijuana and cocaine use. Ella Fitzgerald

summarized the central role of alcohol and other drugs in African American communities during the 1920s and 1930s in her 1938 blues anthem, “When I Get Low, I Get High”.

### **“Beer Drinking Baby” to “Junker’s Blues” (1940s-1950s)**

World War II caused a precipitous drop in the production of African American music and in alcohol and drug-related musical themes within the songs of this period. Concerns about drinking expressed in the lyrics of African American music in 1940s focused primarily on women. Merline Johnson’s “Bad Whiskey Blues” (1947) recounts the loss of her boyfriend due to her drinking, but she laments, “I can’t help it, I would drink until the end.” Billy Valentine complains that his “Beer Drinking Baby” (1949) wants to do nothing but drink day and night, raise hell and fight.

Following the Second World War, heroin use exploded in African American communities. Claude Brown (1965) vividly described the “shit plague” that hit Harlem and other New York neighborhoods in the 1950s. The changing racial profile of the American narcotic addict was reflected in admissions to the federal narcotics hospital in Lexington, Kentucky. African American admissions rose from 9% of admissions in 1936 to 52% of admissions in 1955 (Lowry, 1956). By the late 1950s, African American music was conveying the stories from this plague in songs such as Champion Jack Dupree’s “Can’t Kick the Habit” (1959) and “Junker’s Blues” (1959).

The urban environment of the post-World War II America produced a “hipster” culture in which social detachment and emotional control were adopted as a style of liberated protest. The “viper” (marijuana user) and the “righteous dope fiend” (functional heroin user) became distinctive roles within African American communities and within the growing jazz subculture (Finestone, 1957; Sutter, 1966). First-hand accounts of the early hipster scene, such as “Mezz” Mezzrow’s “Really the Blues,” describe a subculture awash in alcohol, marijuana, opium, morphine, and heroin. The prominence of illicit drugs in this subterranean subculture became periodically visible in the drug-related arrests (e.g., Louis Armstrong, John Coltrane, Miles Davis) or deaths (e.g., Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday) of prominent jazz artists.

### **“Cloud Nine” to “King Heroin” (1960s-1970s)**

African American music of the 1960s and 1970s continued to portray the celebratory function of alcohol in songs such as Lonnie Johnson’s “Fine Booze And Heavy Dues” (1962), John Lee Hooker’s “One Bourbon, One Scotch, One Beer” (1966), and Jimmy Rogers’ “Sloppy Drunk” (1972). These songs did hint that such celebrations could evoke a personal price.

From the 1960s through the early 1980’s, African American song lyrics tended to be suggestive and mysterious in describing drug use. Songs such as Sly and the Family Stone’s “I Want to Take You Higher” (1969), Stevie Wonder’s “Too High” (1973), Bob Marley’s “I Shot the Sheriff” (1974) and “Easy Skanking” (1978), the Temptations’ “Cloud Nine” (1969), and Laid Back’s “White Horse” (1983) all suggested being under the influence of a substance without explicitly describing drug use. Rick James’ 1978 song “Mary Jane” further typifies such suggestiveness as he sings his love for Mary Jane and her ability to turn him on and take him to paradise when he is feeling low. Jimi Hendrix’s “Purple Haze” (1967), the Temptations’ “Psychedelic Shack” (1970) and Gil

Scott-Heron's "Angel Dust" (1978) reflected the broader polydrug experimentation of the era.

Not all African American music of the mid-twentieth century treated drug use subtly. James Lee Hooker's "Kick Hit 4 Hit Kix U" (1970) was a eulogy to Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix as well as a challenge to addicts to kick their habits before they shared a similar fate. James Brown's 1972 "King Heroin" was an in-your-face warning about a drug that could make people forsake everything of previous importance in their lives. The song ended with a prediction of the fate of those who felt they were stronger than heroin.

