

351: Music and Emotions with Bryson Merkley



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Jody Moore

[Better Than Happy](#) with Jody Moore

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I'm Jody Moore and this is *Better Than Happy*, episode 351: Music and Emotions with Bryson Merkley.

Did you know that you can live a life that's even better than happy? My name is Jody Moore. I'm a master certified life coach and a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. And if you're willing to go with me I can show you how. Let's go.

You guys I have such a treat in store for you today. I had so much fun talking with Bryson Merkley earlier this week. He is in Business Minded. As you know I've been bringing on some of the folks in Business Minded and they are brilliant, amazing entrepreneurs. We have coaches in there but we have a lot of people with all different types of businesses. And Bryson is one such person who is not a coach. He is an amazing musician.

And he taught me so many things that I had never considered before about music and the connection that music has to our emotions and how we can take that understanding and use it to help us process our emotions. And it was just such a fun conversation.

So, for those of you interested in learning more about Business Minded, it's a program that I only open up once a year. But we will be opening it this summer so you'll want to get on the wait list if you want to learn more about working with me on your business. You can do that at jodymoore.com/business. But for everybody listening I'm so excited for you to have the tools that Bryson offers us here about music and emotions. Here we go.

Jody: Okay, Bryson, tell me all about you. Who are you? Tell us everything.

Bryson: So, let's see. So, I'm from Mesa, Arizona. I am 26.

Jody: Okay, nice. It must be fun being 26.

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Bryson: Yeah, real fun. I'm a big music guy. I went to college for music education at ASU, Arizona State University, graduated in the winter of 2020.

Jody: A tough time to graduate.

Bryson: Yeah. And that was fun.

Jody: 2020 seemed like winter all year.

Bryson: Yeah. I got to student teach hybrid and completely virtual. So that was interesting.

Jody: Interesting. Okay, so music ed, what age were you teaching when you did your student teaching?

Bryson: I did both elementary age so kindergarten through sixth grade and high school.

Jody: Okay, awesome. What do you like better?

Bryson: You know what? They both have pros and cons I think. With the high school kids, you can go a little bit deeper with them. It's a little less about babysitting I guess. A little more about getting into the meat of the music which I like, but yeah.

Jody: Fun. So, what are we working on next? Not that you have to have anything figured out by now by any means. But what are you doing these days?

Bryson: These days, well, I taught for a semester and it was kind of an experience. And so right now I'm working on, I teach piano lessons. And I'm working on building up, my business is a choir and orchestra that I've started up.

Jody: Awesome. Okay. Do you teach everything local or do you do any online? Because I need a new piano teacher, Bryson.

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Bryson: I've mainly done local out of my home.

Jody: Okay. That tends to work better.

Bryson: Yeah. When COVID happened, I taught one or two lessons over Zoom. And it is kind of challenging to do music over Zoom.

Jody: Yeah, doesn't come through the computer mic the same way. Okay, well, that's exciting, piano, choir, orchestra. So, you do a little bit of everything. And you joined Business Minded. How did you find me, first of all?

Bryson: Actually, there's a lady in my stake who is a coach. And as fate would have it, I was over self-reliance, I was a self-reliance facilitator at one point in my stake. And she came to each of the self-reliance things. And we were supposed to choose a mentor. And so, I did and I chose her.

Jody: That's awesome. What's her name?

Bryson: Her name is Azlin Maloney.

Jody: Okay, I don't know if I know Azlin, okay.

Bryson: Okay. I think it's through her. I think she introduced me to you and to Brooke Castillo. And so ever since then I've been following The Life Coach School, and you, and all things coaching.

Jody: Nice. Okay. Then you joined the Business program to build up your business, yeah?

Bryson: Yes.

Jody: Okay. So just for everybody listening, the people in Business Minded had the opportunity to submit, if they wanted to come on the podcast I asked them to submit what topic ideas they thought they could bring to all of us here. I loved, Bryson, that you said that you wanted to help us use music to manage anxiety. I was like yes, tell me more about that. Especially

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because anxiety is something that is such a problem and issue that so many are dealing with today. But also, music, I do feel the power of music in my life.

