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RA Reviews' Editorial Voice:

What good is a song? A commentary on the human-made poly-crises and existential risks at our doorstep

Written by: Alinah K. Segoby, Extraordinary Professor, Northwest University, South Africa.

What good is a song if it cannot inspire? These are the lyrics of one of the many classic soul beats from renowned musician Quincy Jones. It is hard to imagine what inspired Mr. Jones to write this song, but like his many other productions, he probably gave it thought, and from the ensemble of musicians on the piece, it is clearly intended to invoke the deepest emotions in the listener. Music has been a source of healing over millennia and continues to bring joy, solace, and healing to the world's seven billion people. However, despite all that, human beings have caused wanton destruction of nature, humanity, and everything else. The wrecking ball that is human beings has also assembled an arsenal of deadly weaponry which, as we wrap up 2023, has kept everyone on tenterhooks as several leaders have made threats to use them, including nuclear power. As we teeter on the precipice of 2023, the world has fallen into a stupor of helplessness as wars rage in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, Ethiopia, DRC, Yemen, and countless other flashpoints. Despite the calls for peace by some of the world's most eminent leaders, including United Nations agencies and other humanitarian agencies, these wars have raged on unabated.

Music has been at the heart of struggles for liberation throughout humanity's history. For many of the world's religious orders, sacred chants and verses have been at the heart of the quest for liberation. Similarly, music as a language has been used to communicate in times of adversity. The transatlantic slave trade and descendants of slavery have used music as an important resource to maintain their humanity when faced with some of the cruelest experiences. Blues and Jazz have been attributed to West African and Creolized music roots as they form part of African American music today. During the apartheid struggle in South Africa, music became an important weapon for resistance and remains the uniting force that transcends race, creed, and other divides. Music is a universal language that highlights what is possible when we commit to working together. The animal kingdom clearly has its own rich and diverse sources of music, as indicated by research. Marine researchers have highlighted the music and communication channels of sea-dwelling animals, as have ornithologists who have documented a plethora of musical and communication resources for birds. In addition to music, the lives of other animals in the animal kingdom have highlighted the compassion and care animals, large and small, can give to each other. Social media is replete with video clips of amazing acts of kindness, thoughtfulness, and selflessness of animals, which often elicit soft emotional memes from us. We appreciate the importance of biomimicry and its influence on our use of space, design ideas, and resources. Despite all these positives and human understanding of our symbiotic relations with nature, our voracious appetite for more and more tends to dull our empathy, and we continue to self-destruct and destroy the habitats for other species.

What is clear is that even with the most beautiful opportunity for using music as a medium for healing, the world continues to use the most brutal sounds like guns, rockets, sirens, and drones, which have wailed and blazed for the better part of 2023 and for years before. Many children will, tonight, as on many nights before, end their day to the sounds of guns and sirens. Their mothers will not be able to calm them, and the despair of their fathers, if still alive, will not be helped by the wailing of grandmothers. These are the sounds we have normalized, become accustomed to, and numbed to. The sound of death has come to define our world order as we close 2023. The question is – is there a possible turn for the better as we nudge into 2024? This is the moment to pause and ask ourselves what needs to give before the toxic mix of poly-crises and destruction, which we have wrought on this planet, converge to end the world as we know it. Our collective vulnerability has been on the agenda of the United Nations for years. New organizations have emerged, including COP, humanitarian platforms, including numerous youth-led not-for-profit organizations. Yet there is a tone deafness to the existential crises, of our own making, that face humanity. There is also a fear factor that has gripped many of us as we are silenced or cowered to silence because of our fear of losing privileges bestowed upon us by hands we mistook for gift-givers. We are now inextricably plugged into these lifelines and are too afraid of severing the ties. The eminent social scientist Samir Amin wrote about this need for detachment.

The Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns gave us a taste of severance of global ties on a scale we could not have imagined through lockdowns. The fractured lens through which we view our entry into 2024 suggests we need to reimagine unity and solidarity and their importance for humanity. In the words of Martin Luther King, "To ignore evil is to become an accomplice to it." He further noted, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Perhaps most profoundly, Dr. King said, "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends." And, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." Many have spoken, protested, marched, and even gone on hunger strikes. Many have died in solidarity with the suffering of others, but the hurt continues. It is necessary that we do not walk away, look away, but face the storm that is the cauldron of wars at the turn of 2023. The cauldron of climate crises has seen the global community fall short of its intentions to abide by the pledges and promises of COP 27 and find us still trying to find new ways to address the climate crisis in 2023. The wrath of nature throughout 2023 has shown without a doubt that the future is not guaranteed to us in any way. While we applaud the actions of leaders and civic society who have worked hard since COP 27, it seems the outcomes of COP 28 do not differ radically from previous promises. Despite the laudable efforts of the African Climate Summit held in September 2023, including the declarations that informed the African Union's position towards COP 28, the continent does not seem to have emerged with any more leverage at COP 28. Significantly, the promise of global commitments to financing heavily indebted African nations dealing with climate crises has not been realized. The hyper-vulnerability of small island nations, including rising temperatures, remains as real threats. Furthermore, pledges by developed countries to reduce carbon emissions have not seen any major shifts in action from the developed world.

