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On the power of intention

Musician and sound healer Lavender Suarez on the power of intention, understanding how sounds affect the mind and body, and the value of opening up your senses in order to take in everything.

You have two distinct creative identities: Sound Healer and Electronic Musician. How did you get into those two genres?

I started making and releasing music in 2008. It's always been a very exploratory process. In 2010, I moved to Hudson, NY and started interning with the composer [Pauline Oliveros](#). While I was working with Pauline, I learned her Deep Listening philosophy, which opened my mind to all the capabilities and power that sound has, not just when we're listening to or creating music, but in our daily lives. I learned how to tune into sound in a more dynamic way.

After I studied Deep Listening with Pauline, I began to wonder how I could take everything I had learned in a direction that made sense for me. I noticed that many of my friends, who were touring musicians and experimental artists, struggled with mental health. I've always felt that it's important to help my community. I studied psychology and art therapy in college, so, going into sound-based healing felt like a natural progression.

Are there people in addition to Pauline who inspired you to become a sound healer?

Pauline was a big inspiration. I also studied with [Jonathan Goldman](#), the founder of the Sound Healers Association. But it's never been so much about looking to other practitioners. It's always been a very internal process for me. I wanted to do it in my own way and make that a component of my practice.

I started incorporating electronic sounds into the sound healing practice, and then I started incorporating acoustic instruments. For [Basilica SoundScape 2015](#), I performed an outdoor, three-hour gong bath. That performance was all about using the gong to create a healing space. I realized that this is something I can do to have an effect on people, and I feel that it's important to bring that to alternative spaces.

What's the difference between a healing sound and a musical sound?

It has to do with the intention. The way I navigate between questions like, "Am I performing artistically or am I performing as a sound healing practitioner?" is by asking myself, "What's my intention?" When you set up an intention, you hold space for people, cultivate accessibility, and place listeners into a space of safety. That's the main way to create healing music.

Is it as simple as thinking about the audience/client as opposed to thinking about expressing yourself?

Well, in either modality, I assume the audience will have a physical reaction. I can perform an electronic music concert or a sound healing event and people will have certain reactions. It's about building a sonic space for the audience and trying to meet their needs. And it's about taking my emotions out of it, which is one aspect I love about my sound healing practice. I'm creating conditions for someone's healing process to happen. It's not about being considered some kind of master of anything. That's not the point.

What do healing sounds sound like?

There are differing opinions about what can be considered healing or therapeutic music. Sometimes people expect a sound healing event to feel really light, like they're floating. But then, after the event, they'll say, "My body actually felt really heavy."

Everyone comes in with their own ideas about what healing music can be. It can be anything, really. That's what I learned from Deep Listening with Pauline Oliveros. Healing sounds can be the sound of water moving in a stream, or the sound of a radiator banging. Your body is always trying to physically and mentally connect with the sounds around you. That's a very subconscious process.

When I'm invited to perform, since I have these two practices, it's up to me to decide the intention. Do I intend to make therapeutic music for someone or to express myself? I think of these two areas as separate projects. When I'm performing an artistic, sound art-based performance, it's booked as C. Lavender. When I'm doing my sound healing practice, it's Lavender Suarez. Either way, it's me. The two elements collide all the time now. The sound healing informs my artistic practice as well.

I'm interested in the way that you're connecting the words "healing" and "intent," because it suggests that being intentional has the potential to heal people. Creative people often focus on self-expression, healing themselves through creative processes, and often think about audience later. Do you feel like you're doing something unusual?

Intent is very important because that sets the stage for what I'm going to present. I'm always reaching out for new spaces, new audiences to explore. When I'm doing that, I'm asking myself, "What do I want to deliver to these people, to this place?" It's very important for me to decide, "Is this a space that needs more art or more healing? Have they had either experience?" Sometimes—actually, a lot of the time—I'm bringing my healing practice to artistic spaces.

For example, I did a sound healing workshop at the Brooklyn Botanical Garden. They had never hosted anything like that before. It was a listening and walking tour of the garden, and then, we talked about how noise pollution affects people's lives.