And I believe completely that it's healing to our souls and that it does something to us psychologically, therapeutically. But I don't understand it. I've never studied it or anything. And so, I'm really excited to have your expertise here today. So where shall we dive in?

Bryson: I think it's important first to understand and delve into the basics of what music is.

Jody: Okay, let's start there.

Bryson: Yeah. So, because we don't really think about it that much. Because it's everywhere we're inundated with it all the time. Anywhere you go out in the world there's almost always some sort of music playing. And so, we don't really think about it that much because it's so prevalent. But yeah, so at its basic level music is just organized sound. Isn't that interesting to think about?

Jody: Yeah, that's very interesting. I never thought of it that way before.

Bryson: And when I was in college they kind of talked about this concept a couple of times. And when I first heard it, it was kind of like, really?

Jody: Are you sure? It seems like there's a little more to it than that.

Bryson: I'm pretty sure there's more. Yeah. But if you think about it, my understanding of the model has really helped me to kind of parse this out. But if you think about it, music is something that happens from outside of us. And then it's something that our senses take in. But it's really just sound that our brain is processing. And we use what we call instruments to make those sounds. But it's really no different than say the microwave beeping or the garbage truck outside. It's created by the same process of vibrations.

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And so really if someone comes along, the composer and they just decide, I want these sounds, certain sounds to happen at these specific times, and that's what we call a song.

Jody: Okay. Sorry to interrupt you but this is so fascinating and it's reminding me of a little video clip my husband sent me the other day, Billie Eilish and her brother, Finneas, whose last name I can't remember now. They produce their music together. Her brother is kind of the genius behind the songwriting and the production. And Billie Eilish has the voice and the character to go with it. So, Finneas was on, I think it was on Jimmy Fallon on The Tonight Show. And they were talking about one of her really famous songs, I think it's called Bad Guy.

And there's a kind of a sound in the background of that song that he said, "Everybody thinks that it's some particular instrument but it's not." What it is, is there's a crosswalk wherever they live that makes a certain sound, like a ticking sound when it's time to cross the street. And every time he would hear that sound he said he kind of danced to it. It had a beat or a rhythm to it that he identified. And so, he recorded the sound of the crosswalk thing and that plays in the background of this song.

So, like you're saying, it literally could be the microwave beeping. It can be, you take something, you make it intentional, you package it in a certain way, that is music. That's so fascinating.

Bryson: Yeah, definitely. And like we talked about earlier, at first it can seem like knowing that about music kind of almost disempowers it because it makes it seem kind of stale or kind of sterile I guess is the word. But what really, what I've realized really gives music its power in our lives is the concept of story in music. The concept of combining sound and story is something that's really fascinating to me. The music itself is the organized sound like we talked about. But when you combine that with a storyline then that's the experience that we have of music.

Jody: That's so good.

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Bryson: Yeah. Isn't that great? I think that's amazing.

Jody: I think that's awesome. So, when you say story, obviously song lyrics bring in a story but I would assume it doesn't even have to be, because there are many songs that don't have lyrics. Instrumental music still tells a story. So, can you say more about the story part?

Bryson: Yeah. So really what I believe is that the story that we are processing as we listen to music is really just our own thoughts about what we're hearing. So, we have this oral input from the music. And our brain is translating that into how we hear it. But then it's our thoughts about the sound that we're processing in our minds that then creates the storyline that evokes and generates the emotions that we feel as a result of what we're hearing.

Jody: That's fascinating, yeah. Would you say or would you describe them, Bryson, as sometimes subconscious thoughts? Because I feel when I'm listening to music mostly I'm not in my conscious brain. It feels like it's just generating emotion in my heart. But you're right, it could be subconscious thinking, yeah.

Bryson: Yeah, definitely. I think as a society, in our culture we're trained from the time we're very little. We're trained to hear music in a certain way. And that may not translate. People talk about music being a universal language. But that may not always translate perfectly from culture to culture because different kinds of sounds come across differently depending on what we are accustomed to hearing.

