

Standing in the Gap

MUSIC AS FIRST RESPONDER

Duane Robert Garcia and Vijay Gupta

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Duane Robert Garcia was born in 1948 and is a veteran who was deployed to Vietnam and beyond from 1965 to 1968. Duane's trajectory as a professional radio broadcast engineer was interrupted by thirty years and forty-four days of incarceration in the California state prison system. During his period of incarceration, Duane continued to pursue his passion for music.

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Vijay Gupta is an esteemed violinist and a leading advocate for the power of music to foster social connection. A 2018 John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellow, Gupta is the founder and artistic director of Street Symphony, a nonprofit organization providing musical engagement and dialogue and teaching artistry for homeless and incarcerated communities in Los Angeles.

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EXCERPT FROM "LA VIA DOLOROSA" BY SANDI PATTY

Por la Vía Dolorosa, triste día en Jerusalén
Los soldados le abrían paso a Jesús.
Más la gente se acercaba,
Para ver al que llevaba aquella cruz.
Down the Vía Dolorosa in Jerusalem that day
The soldiers tried to clear the narrow street.
But the crowd pressed in to see,
The Man condemned to die on Calvary.
Por la Vía Dolorosa, que es la via del dolor
Como oveja vino Cristo, Rey y Señor,
Y fue Él quien quiso ir por su amor por ti y por mí.

Por la Vía Dolorosa al Calvario y a morir.
Down the Vía Dolorosa called the way of suffering
Like a lamb came the Messiah, Christ the King,
But He chose to walk that road out of
His love for you and me.
Down the Vía Dolorosa, all the way to Calvary.

Tonight, in Los Angeles, 66,000 people will walk the way of suffering. The epicenter of the crisis of homelessness in America today, Los Angeles County is only 8 percent African American, but Black people make up a whopping third of the homeless population. As early as the 1960s, Skid Row—the fifty-square-block neighborhood of downtown LA—was the terminus of “Greyhound therapy,” when an institution would buy a patient with severe mental illness a one-way bus ticket to the City of Angels. Skid Row is often the end of the line for many who are consumed by intergenerational trauma, manifested through chronic addiction and mental illnesses.

Defining a neighborhood by its afflictions is a convenient excuse to erase it. Skid Row is precious land to developers and gentrifiers but could also be considered a recovery zone—one of the largest in the nation—a precious, vital place of new beginnings.

In 2009, Americans for the Arts conducted a case study on the role of arts and culture in Skid Row. Part of the Animating Democracy program, the seminal study, which gathered testimony from community members and leaders of neighborhood organizations, was coauthored by Maria Rosario Jackson—then of the Urban Institute—and my mentor and friend John Malpede, the founding director of Los Angeles Poverty Department, the first theater company to be made up primarily of unhoused people and the first arts program of any kind for the homeless community of Los Angeles.

Respondents of the study saw the power of art as being core to reclaiming their neighborhood, their cultural lineages, and their very lives, while also challenging a stigmatizing narrative. A community member stated, “We are creating the recovery process. . . . A part of the wisdom that has been discovered and is operational in the neighborhood is that once you are given a safe space, positive things happen.”

Since 1985, Los Angeles Poverty Department has celebrated the art and cultures of Skid Row with projects like Walk the Talk—the parade commemorating neighborhood initiatives and the people behind them; an annual two-day Festival of Skid Row Artists, which has created a registry of over eight hundred artists working and living in Skid Row; and the Skid Row History Museum and Archive, a gallery space for Skid Row artists, and

a center for challenging, generative conversations with community activists and policy makers across the city to create a vision for a healthy, vibrant Skid Row. Skid Row is an artistic ecosystem, composed of the painters of Studio 526, the tile mosaic makers of Piece by Piece, the singers of Urban Voices Project, and the musicians of Street Symphony—to name a few.

The work of Street Symphony is to create a relational laboratory through music. The music we offer is just the beginning of a dialogue, of a relationship—whether we’re playing jazz or Schumann at a county jail, singing the “Hallelujah” of Handel or Leonard Cohen at the Midnight Mission, or playing the music of mariachi, reggae, and West African traditions on the very streets of Skid Row—the music we play is a conduit of relationship, a way to listen to the voices and experiences of a community. In Skid Row we were taught that listening is one sure act of love.

Street Symphony serves to hold up a mirror to communities in reentry and recovery—to offer a pathway to wholeness: for those with histories of pain to orient themselves toward hope, and for us with questions about our role as artists and citizens to find a role as stewards of change. In that liminal space that only art can create, we might find the tiniest window—in the form of a glance, a smile, a pause in conversation—to peer beneath the veneer of armor, to transform.