*Mount the steed!  
And ride him well  
For the white horse of heroin  
Will ride you to Hell!*

### **"8-Ball" to "Street Lobotomy" (1980s-present)**

The devastating effects that the cocaine epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s unleashed on African American families and communities broke into public consciousness through a series of cocaine-related events: Richard Pryor's self-immolation (1980), the deaths of Len Bias and Don Rogers (1986), the damaged athletic careers of Dwight Gooden, Daryl Strawberry, and Dexter Manley and the public fall from grace of such African American political celebrities as Marian Barry. African American music and film celebrities of this era who also experienced substance-related incidents included Marvin Gaye, Rick James, James Brown, Whitney Houston, Dionne Warwick, and Martin Lawrence. While these high profile cases spawned unending media attention, the poorest African American communities experienced a crack cocaine epidemic, proliferating illicit drug markets, unprecedented patterns of crime and violence, and the transformation of the criminal justice and child welfare systems into occupying institutions. These changes unfolded just as a new stylized form of storytelling—rap music—and a broader "Hip Hop" culture were spreading through African American urban communities. It was inevitable that cocaine and its transformation of street life would be featured prominently in this new instrument of cultural expression.

Rap (particularly gangsta rap) featured alcohol and drug themes more prominently than any previous musical genre. To illustrate this influence, of the 145 songs we identified between 1924 and 2006 that prominently contained alcohol and drug themes, 106 (mostly rap songs) were released after 1980. Between 1979 and 1997, rap music songs with references to alcohol increased fivefold (from 8% to 44%), those exhibiting positive attitudes toward alcohol rose from 43% to 73%, and brand name mentions increased from 46% to 71%. There was also a significant increase in songs by rappers such as Jay Z, Puffy Combs, and Kanye West extolling exclusive brands of champagne and liquor. This marked a shift from a celebratory function of alcohol and drug use to the use of particular substances to signal glamour and wealth—a linkage fueled by the alcohol industry's use of rap music stars such as Ice Cube, Geto Boys and YoYo to promote expensive alcohol products (Herd, 2005).

Alcohol-themed rap songs of this era include NWA's "Drink it Up" (1987), Afroman's "Let's All Get Drunk Together" (2001) and "Colt 45" (2004), 50 Cent's "Got

Me a Bottle” (2002), Tweet’s “Drunk” (2002), and Tupac Shakur’s “Hennessey” (2004). Typical of the rap songs that prominently featured illicit drug use were NWA’s “8-Ball” (1989), Bone Thugs N-Harmony’s “Smokin Buddha” (1990), Cypress Hill’s “Light Another” (1991), Dr. Dre’s “Puffin On Blunts And Drankin Tanqueray” (1992) and “Blunt Time” (1996), Robert Plunkett’s “Crack Smokin’ Woman” (1996), Notorious BIG’s “Ten Crack Commandments” (1997), Jay-Z’s “Dope Man” (1999), and Afroman’s “Dopefiend” (2000). While some rappers glorified their transformation from drug dealers into millionaire rappers, others, such as Chuck D, lead singer for Public Enemy, expressed through songs like “Night of the Living Bashead” (1998) and “1 Million Bottles” (1991) that drugs and alcohol were destroying the Black community.

## **Themes and Implications**

Music is a component of both the culture of addiction and culture of recovery (White, 1996), and reflects the African American community’s ambivalent and evolving relationship with alcohol and other drugs and the functions substance use has served for African Americans.

A pervasive theme in African American music is the use of alcohol and drugs as a balm for personal and cultural pain. Songs from Ella Fitzgerald’s “When I Get Low I Get High” to Tupac Shakur’s “Pour Out A Little Liquor” (1994) portray the ritualized use of intoxicants to blunt emotional pain, assuage grief, and ritually honor the passing of loved ones. The portrayal of alcohol as an emotional anesthetic dates to Lucille Bogan’s “Drinking Blues” (1934) in which the central character’s heart “*is achin’, and whiskey’s all it’s takin’.*” Such pain may be either personal or cultural. Maria Yellow Horse Braveheart (2003) describes a similar pattern of ritualized alcohol use through which Native Americans have medicated the pain of prolonged historical trauma. Each African American client has a “song to sing” (a story to tell), and these songs are filled with cultural as well as personal pain. Talking about historical oppression and present-day racism as well as talking about addiction and recovery within those contexts are best viewed by the counselor, not as defocusing, but as a potentially crucial dimension of the recovery process for many African Americans.

A second theme is the use of alcohol to socialize, celebrate, and signify (assert status). There is a distinct shift in emphasis from the portrayal of alcohol as a balm in the blues genre to the portrayal of alcohol and other drugs as status symbols within rap music. African American music contains vivid portrayals of the personal experience of addiction (particularly the loss of freedom and control) and life within the African American drug culture. A distinct feature within the latter is the depiction of the drug dealer as a hero and anti-hero in songs such as Cab Calloway’s “The Man from Harlem” (1932), Curtis Mayfield’s “The Pusherman” (1972), and Notorious BIG’s “Ten Crack Commandments” (1997).