And so, I think especially, if you think about movies and the soundtracks that movies have, that's a great example to go off of because the music is designed to kind of enhance the storyline. And all of us watch movies and so it's something that we've been trained that when the music is intense and high pitched, or really low pitched, extreme then we're trained to think this is more of an intense scary scene. And then if the music is more

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smooth and lyrical, it has a clear melody line or it has a warmth to it, then we see, this is conveying love, or comfort, or whatever the emotion is.

Jody: But you think that's mostly learned then throughout our life as we're exposed to those situations. Is there an element to our response to music that is innate within us? Because even little, tiny kids, you see them react to music.

Bryson: I think everything we're talking about is part of it. But I do think like you say, I do think that there is this innate nature in human beings to be drawn to that. And I'm not sure why. But I believe that music was given to us by God. And so, I think that our spirits are sensitive to music.

Jody: Yes, that's so amazing. I love that. Okay, so before we connect the dots on anxiety I just had one question for you as you were talking about sometimes there are differences culturally or what have you in terms of what we experience with music. What are your thoughts on, because you mentioned being a member of the LDS faith, what are your thoughts on the music in our church? Because I feel we need to step it up a little. Not to give you a leading question but I feel it's music that was written so long ago.

And I understand the appropriateness of a reverence behind it. But there's so many religions, and cultures, and people that are better than us I feel are using music to worship and to celebrate. What do you think about that? Is there a way that we could, not that they're asking for our opinion in Salt Lake about music in church? But I've been speaking at Time Out for Women and we have these musicians come that are amazing. And it's not like what you hear in church, the very slow kind of monotone reverent hymns. It's really alive and passionate. What are your thoughts about that?

Bryson: Yeah. Well, I do think that everybody is different. I think the taste of music is as different as people are. And all the music that we experience in our western culture really stemmed from classical music. And so, when you go to the older hymns that we have, it's more of that classically

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influenced. But in our world today we are more global. We're more connected globally. And so, we're able to connect with different cultures.

And here in the United States we're a big melting pot. We have people from all over the world and a lot of different countries do have people from everywhere. And so, we kind of have this merging of cultures. And I think that shows up in different tastes in music. But yeah, but I think that there is – I think that we could be I think more open if that makes sense. We could be more open to other options.

I think there's a tendency when people have a taste in music to be kind of close minded to other options. Because they have an experience with music and it's like, that didn't move me or touch me in any way. And so, they kind of write it off. But I think that there's a way, if we can really connect with the music and utilize what I mentioned before, this whole concept of story, if we can find the story in music of different kinds then I think we can come to appreciate it even if it's still not necessarily our favorite music.

And so, I think maybe focusing more on the story of Jesus Christ, the story of the plan of salvation, the story of our Heavenly Father and we are His children. I think music really somewhat regardless of style, I understand that it's important to have reverence in our meetings. But I think that if it is really conveying that message and that storyline of increasing our faith in Jesus Christ and in the gospel then I think that, yeah.

Jody: There could be a place for that, right?

Bryson: Yeah, I think that there's a place for that.

Jody: Yeah. Again, I've been able to hear The Bonner Family. I don't know if you're familiar with them.

Bryson: Yeah.

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Jody: They've been signing at the last couple of Time Out for Women's events I was at and Nathan Pacheco. And it is like you said, it's the celebration of the gospel and the good news of Jesus Christ. And anyway, I know they're redoing the hymnbook right now. I heard it's going to be a long process but it will be fun to see if we get, like you said, a little bit more diversity, a little bit more inclusion of different styles, different cultures. That could be fun to see what's coming. But okay, so talk to me about how you connect the dots between music and managing anxiety.

Bryson: So, growing up, I've never been the type of person to really be very good at expressing or processing my emotions. In my head it's never been something that's okay.

Jody: Welcome to the human race.

Bryson: Yeah, seriously. Yeah, but I think growing up I discovered movie music, movie soundtracks. And they were so moving to me and I would just sit and I would go through my saved lists of music, movie music. And I would just sit and listen and not do anything else.

Jody: I love that.

