

Mental Illness Unnoticed: What Our Favorite Musicians' Lyrics Are Really Saying

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Mental illness has always been relevant in human societies and the United States is no different. However the United States exists in a time period where social expression is somewhat encouraged in many parts of life. Mental health has evolved from strictly being taboo to being slightly more accepted in the United States. Now, living in an age in the United States where people like musicians have formed an outlet for those struggling with mental illness, some fall victim to their own minds. The following offers historical, informational, and biographical points of view that look into the nature of mental illness and why it is treated the way it is in the United States.

First, is one regarding asylums and treatment centers in early America which allows for an understanding of how the United States government and society treated mental illness and the stigma around expressing one's mental health. The aim is to explore the complexities of addiction and how mental illness can lead to addiction. Lastly, *Most Dope: The Extraordinary Life of Mac Miller* by Paul Cantor, conveys Mac Miller's life story and rise to fame, as well as diving into the events and situations regarding his difficult mental health journey.

A biography was chosen in order to fully analyze a person's life and gain some insight into their mental struggles and identity. The Mac Miller biography specifically was chosen as Mac Miller's life was very documented and it was written recently. Mac Miller is from Pittsburgh, like myself, which I believe can reach people in my area when it is talked about, and I also have enjoyed his music for a long portion of my life (Cantor). Reading his biography allows one to look into his psyche and see his line of thinking and following events leading to him passing away. Knowing this information from Mac Miller allows one to get more of a glimpse of how and why people who are so fortunate often succumb to their mental illnesses, despite

everything going on for them.

Although today mental illness is recognized, at the conception of the United States it was not seen as normal. In conjunction with mental illness being frowned upon, there weren't as many measures for helpfully dealing with it compared to now. The first mental health facility in the United States "Pennsylvania Hospital" was located in Philadelphia and founded in 1752 ("Timeline of Early Psychiatric"). This was a place for those in early United States society struggling with mental illness struggles, things such as anxiety, anger, and personality disorders were not understood at the time and were not handled appropriately. With mental illness not being recognized and understood, the familiarity around it was low leading to unfair assumptions. Family and friends who experienced those around them struggling might have seen no other option, but to send them to a hospital.. By 1890 every state in the United States had a mental health asylum, the *National Library of Medicine* argues, and living conditions were poor with some locations restraining patients with chains. An unstable basis and lack of understanding around mental health would travel throughout time leading to today, and even as the extreme asylums would fade away, the stereotypes and stigmas around people suffering from their own mental illness and solitude would continue in the United States History. The most present psychiatric reform was seen in the period from World War II to the present:

The period following World War II saw the expansion of federal legislation to reshape the mental health system. With the establishment of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) in 1949, policy makers and academic psychiatrists shifted the conceptualization of mental health to a public health concern, one that could include a broad range of mild to severe illnesses with treatments that providers could deliver in outpatient and inpatient settings. (George et al. 6).

Although practices have been vastly updated since their conception in the late 1700s, there still leaves much to be desired in a patient receiving all the necessary care they require. This lack of not only knowledge but availability to access such treatment lends to the fact that some, if not most, individuals suffering from a mental illness inherently find a way to treat themselves.

Those who are not doing the best and have not had success when and if they seek treatment, may choose to try drugs as a coping mechanism and end up addicted. Addiction is terrifying and many Americans know someone who is suffering from addiction or addicted themselves. Addiction is when someone depends on a certain activity or substance without any control. Drug addiction specifically is when a person takes drugs not due to choice, but their brain demanding it thinking it's necessary for them. Drug addiction does not discriminate, you could have everything and be addicted or have nothing at all and be addicted. Addiction does not care about your age, race, sex, income, or status; it only wants control over you, and ultimately it won't stop even after it completely takes over. Parents, children, and friends can lose loved ones to addiction not simply because of how potent it can be, but the root cause of why people try drugs. There is a direct correlation between drug abuse and mental health, and the *National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIH)* confirms this in their research report "Part 1: The Connection Between Substance Use Disorders and Mental Illness." Drug abuse is not just linked to conditions like depression and anxiety, but other conditions like "bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder, and attention deficit disorder," and the link between mental illness and addiction is not surprising given how society views both ("Part 1: The Connection"). Drugs are very common in the United States, so much so that children can gain access to them and use them easily by themselves or with their friends. With this being the case it's still unclear why someone would choose drugs over medical and therapeutic services offered all throughout the

country. To get a look at the average American teenagers experience struggling with mental health Mac Miller's Biography *Most Dope* will be evaluated.

