

Paradise City

healing cities with music

Mario Goossens & Karel Van Mileghem

photography: Fabrice Debatty

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Introduction

Music heals. This may sound like a cliché, but when an entire community is traumatized by horrific events, then it holds true, and music is embodied in its pure healing form; an all-encompassing power of life. Our creativity is often at its best under the most difficult circumstances. Music is in our genes. We instinctively move toward maintaining our emotional balance, and that's when magical things can emerge.

There is clear evidence of this in recent music history. Remarkably, many genres originated in traumatic times; well-known examples include the gospel and blues that comforted slaves in the American South. Genres such as jazz, soul, punk, reggae, hip-hop, techno and rap also originated in communities that endured hardships.

Eventually, these genres appealed to a wide audience and became commercialized, but they originated as a response to the hardships that communities had to face.

Music and misery go hand in hand. This sounds like a contradiction, but it is not: misery makes music, music heals misery. It is a hidden and daily constant in our lives. It is an indispensable part of our quest for survival as human beings.

We wanted to measure the power of music in a microcosm: the city. We chose six cities that have experienced devastating catastrophes, either natural or man-made. Who are the driving forces of music in such cities and, how can music and art heal the wounds of the community?

We traveled to various continents and cultures to visit

communities with divergent musical backgrounds. Some disasters played out over decades, such as The Troubles in Northern Ireland, which for years had a stranglehold on the city of Belfast. Other disasters occurred suddenly, such as the New Orleans flood in 2005, which almost drowned the city, and the atomic bomb in Hiroshima three-quarters of a century ago. The witnesses to that living hell were children at the time and are now in the last phase of their lives. By contrast, the earthquake in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, is only 10 years old. The decline of the city of Detroit cannot entirely be blamed on the collapse of the automobile industry. In the Rwandan capital of Kigali, the power of music was deployed as propaganda for a meticulously planned genocide, especially via radio. Rwandans are now trying to use this same medium for reconciliation, and they are succeeding in this effort.

Nothing is what it seems like after a disaster. There is always a narrative that is more subtle than the story told in the media and what remains in our collective memories. In processing the disaster, this nuance plays an important role for the inhabitants, and music is a perfect catalyst for this. It provides the spiritual input for them to hold their heads high and believe again in a future.

This book provides an insight into the underbelly of cities that have scrambled to their feet. We knocked on the back door of each city and discovered hopeful stories. "The healing power of music" instantly stops being a cliché. These are real people. These are real stories. This is real music.

Mario Goossens & Karel Van Mileghem

“There is
a light
that never
goes out”

The Smiths











I. Port-au-Prince

Every time Haiti tries to raise itself up, it gets bashed and sinks further. For centuries, Haitians had taken a beating, and nature dealt them yet another destructive blow on January 12, 2010.

In 1492, it was not the squalor, but the beauty of the area that captured the emotions of Christopher Columbus. The explorer was looking for a new route to India when on December 5 he berthed at a beautiful mountainous island. It was inhabited by the Taíno Indians, who gave this idyllic place several names: Ayiti, Bohio, and Quisqueya. Columbus named it Hispaniola.

Shortly thereafter, Hispaniola was invaded by Spanish conquerors blinded by gold fever. Within a few decades, they had wiped out the native population. The Indians were not immune to European diseases, and those who survived had to toil hard on plantations that were established.

European super powers vied for the division of the New World and France set its eyes on Hispaniola. For years, French pirates had tried to take over part of the island, and ultimately Spain withdrew from the western part. The eastern part became Santo Domingo, which nowadays is the Dominican Republic, and the western part became Saint-Domingue.

The French transported hundreds of thousands of African slaves to work on the plantations. Saint-Domingue became known as the "Pearl of the Antilles," the French Empire's richest colony due to huge profits from the sugar and coffee plantations. But the pearl had its dark side: the African slaves lived in the most appalling and inhumane conditions.

The "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" of the French Revolution inspired the slaves to rebel, in what became the Haitian Revolution. After a 13-year struggle, the Afro-Creole slaves, under the leadership of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, defeated Napoleon's army and in 1804 declared independence. Haiti became the world's first black-led republic, and the remaining French islanders were gruesomely killed. The first Haitian flag was created by symbolically ripping out the white band from the tricolor French flag.

During the Haitian Revolution, a new music genre emerged: Rara, poly-rhythmic music based on cylindrical bamboo trumpets. Added to that were drums, maracas, güiros, and metal bells. Its African roots tie it closely to voodoo rituals. Rara inspired the fighting slaves on the path to victory, and when they finally gained independence, a huge rara celebration broke out in Haiti. This is a tradition that still exists today.

Port-au-Prince became the capital city, but the new republic was not recognized by most European states. Dessalines declared himself Emperor of Haiti. An ongoing internal power struggle raged, and Haiti changed hands several times. For recognition of Haiti as an independent republic, the French government agreed to the loss of its colony and slaves, a debt that was fully paid by 1820.

