



Music's Marvellous Medicine & Moerman's 'Meaning Effect'

written by Gavin Weston
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I am not alone in using music medicinally. The use of music's mood altering properties was one of the themes to emerge out of [The Fieldwork Playlist](#) conference I ran with Dominique Santos last year. Whether I want to evoke a prior experience, lift my mood, get ready for a night out or wallow in a sense of self-pity I have track-lists set up to indulge these needs and desires. Had your heart-broken? There's a song for that! Need to write a bit more quickly or avoid procrastination? There's a song for that!

Or... songs... plural. And they won't be the same for everyone. And some of the songs will do the exact opposite to other people.



For me a headache would be soothed every bit as much by a bit of Dark Side of the Moon as it would be by an aspirin – but I’m assuming the same album would make famous Floyd-hater Johnny Rotten feel a lot worse.

Much of what music does taps into well established psychological and physiological responses. [Minor keys sound sad](#). Music with a beat that mimics a fast heart rate is exciting. These, and other wondrous properties that are beyond my musical ken, are part of what makes music so medicinally efficacious. Yet as with other medicine this is just one layer in it’s effectiveness.

[Daniel Moerman](#)’s *Meaning, Medicine and the ‘Placebo Effect’* (2002) suggests that we ought to reconceptualise the placebo effect – the gap between what is medically effective in a given treatment and what actual effect it has – as something more interesting in and of itself.





Two placebo tablets are more effective than one. A placebo injection is more effective than a placebo tablet. This demonstrates that belief in the effectiveness of certain scientific procedures leads to them being more effective.

Moerman pins this down as being about meaning, and therefore a product of personal and sociocultural specificities.



Blue tablets are generally more calmativ e - unless you're an Italian male, in which case they tend to excite you because the national football team wear blue. A mixture of the general and the specific, the medical and cultural. If we bear in mind that [knowing that something is a placebo doesn't remove its effectiveness as a placebo](#) we have the beginning of a ethnopharmacological approach to music. I am simultaneously being entirely flippant and entirely serious when I say this.

When someone tells you of an ailment - have a stab at suggesting a song that might help them. If music is a medicine - it's time we all start thinking of it pharmaceutically.