When I bring healing practices to spaces, it's important that the practice opens up a discussion, that it creates a way for people to ask questions, like: "Who gets to decide what makes a certain space a healing space versus not being a healing space?"

That's a good question.

It's important to me. I like to demonstrate how spaces can be activated into healing environments. To say, "Look, this can happen here, and you can make this happen." On the bus, if you take a moment and listen closely to the sound of the gears moving, slow your breath, close your eyes—you can momentarily turn your commute into a healing space. Concerts happen everywhere, and festival culture is rooted in the idea that, "We just set up in a field and now it's a concert series." But, with healing practices, there's been a lot of gatekeeping to say what is and isn't, what can or can't be, a healing space.

Like a safe space.

Yeah, and you have to go there, and you have to subscribe to these people's beliefs, all because you want to tend to yourself. That's a big part of my mission, essentially: anywhere can be a healing space. I have a mobile sound healing kit, it fits in my backpack, and I've gone up on mountaintops, into colleges, and, actually, into a tunnel in Philly, which was amazing.

The acoustics must have been so cool.

We were in the street, pretty much. Jim Strong from Vox Populi parked a truck on one side of the entrance to the tunnel to block traffic from coming through. For one hour we created a healing environment in what was otherwise an underpass that didn't smell good, with cars going by. It was hot and drippy and weird. I think that's a testament to how sound can reinvent spaces. The sound vibrates out and it changes the atmosphere. It becomes a slowed-down space where you forget about time.

Do you think that sound healing is really just about showing people how to be attentive to their surroundings in different ways? Like mapping space through the acoustics and the importance of being present?

That's definitely part of it. It's a great way to help people notice their body or their mental state. I always enjoy having discussions about sound after I've performed a sound healing event, because often people describe these sensations that they've never had before, and they're trying to make sense of it: "Oh, at one point, I felt the sound of the gong in my knee. Well, I never thought about listening with my knee or how sound affects my knee." But sound is constantly affecting our bodies in every moment, and most of the time it's subconscious.

A lot of people go into a hypnagogic state and they'll experience visions and sensations. That's really powerful. It can help someone tap into that feeling of slowness, a space beyond time, where images and sensations and sounds just come to you. It's up to the participant to process that and determine what it says about their bigger picture or what that says about their subconscious. People can have memories triggered by these experiences, too.

Do certain sounds hit people's bodies in different ways, and when you're performing, do you have that in mind? Like, are you saying to yourself, "I'm going to aim for the knees!"

Well, everyone's body reacts differently. People have varied responses, triggers, and things that they think of, but they're deciding what they want to tell me. The general philosophy with psychoacoustic principles is higher pitches affect upper body and lower pitches affect lower body. That's why a lot of dance music, the best dance music, is really bass heavy, because it makes you want to move, and move your legs. It goes right into your gut and propels you in that way.

Our brain deciphers higher vocal tones as being friendlier and more comforting. Our brains want to connect with a little bit of a higher range, so our brain is constantly trying to hear human speech patterns. That's the general consensus on how frequencies affect the body and mind, and that's something I consider all the time in my artistic practice. I'm always thinking about how I can move through that range so that the audience does have this full-body experience when there can be moments of high-highs and low-lows. That's ultimately a grand metaphor for life.

When you're getting ready to do a performance, how important is it to go visit the space ahead of time and find out what the architecture and audio set-up is like?

I try to do that whenever I can. But sometimes it's just not possible. I usually plan to have a lot of time beforehand, if possible, so I can work with sound technicians there. Over email correspondence I'll ask, "What are things I should know about the sound there?" Once I'm there, I usually work with sound technicians to figure out where my placement should be. "Do we want to amplify the sounds I'm using? Do we not want to amplify, if I'm using acoustic instruments?"