As this year ends, it is clear that voices must rise, songs, even if broken, must call out the multiple wrongdoings, and collectively call for peace and action against the horrors of 2023 so that a new light can emerge for 2024. In the previous editorial of RAR, Prof Mbaye Lo noted that Africa is the most impoverished continent (RAR Vol 7 No 2 August 2023), despite having some of the world's most valuable deposits of natural resources, including minerals, wildlife, and people. Africa has a youthful population which, with a median age of 19, holds much promise in respect to what the world needs to realize future prosperity. Many of these young

people, unfortunately, have endured multiple hardships, including poverty, pandemics, and conflicts. Some lack basic resources and rights for a decent livelihood, including freedom of movement. Some have only ever experienced life in refugee camps and makeshift structures as internally displaced persons. Others are in captivity after desperate efforts to try and escape the lands of their birth. Others have perished at sea after perilous efforts to cross oceans to reach Europe. Leaders of the 54 nations on the African continent continue to make pledges towards, among other things, silencing the guns to end the protracted conflicts beleaguering the continent. However, over the last three years, seven coups d'états have taken place on the continent. In 2023 alone, several attempts have been made to unseat leaders, and contested elections have seen civic discontent across several nations.

Marvin Gaye asked, "What's going on?" While Donny Hathaway impassioned in a moment of hope, "Some day we will all be free." In the same hopeful note before Hathaway, Sam Cooke had willed, "Change is gonna come." A lot continues to go on, rather than go down into the annals of history, including shocks to which we have adapted and adjusted. Resilience has become the catchphrase to describe the ability of the world's most vulnerable people to live with the unbearable. Where sanctions have been imposed, these have served to deepen the plight of the already vulnerable, as those with the means, power, and other resources would have taken steps to protect their wealth. Furthermore, complexities in local responses to coups in Africa have made decision-making on sanctions at the African Union Commission level and other global platforms more difficult (Soumahoro 2023). The complexity of insurgencies has also highlighted the problem of strictly defined efforts to resolve conflicts on the ground. The interlinkages between resource extraction, power, and politics, in contrast to the vulnerability and poverty experienced by communities in resource-rich places like the eastern DRC, suggest that disentangling such conflicts and finding lasting solutions will require much more than a few hastily convened peace conferences in plush hotels. Especially important will be ensuring that places at the negotiating tables are intentionally made for non-traditional actors, including those most affected by violence, especially women and children.

Scholars like Professor Cheryl Hendricks and Professor Funmi Olonisakin have consistently highlighted that peace-building frameworks and mechanisms in global peace and conflict resolution fora are not inclusive, as they often do not include some of the most vulnerable and affected people. Global advocacy for peace should bring attention to this asymmetry and ensure that an inclusive peace agenda is given higher priority at negotiating tables. The "men in suits" nature of global peace platforms must be seen to be changing to ensure that the world truly embraces diversity, equity, and inclusion at all levels. In the 1960s, when Gil Scott-Heron burst onto radio airwaves and now museum-piece television sets with his firebrand "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," we could not have imagined the horrors of everyday news which we are now accustomed to, including the terrified screams of children or the whimpers of others as life ebbs from their mangled bodies under the rubble that used to be their homes in Gaza. We have been numbed. We eat popcorn through these scenes and flick the TV remote buttons between news channels and Netflix movies whilst holding a WhatsApp conversation or sending an OMG!! text post on another platform. The revolutions have been televised. Lives have been lost by the thousands. From single acts of brutality at the hands of law enforcement officers to mass killings at the hands of security officers to senseless executions by insurgents, we have witnessed death and come close to knowing what revolutions can do. Confusing, confused, and with not many clear endings in sight. So what's next? What opportunity for redemption? Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" was a positive signal at a point in time. In 1980, as the newly liberated nation of Zimbabwe was hoisting its flag up and lowering the flag of Rhodesia down, many across the continent experienced

euphoria, especially as Marley and the Wailers performed to an ecstatic crowd at Rufaro Stadium on April 18, 1980. The joy of that day has since faded to a dusty memory as many ordinary Zimbabweans struggle with the daily challenges of a life that has become as precarious as the mines which many risk their lives to eke a living hustling for gold dust. Whilst there may be no outright war in their communities, the sound, feel, and smell of hunger, terror, and desperation is no different from that which faces those in war zones.

