

Epilepsy and stigma in popular music

Through the ages, people with epilepsy have been subject to stigmatisation. To what extent is this still a reality? The depiction of epilepsy in contemporary popular music may reflect these attitudes.

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Throughout our history, epilepsy has remained a disease associated with stigmatisation (1, 2). To obtain an impression of popular notions of epilepsy in our time we can study, for example, modern cultural communication, in our case music. Music lyrics can reflect current attitudes, often quite directly and without embellishment. Moreover, it provides an insight into what is in fact permitted in current music publication, for example in the form of directly discriminatory lyrics.

Many song lyrics have portrayed epilepsy as scary, contagious or linked to sexuality. This is especially evident in musical

genres such as death metal, hard rock and hip-hop. International advocacy politics aiming to prevent the spread of prejudices against epilepsy in recent years has helped bring about a less discriminatory content in their lyrics.

The frightening epilepsy

In death metal, epilepsy has been used as an effect to evoke fear (Figure 1). This music idolises all that is dark and negative, and disease and violent death are frequent topics. The band Malevolent Creation uses epileptic seizures as a shock effect in their lyrics, in the same vein as «disease, blood and gore».

Seizure

...
living in fear
tearing your soul
no cure for this pain

this is your hell
given at birth
symptoms take course
seizure taking over
consuming...
convulse...

The American band Death, which by some are regarded as the progenitors of the death metal genre, released their album *Death bloody gore* in 1987. The album contains the song *Scream bloody gore*, in which epilepsy is described in a way that links to a time when the belief that the disease was caused by evil spirits had wide currency:

Controlling the minds of the bloodthirsty dead
Unholy seizure slicing through your head

Although some of the death-metal lyrics portray epilepsy in a strongly negative light,



Figure 1 Gus Rios of Malevolent Creation. Photo: Camera Press/NTB scanpix

epileptic seizures are also used to describe a desire to vanish or become lost in dreams to escape from a troublesome world. Some of these lyrics imbue epileptic seizures with positive associations (3).

A sexual and contagious disease

Through history, epilepsy has been associated with sexuality. In the 19th century masturbation was regarded as one of the causal explanations of epilepsy (1). Sounds and twitching that occurred during seizures were perceived as sexual ecstasy; the aura was the foreplay, the cramps were the orgasm. The notion that epilepsy could be contagious has also caused unfounded fears in society. It was believed that the disease was caused by an unknown source of infection or that those affected were possessed by evil spirits that could be transferred to others (1).

These historic notions live on in many of today's song lyrics. Many rap lyrics describe how sexy men produce an «epileptic» reaction in women (3). The women become shiveringly ecstatic at the sight of this man or his display of sexuality. Therapy, an Irish heavy-metal band, uses epilepsy as a metaphor for all-consuming love or possession, emphasised by repetitive rhythms. In the song *Epilepsy*, the phrase «this infernal love» is repeated a number

of times, and the repetitions in themselves become symbolic of an epileptic seizure. But: «I've got a problem» – this is not only a positive love story being told (3).

Some artists continue to describe epilepsy as contagious, or they sing about how acting reprehensibly may trigger epilepsy. In «Hit'em Up», the artist Tupac is rapping about epilepsy (3):

*You fucking with me?
You fuck around and catch a seizure or a
heart attack.*

In the song *Contagious*, the band Static Lullaby describes epilepsy as scary, contagious or of a sexual nature:

*The choking has you foaming at the mouth
Our bodies convulsing on the floor
Like a fish out of water, the price of wanting more
Epilepsy seems, seems safe enough for me
It's alright girl, it's alright
Contagious, contagious as it seems.*

In the song *Ballad of worms* the American rap artist Chris Palko, with the artist name Cage, relates a personal experience in which the stigma of epilepsy «infected» him. He has met the most beautiful girl in town. She contracts meningitis and epilepsy

and has frequent seizures. «I'm known in town as the creep that's into zombies,» he says in the autobiographical lyrics. In melancholy words, he describes how he feels as an outcast while caring for his ill and dying girlfriend.

Lyrics that question the stigma

Notions of epilepsy through the ages have not always been unambiguously negative. Some believed that persons with disease were God's chosen people on Earth, cf. the designation *morbus sacer*.

In recent years, some have attempted to use song lyrics to challenge the prejudices associated with epilepsy. Throughout his career, Nick Cave has been preoccupied with social stigmatisation, as is shown in several of his lyrics (Figure 2). On the album *Henry's Dream*, he has included a song about the historic figure of Christina the Astonishing (1150–1224). She acquired world fame after having risen from «the dead» during her funeral after having suffered an epileptic seizure.