The role of the dealer and the broader themes of sexuality, criminality, violence and financial status that pervade rap music all suggest a search for manhood. Counselors share with us that they find it difficult to reach young African Americans who are a part of the hip-hop culture. The music of that culture can provide a bridge to understanding and empathy. Listen to the themes of these songs and consider that many successful rap artists—Tupac Shakur, Eminem, Jay-Z, Notorious BIG, Nelly, 50 Cent—were all reared

without the active involvement of their fathers. Young African American men who have struggled to define their manhood in addiction will be similarly challenged to define their manhood in recovery.

Warnings of the effects of addiction on self (insanity and death), family (conflict and estrangement), and community (loss of connectedness, violence) also have a long history in African American music, although less prominent in rap music than earlier genres. Cautionary tales of recent decades combine admonitions to stop shootin', smokin', and swallowin' (James Lee Hooker's "Kick Hit 4 Hit Kix U", 1970) with messages to "get your mind together" (James Brown's "King Heroin", 1972) and "make some changes" (Tupac Shakur's "Changes", 1998). Other songs with a distinct anti-addiction message include Gil Scott-Heron's "The Bottle" (1974) and "Angel Dust" (1978), Prince's "Pop Life" (1985) and, as earlier noted, Public Enemy's "Night Of The Living Basheads" (1988) and "1 Million Bottlebags," (1991).

African American music has celebrated, cautioned and condemned alcohol and drug use, but has until recently been silent on broader patterns of abstinence, moderation, and recovery. It is only recently that stories of resilience in the face of addiction and stories of recovery have appeared in the lyrics of African American music. A poignant example of this trend is Tupac Shakur's homage to his mother in "You are Appreciated" (1995).

*And even as a crack fiend, mama  
You always was a black queen, mama  
I finally understand  
for a woman it ain't easy tryin to raise a man  
You always was committed  
A poor single mother on welfare, tell me how ya did it  
There's no way I can pay you back  
But the plan is to show you that I understand  
You are appreciated*

As more prominent African Americans become public about their recovery from addiction (e.g., Whoopi Goldberg, Samuel Jackson, Natalie Cole, Jada Pinkett Smith, and Mary J. Blige), recovery themes will likely be reflected in their future work.

We found few African American song lyrics explicitly about addiction recovery, but we would be remiss in failing to acknowledge the role Gospel music has played in the lives of African Americans in recovery. With its themes of redemption, rebirth, forgiveness, and gratitude, and its deep historical subtexts of resistance, liberation and survival, African American Gospel music strikes powerful chords among many African Americans seeking recovery. The authors have interviewed numerous African Americans in faith-based recovery who report that the messages of hope, renewal and reconnection in the music are as important to their recoveries as religious doctrine. As one person stated, "As a recovering cocaine addict, I need a religion I can feel. I can feel Gospel music and it gives me hope."

African American clients seeking recovery are bombarded by musical cues that celebrate drinking and drug use (Brookshire, et al., 2003). This suggests the potential benefit in exploring isolation strategies (minimizing cue exposure), substitution strategies

(replacing intoxication cues with sobriety cues via recovery-themed music), or reframing strategies (altering the meaning and response to pro-drug messages) (White, 1996). The influence of such messages in African American music can be weakened or neutralized by reframing addiction within afri-centric metaphors (e.g., slavery, genocide) and portraying recovery as an act of cultural survival as well as personal transformation.

The recovery of African Americans can be enriched by exposure to the history of African American resiliency and recovery and by exposure to living proof of long-term recovery and the diversity of recovery styles within the African American community—including exposure to prominent musicians and artists in recovery. African American songwriters, musicians, singers and producers could help build cultures of recovery in the African American community by expressing their recovery experiences and service work through their music.

African Americans have expressed their relationships with alcohol and other drugs through multiple musical genres. The stories conveyed through the medium of song reveal the wounds these substances have inflicted on African Americans and their families and communities, but they also stand as testimony to deep sources of resilience and recovery within African American communities. Music as a healing testimony will increase as the prevalence and visibility of recovery grows within African American communities across the country. As culturally competent counselors, we can serve as conduits through which such recovery stories reach our clients.

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