With every sound healing performance or private treatment I'm doing, I'm working with principles of improvisation that I've learned over ten years of performing music, in the sense that I don't have a standard set that I'm always going to do, or that's always going to happen, or that's going to happen no matter what. Once I get to a space, I have to work with the space. I have to consider how people's bodies will be in the space. Will they be standing up? Will they be sitting down? Will they be lying down? There's a lot of consideration that goes into, particularly for sound healing experiences. How can this come together so that it's most effective in that particular space?

With private treatment as well, when someone comes to me saying, "This is why I'm interested in receiving

sound healing treatment," I'm not just going to respond with, "Oh, this is what I do. This is what sound healing does for people." I craft a different session for each person, based on what I feel will be most beneficial for them. That comes out of a preliminary conversation. In the same way that, when I go to certain spaces to present a sound healing event, a lot of conversation happens to figure out how we can make it the most effective experience for people.

There've been times when I showed up to do a sound healing event and they've said, "Okay, you're going to be in this room," and then we get there and I'm like, "This room actually won't work, can I see other rooms that might be available?" Or there's too much outside sound. Or this room isn't temperature controlled enough. I always have to be willing to move around and figure out what will feel best for me, so that I can feel confident presenting the work there.

It sounds like part of your practice is about being open to everything around you: the environment, the people, and presenting yourself as someone who's ready to encounter whatever a space looks like, or whatever a person is feeling that day.

I go into things with a lot of flexibility. I never go in and say, "Okay, I'm going to show up and this is exactly what it's going to be." With my music practice, I learned that fairly early on. You can say, "Okay, I've rehearsed for weeks now, and this is what this piece is going to sound like, and I'm going to present it this way and this is what they told me the sound system will be," and then you get there and things may be different and you can either fight against that or you can try and make the most of it. I'm always willing to craft and shape the experience as much as spaces will allow me. I'm always stepping into a space ready to decipher it—to work with it versus against it.

I want to circle back to an earlier moment in our conversation when we were discussing time—the way that healing can involve disconnecting from time or experiences of time.

Sound can elude time and eluding time is important, not only to the healing process, but also to our creative processes. It's just that so much of our time is dictated. We're always checking on the time and getting notifications on our phone. At a lot of the sound healing events that I do, people have never had this experience of just closing their eyes and listening to sound for an extended duration. At a lot of the sound healing events, I'll play gongs, singing bowls, potentially some digital sounds, for at least an hour. That's a very unique experience for people, to have a physical listening experience, for an hour of time.

Sometimes when people first go in (particularly students at colleges, who are so often glued to their phones) they hear that it will last for an hour and say, "Oh my god, this is going to be so long and so boring." They hear an hour and they get freaked out. But once everything calms down, and I have auditory cues as well, I'll cue a bell at the beginning and then cue a different bell at the end. But once the sound healing concert is over, a lot of people say, "I lost track of time. It's been an hour already? I had no idea, I thought it was 15 minutes." Very often, this discussion of time comes up and it's a unique durational listening experience.

It's like what we say when we're having a particularly internal experience: "I lost all track of time." Or, "I didn't even realize four hours had gone by."

That is when you're in your most fruitful moment—when your brain is in a focused state, when you're allowed to just exist; to be in your body, allowing your senses to take in everything. That's the beginning of a healing process. Just getting into that mental space where you're allowing yourself to be in your body. And the sounds that you hear, whether you're focusing on listening to an environment or listening to durational live music, the sounds can help guide you to let go of thoughts and distractions that may come into your mind, so you can drift away.

Lavender Suarez Recommends:

[Five Varied Texts That Explore Sound as Healing Method From New Age, Spiritual and/or Scientific Perspectives:](#)

[Sounding The Inner Landscape: Music as Medicine](#) by Kay Gardner

Sonic Meditations (the collected scores) by Pauline Oliveros

The Mysticism of Sound and Music: The Sufi Teaching of Hazrat Inayat Khan by Hazrat Inayat Khan

Healing at The Speed of Sound by Don Campbell & Alex Doman

The 7 Secrets of Sound Healing by Jonathan Goldman

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