The artist Antony Hegarty, known from the band Antony and the Johnsons, is also preoccupied with social stigmatisation. As transgender he has also been subject to prejudice. Perhaps he sees an opportunity to use his song lyrics to influence prevailing attitudes to those who are different? In his



Figure 2 Nick Cave has written a number of lyrics describing people who are different and how they are treated by society. Photo: Gonzales Photo/Christian Hjort/NTB scanpix

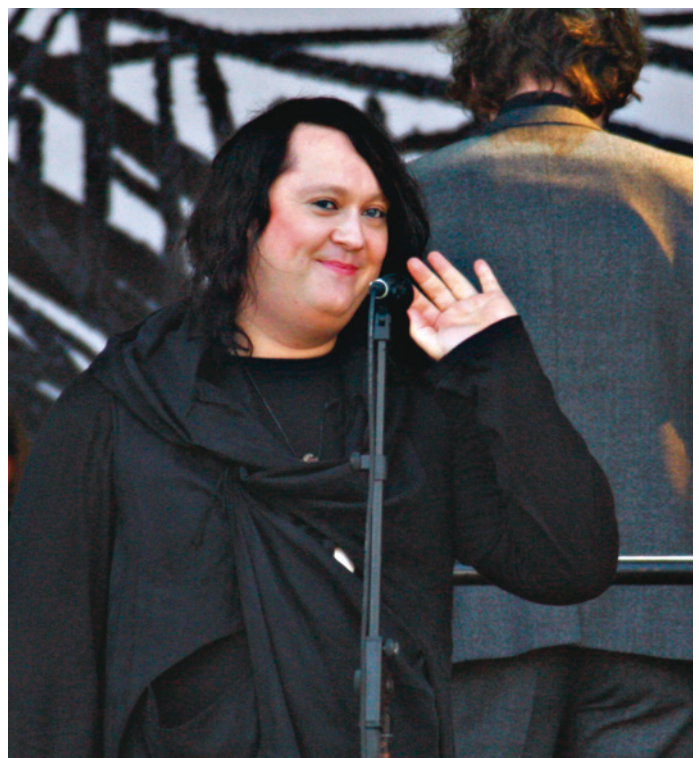


Figure 3 Antony Hegarty has written the song *Epilepsy is dancing*, where he describes an epileptic seizure in positive terms. Photo: Rolf Øhman/Aftenposten/NTB scanpix



Figure 4 Sam Riley as Ian Curtis, front man of Joy Division. Curtis often had seizures on tour and on stage, and he also used epilepsy as an element in dancing on the stage and in song lyrics. Photo: Mary Evans Picture/NTB scanpix

delightful lyrics to *Epilepsy is dancing* he describes an epileptic seizure in positive terms (Figure 3). The lyrics include references to Christ's resurrection. Hegarty may have been inspired by *Transfiguration*, a 16th century painting by Raphael, where Jesus rises from the dead and a boy suffers an epileptic seizure at the same sacred moment. During an epileptic seizure the main protagonist in the lyrics is transported into another and different world.

Epilepsy is dancing

*Epilepsy is dancing
She's the Christ now departing
And I'm finding my rhythm
As I twist in the snow*

The song is accompanied by a dreamlike music video of naked people in a paradisaical garden of flowers. The seizure turns into an ecstatic dream, similar to what can be experienced by people with temporal lobe epilepsy (4). When the seizure is over, the main protagonist steps back into grey reality in an asphalted industrial site.

The rock artist Prince suffered from

epilepsy as a child. He had a difficult childhood and adolescence marked by bullying and a father who failed to support him in his pursuit of music. Many of his lyrics deal with making life-changing choices. The song *Sacrifice* tells the story of little Victor, who is a victim of bullying.

Sacrifice

*I was born on a blood stained table
Cord wrapped around my neck
Epileptic 'til the age of seven
I was sure Heaven marked the deck
...
Mama held up her baby for protection
From a man with a strap in his hand
Ask the Victor 'bout pain and rejection
You think he don't, when he do understand
... ..
My name will be, Victor*

Amen

These lyrics contain obvious autobiographical elements. Perhaps Victor is an allusion to «victory»? Prince himself expresses his identity clearly, in his characteristic style

as well as his various artist names. He has used the names Prince, Jamie Starr, Christopher, Alexander Nevermind and The Purple One, as well as the symbol ♀. In his life and career Prince has deliberately promoted his image as an exceptional character, and this has been his strength.

Epilepsy as a means of artistic expression

Ian Curtis was the front man of the post-punk band Joy Division. He suffered from epilepsy and used it actively in his song lyrics. Curtis lived a very tumultuous life. He had a number of seizures, in daily life as well as on stage (Figure 4).

Because of his on-stage seizures he attracted a lot of attention and featured frequently in the media. The punk and post-punk era was partly devoted to disinhibited behaviour, madness and «freaking out» on stage. His seizures were hailed as somewhat freakish, but also as an illustration of the unpredictable aspects of epilepsy (5). At the same time he was a highly respected artist, an icon, who with his means of artistic expression and characteristic bari-

tone voice represents the post-punk genre. Curtis committed suicide in 1980.

Protest against stigmatisation in lyrics

The band Black Eyed Peas triggered a debate in the USA when they linked epilepsy to mental retardation. The original title of the song was *Let's get retarded*:

*Bob your head like epilepsy,
inside your club or in your Bentley.*

This condescending view of epilepsy met with massive protests. To permit the song to be played on American radio stations, the song title was changed to *Let's get it started* and the verse lines to «Bob your head like me, Apl.D» (3).

In the future it will hopefully be impossible to portray people with epilepsy in the same negative light as previously. Epilepsy associations the world over are working to prevent the spread of prejudiced lyrics among people, but to the extent to which popular music reflects popular attitudes to epilepsy, it appears as though we still have a long way to go to de-mystify the disease and eliminate prejudices.

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