The US occupied Haiti in 1915 and basically controlled the country until 1934. It continued to have a strong influence during the hands of dictators, the most notorious being François Duvalier and his son, nicknamed Papa Doc and Baby Doc, respectively.

On January 12, 2010, the island, already brought to the edge of disaster by an enormous natural disaster. At 4:53 p.m. local time, two major earthquakes struck alongside each other under the city of Léogane, close to the capital. The result was a devastating earthquake. An estimated 250,000 people were killed. Buildings built to sustain tectonic forces, collapsed or were severely damaged. Even a large part of the presidential palace was destroyed. The death toll was enormous: estimates range from 100,000 to 300,000, and mass graves had to be dug. A cholera epidemic broke out. The global humanitarian aid that Haiti received could have meant a new start for the country, but a large part of the collected funds was embezzled. Haiti remains an unstable country where the lion's share of inhabitants live in dire poverty, with little to no basic provisions.









ROMEL JEAN-PIERRE

Romel Jean-Pierre was born in the Grand Rue ghetto neighborhood of Port-au-Prince. Once the commercial hub of the city, the neighborhood was left in shambles by the earthquake, and the economic center of the city was moved higher up the mountain to Pétionville. Grand Rue remained deserted and devastated. The damaged buildings are scarred with cracks from the earthquake, and it is one of the poorest neighborhoods of the city.

Romel was a baby when an American expat fell in love with his mother. The relationship did not last long, but the American considered Romel as a son, and gave him the best possible education away from the ghetto. Romel thought that the white American was his biological father, taking no notice of the different skin color. When Romel's adoptive father died suddenly in 2003, he was brought back to Grand Rue by his father's family with the explanation that he would visit his mother, who he had not seen for years. When no one came to pick him up by evening, Romel realized that he had been dumped.

Romel's new home, which had to accommodate an entire family, was the size of his childhood playroom. He no longer slept on a mattress, but on a carton. His family considered him a snob and rejected him. Romel became introverted and the people of the Grand Rue neighborhood thought he was crazy and backward.

One day on the Grand Rue, he encountered the Atis Rezistans, a collective of urban artists who created voodoo-inspired art from waste and human remains. After the earthquake there were so many bodies that a lot of art was made with skulls and bones.

The Atis Rezistans discovered that Romel could speak English. Feeling appreciated, Romel opened up to the artists and he became their interpreter. In 2009, he met international artists who visited Haiti and a new world opened up for him.

This world collapsed abruptly on January 12, 2010. Romel was in an Internet café on Grand Rue when the earthquake began. He rushed outside with his friend Steven as the building behind them collapsed.

Romel and Steven stood in the middle of the street and held each other tight. In the unfathomable mist of dust, they stood like stone statues surrounded by horrible screams. When the curtain of dust slowly settled, the horrific scenes emerged: arms and legs of people were hanging out of buildings; a child with half his face missing stumbled by. Romel was in the midst of an apocalypse.

After the earthquake, humanitarian aid organizations poured into Haiti. Romel was one of the few young people who spoke English, and he became one of the main witnesses for organizations that recruited funds. Romel was invited to meet with Bill Clinton, Pharell Williams, and Robert De Niro.

In Haiti, Romel invested all his time in the Konbit Mizik Project. It was established as a free record label and music studio for young musicians in Port-au-Prince, but rapidly expanded its activities. They annually organize the Pwojè SIDA, a festival with popular performers in Haiti. Entrance is free, but the festival attendants must take an HIV test before entering. It is estimated that there are 140,000 people with HIV or AIDS in Haiti, half of whom are not tested or treated.

Romel is currently the director of Konbit Mizik and has a new dream: to become the president of Haiti. He thinks the time is ripe for great changes and wants to become an influential figure in Haiti. "We now have independence. It's time to build up our nation," he says.

The once "backward and crazy" youngster now has a powerful voice.





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Special thanks to:

Fabrice Debatty, Sofie Hendrickx & Leon, Nathalie Sternotte, Michaël Van Damme, Niels Famaey, Sarah Theerlynck & everyone at Lannoo, Olivier Goris & everyone at Canvas, Gerrit Kerremans, Radio1, Karl Everaert & everyone at Panasonic, Everyone at PIAS, Everyone at Connections, everyone at TV Connections, Peter Verstraelen, Herman Hulsens, Chris Dusauchoit, Lucas Van den Eynde, Joris Thys, Hendrik Smeyers, Janne Goossens, Hendrickx family, Van Mileghem family, Goossens family

If you have any questions or comments about the material in this book, please do not hesitate to contact our editorial team: markedteam@lannoo.com.

© Lannoo Publishers, Tielt, Belgium, 2019

D/2019/45/500 - NUR 640/653

ISBN: 9789401464963

www.lannoo.com

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