Nina Simone's "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood" is a refrain we all default to. She was misunderstood, as too were many who were activists during the civil rights movement in the 1960s. What she spoke out against in the heat of her own generation's struggles led to her being cast out. Like many others who dared to speak truth to power through music, they paid the price. In today's world, the price is paid by others such as Bobby Wine, who tried to use their voice and activism to challenge power regimes that had perhaps lingered too long in the halls of power. Journalists have not been spared, as journalists like slain Ghanaian Ahmed Hussein-Suale Divela still have no one brought to justice for their brutal killing. Al Jazeera reports that at least forty-five journalists have been killed by Israeli forces since 2000. The death of Shireen Abu Akleh in May 2023 could not have prepared us for the current daily losses of lives by journalists in the war on Gaza. The bravery of news reporters to ensure we receive the unfiltered reportage of the horrors of war has been at the expense of their own lives. One such story was of two young mothers from Gaza who gave birth to premature babies who they would never see or hold until a few months later. Many others perished in the onslaught on Gaza hospitals and homes. Their tales, including the experiences of the babies, are only a fragment of the ugly underbelly of war. Nina Simone's "Sinnerman" calls out the makers of these wars. There are many sinners, men and women, who sleep easy at night watching their shares rise as sales of war machinery rise with each new conflict. Why have we not named and shamed these people in our midst? Could it be because all of us are materially and emotionally entangled in the profits of war?

Going back to our footprint on nature, COP convenings have failed to resolve the quandary of the quest for development by emerging nations who pleaded for a stay of execution to utilize their reserves of fossil fuels and other resources, such as wildlife. Here too, it is not easy to take a stand, as those who live in the shadow of these resource-rich landscapes tell a different tale. Children are trampled to death by buffalo, herds of elephants starved and thirsted to death due to lack of water and pasture. Vultures were poisoned as they consumed carcasses of poisoned animals. Children trapped in unfree laborious mining activities for precious minerals, which are essential for "green" luxury items like electric vehicles. If the price of the green revolution is the blood of innocent children, then the asymmetry needs a different tack. The food chain seems to have experienced onslaughts of toxicity over decades. There is no new spring to recharge and refresh. If anything, the wrath of nature has come with renewed fury as rains, mudslides, and angry rivers swallow whole communities. The belch of the ocean brings forth rancid air as plastic and other waste choke all forms of life in the oceans. We are all too familiar with whales, dolphins, seals, and other marine life washed up on beaches in tangles of twine, plastic, metal, and other substances from which they had no chance of disentangling themselves. Yet we did conclude COP 28 and reaffirmed our new commitments. Roald Dahl's *The BFG*, which used to petrify my then five-year-old son and deny him the sleep I was trying to induce, as he imagined the giants coming to eat him at night, is a tempting death wish to arrest our gluttony. What if there was other life out there? Of others bigger and tougher beyond our planet who could come to contain our greed and relentless destruction of earth? If we could be tempered by others more giant and violent than us maybe we could rein ourselves in. Would that bring us to reason? Would rethinking the world order and our voracious consumption help?

It seems the race for more will still be our mindset in the foreseeable future. As Dionne Warwick pleaded, "What the world needs now is love, sweet love." The gold of the future will be love and fresh air, which we take for granted today. What will be your personal role in ensuring these are safeguarded and shared responsibly?

The closeout of 2023 has brought out the best and worst of our world. Global systems that were thought to be robust enough to protect the vulnerable have failed dismally. Muted calls for a ceasefire in Gaza and peace around the world continue to fall on deaf ears. For Gaza's children, who will remember the lyrics of MC Abdul? Did he, at the tender age of fifteen, imagine the horrors that have visited the people of Gaza since? The sound of music that used to give hope to young Palestinians like Saint Levant, who used music to draw attention to the plight of their communities, has been drowned out by the continuous shelling and bombing that have left cities flattened.

The almost lone voice of South Africa, which took the courageous stance to bring Israel before the International Court of Justice, has been like a mourner's solo or the rendition of "Victor Nelson's Cotton Field, Elgin, Texas 1940" by Jevetta Steele. It gave us, children of the African liberation struggle, a glimmer of hope that a turn will come. It is one's hope that more voices will join in and reach a crescendo to push back on the evil of war and injustice. The quest for freedom, humanity, and peace, especially for the people of Palestine, must remain our moment of conscientious wakefulness. We cannot afford to remain silent, to turn our eyes away, or to ignore the sound of death. We must, as humanity, stand in solidarity for what is just and right or relinquish our claim to being the better species.

References:

All music cited in the text was accessed via YouTube. I acknowledge and pay respect to all composers, singers, and musicians whose work I listened to in preparing this essay. To those who shared their love through music, thank you for gifting us this beautiful gift and may it help us find redemption.

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