Today, Skid Row serves as a point of reentry for thousands of Californians emerging from incarceration in the state’s thirty-five prisons, and from the billion-dollar LA County Jail—which is effectively the planet’s largest psychiatric facility. In 2018, Street Symphony started a program called Music for Change, supported by the California Arts Council’s Reentry through the Arts Program, which empowers our musicians to engage individuals paroled from life sentences in prison.

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In 2018, I met a man named Duane Robert Garcia. He sat in the audience of a program called the Messiah Project, an annual culminating event of my organization Street Symphony. It was Duane’s first public outing after an incarceration lasting three decades. Nearly one hundred musicians performed for an audience of hundreds more in the gym of the Midnight Mission in downtown Los Angeles’s Skid Row. There were songs from the community of Skid Row, nestled in the frame of George Frideric Handel’s beloved oratorio *Messiah*.

Throughout the next two years, my team and I got to know Duane more informally as De—a humble, devout man with the soul of a poet. At the next Messiah Project, De was one of our opening acts, sharing his voice and his story with the people he came to call his new family. Each week

now, even through COVID, De speaks and sings to us through his phone or Chromebook like some grand priest of music, a constant human reminder of the power of love.

In June 2020, I was honored to give the thirty-third annual Nancy Hanks Lecture for Americans for the Arts. Of course, I had to ask De to be my guest. From his tiny cell of a room at the Weingart Center, garlanded by art he had created during his incarceration, honey flowed from De's heart:

Words the spirit longs to express are many times best quickened to life in melodic forms we cordially and lovingly call music. Single notes, triplets, arpeggios strung together like a precious pearl necklace adorn the listeners' heart and soul. Music stands in the gap when even the human embrace does not suffice, a first responder, if you will, to the longing of the spirit at the very core of who we are. Our divinity drinks from the fountains of sound. Ever refreshing the drought that at times can be a desert of space and time. Music, second to none, stands alone—the go-to place accessible to all—knocking at the doors of our being, crying out from the rooftops and on the highways and byways of all of our life experiences.

Always eager to please, ever pleasant, kind and loving, soothing the troubled waters of our sojourn—onward and upward liting and lifting us to crescendo—resolving in the rapture of auditory bliss. It's not about the gift, it's about the giver, ever giving glory to the Creator. Loving in its expression, music solely gives to all asking only that we share the unveiling of itself with each other.

Music lends grace to the hearers.

Music is purity.

Music is perfect love.

In 2008, I encountered the monumental heart and work of the artist J Michael Walker, who created a geographical and historical testimony to the saints of Los Angeles in a project called *All the Saints of the City of the Angels: Seeking the Soul of L.A. on Its Streets*. As J Michael became a beloved friend and mentor, I learned about San Julian Street—one of the main thoroughfares of Skid Row—miraculously named for the patron saint of wanderers, of those who make shelters and hospitals, and of violinists. I wonder if Duane would say that San Julian is the patron saint of those who “stand in the gap.”

What does it mean to stand in the gap? What does it mean to stand where few are willing to stand—to serve as the bridge, a conveyance—between seemingly irreconcilable worlds?

Recently, I have been enraptured by the image of the Hindu world tree—the Asvattha—which is upside down, its roots in the sky and branches in the earth. This tree, the sacred fig, or peepul, is also known as the Bodhi—the very same tree under which the prince Siddhartha Gautama became the Buddha. I am struck by the image of this metaphor, particularly because of the inversion of the image—the fruits of the tree are invisible. They reside within us, hidden from plain view. We must manifest and grow fruits within the darkness of our being, nourished by the transcendent. We must stand in the dark gaps of ourselves, if we are to stand in the gaps of the world. What gifts, within us—within all people—beckon to emerge from the darkness, in order to nourish the world?

That conveyance—between the transcendent universal of our roots and the slow cultivation of inner fruit—is the specific work of the artist. Like pearl divers, we constantly search for gems in the muck of ourselves, manifesting our deepest intuitions into some soul-nourishing form. In that movement from cultivating deep inner fruits to manifesting gifts for the nourishment of all—we may enact a profound loving grace.

When I visit with individuals emerging from life sentences in California prisons, I encounter an alchemical force embodied in people who have been told to wait, people we have locked away in the darkness of our carceral state. Little do we know, many of them have taken the calcified container of the cell and turned it into a cocoon. In the complicated nuance of people waiting for their SSI, waiting for an ID and a job and a Greyhound bus out of Skid Row to hopefully reconnect with their families, I meet my teachers—those who have weathered the drought of care, who have walked the *Via Dolorosa*.