Malcolm Miller, more commonly known as “Mac Miller” was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on January 19, 1992. Malcolm hailed from a primarily middle class family in the safe beneficial community of Point Breeze. His parents were both creatives and art which would lead into his own artistic development (Cantor). His rap skill and musical apprenticeship would start off simply as a hobby with friends and as he got older it would evolve into a passion and then a job. In his teenage years recreational drugs, drinking and partying were a normal occurrence, but nothing too out of control as it was managed pretty well. He was monitored by his close friends who were luckily responsible caring about Malcolm as he was their ticket to the major leagues.

Time would go by with Malcolm as a renowned local Pittsburgh artist, but the attention was small and he wasn't in the limelight yet, and his mental health was in a good place at the time. Things would change however as time went on, deals were arranged and Mac Miller would start releasing studio albums which at first went well, but would devolve into a situation where Malcom would face hate for a multitude of reasons. At first his music was too bland, and just “frat music” without substance which Mac kind of accepted partially which hurt, but he was going to go harder on the next album. So Malcom worked and worked repeatedly trying to prove his critics wrong and make his way as a respectable hip hop artist. Some more albums were released but Macolm didn't reach the level he wanted to, and faced heavy backlash. On the album *Macadelic* he had a song about his recently passed grandfather, which was heavily underlooked by his critical audience (Cantor). This started a downward spiral in Malcolm's mental state which could be seen in his music.

As Mac Miller moved his sound from the “party music” sound he was portrayed to have, he took a more experimental approach different from most other rap competitors. The overall low embrace of his album *Blue Slide Park* and previous work led him to really shake up his catalog with his *Watching Movies with the Sound Off* album two years later in 2013. These albums would be more unique, however Miller was starting to abuse drugs and fans would notice in his music

Miller’s albums *GO:OD AM* and *Swimming* would be the albums later in career to showcase his internal problems leading to his severe abuse to drugs that would end up taking his life. The song "Self Care" is an explicit look into Mac’s mind that would be released on his album *Swimming* a month before he unfortunately passed away. The beat is very melodic, wavy and, sleepy which draws the listener back in to hear what Miller has to say. On the first verse Miller is talking about some type of hurdle he had to overcome previously and describes how he got over it from “climbin' over that wall” to “Now I know that the medicine be on call” (Cantor). Miller is telling the listener in verse one that he faced some type of event in his life that changed him with the result being a reliance on drugs and hard drugs with the following statement that it makes his skin so hot that he can compare it to melting. The listener does not know what could have happened, maybe hate towards his passion projects or his recent breakup, but none of that is important as Miller just expresses his current feelings in life.

Mac Miller was very open in his lyrics, though he didn’t find help outside of it like a lot of people struggling with mental health. Instead, Miller opted to try and find a way to satiate his own demons, much like those that have come before him, such as Amy Winehouse and Kurt Cobain to name just a couple as the list unfortunately becomes extensive. Critics believe one reason artists succumb to this fate could be due to the “...romanticised link between musicians

and depression” (“Mental Health Support”). However, this speculation continues by stating that “...while popular culture idolises the idea of the ‘tortured genius’, the truth is more insidious. Not only are we losing talented artists to suicide and overdoses, but the lives of many more musicians are being made miserable by anxiety, depression, addiction and other psychiatric condition” (“Mental Health Support”). Even though it is becoming more prevalent that musicians suffer from mental health issues, they still do not always turn to a proper place for diagnosis.

It is a problem many go through alone from being judged harshly by loved ones to abusing drugs primarily for the ease of access and widely accepted societal viewpoint of the way partaking in drugs creates or shifts a person's reputation or social status. People struggling feel helpless and don't want to reach out and with how “insanity” was treated in the past this is no surprise. The United States has never had an effective positive way to address mental illness on a large scale and to fix the overall dismissive energy around the topic.

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