Bryson: Which maybe seems a little crazy. But that's what I would do. So, I would just sit and listen. I think at the time I just attributed it to, well, I'm just a musical guy. But as I've thought about it more recently looking back on it, I realize that I think a major reason why I did that is because it connected me to my emotions that were inside of me but that I was not allowing myself to process.

Jody: That's so good.

Bryson: And so, because of that, that's why I was so drawn to it because it actually relieved a lot of the emotions that I had buried deep inside.

Jody: I love that.

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Bryson: And so yeah, it was actually a coping mechanism that I naturally was drawn to because of I had already been involved in music I think.

Jody: I can relate to this where I've gone through things that are really emotional like a breakup with a boyfriend or things like this in my past. Music is the way for me that I process emotion. I go for long drives by myself and I listen to certain songs, even sad songs because I want to be sad when I'm going through a breakup or something.

I have go-to songs like Sinead O'Connor has a song called This is to Mother You. And I just, if I'm really sad or something I just put it on really loud by myself. I sing along. I can't sing at all but it helps me lean into the pain. And maybe I even cry. And music for me also in a different way than you but music is the thing. It's the vehicle by which I best move through emotions. So that's interesting, okay.

Bryson: Yeah. And actually, while I was being coached there was a time during one of the coaching calls where I was a little bit in a state where I wasn't really open to a whole lot of feedback, I just wasn't in a good mood. But I finally got to the point where on the call I was just like, "Well, I'm just sad." And she was like, "Well, then just do sad." And she encouraged me, because I'm a musician she encouraged me to use music to help me process that.

We got off the call and I went into the living room and I got on the piano and I just started playing some music that I felt like was sad music. And it was amazing because it totally changed the experience of that emotion. It went from being something that was challenging and difficult for me to, for one thing, almost going away immediately. But also, I almost didn't want it to go away. It became this beautiful experience for me with the music. And I felt so much more connected to what I was doing musically as I played.

Jody: That's awesome.

Bryson: And so, another experience in a different way rather than just listening, actually playing music. But yeah, and so understanding this I think

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is huge. I think a lot of people kind of do like what you mentioned. They have these go to songs. But I feel like it's largely misunderstood how that works and why it works. But I feel because of that music has become kind of an underutilized tool that we can use intentionally to help us process our emotions. And so that's kind of where anxiety can come in. I have actually curated a bunch of playlists of all symphonic music.

And the reason, I'll kind of do a sidenote here, the reason I've chosen symphonic music is not because lyrical music is not good and can't help us process our emotions because like you said, it helped you. But what I do find is that lyrics can be somewhat confining to the storyline that we can associate with them. And so, these playlists that I've created, there is a playlist on there for fear and anxiety. And it's designed to actually evoke anxiety, the first song.

Jody: And everyone's like, "Why would I want to do that?" But I'm with you. But tell people why.

Bryson: Yeah, so the reason why is so that you can actually process the emotion. A lot of people think that we want to get away from anxiety. It's like oh no, I don't want to feel anxiety. I have to get to a place of peace when anxiety comes on. But the quickest way to peace is through the anxiety, not around it. And so, if we are able to give ourselves the space and the grace to allow the anxiety to come up then we'll be able to process through it and get to the other side where we'll then be more open to experience the peace that we're seeking.

Jody: That's right. So, I just want to state that I would think that it's not like you're just sitting around having a lovely day and you think, maybe I'll go listen to the fear anxiety playlist that Bryson put together. Of course, we don't want to trigger that for no reason. But if there is something going on and your brain is offering you tons of thoughts, your brain thinks it's protective to cause you to feel fear and anxiety. It thinks that you're going to have a better chance of navigating whatever it thinks is coming.

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And so, if that's happening then go listen to that playlist and let yourself be anxious and fearful for a little bit knowing all the while it's not that you're in real danger necessarily. It's just your brain trying to protect you but take some breaths and just be anxious and just be fearful for a little bit. And that's the way, like you said it so beautifully, the way to get to peace faster is to go through the fear and the anxiety, not around it only because I haven't figured out how to go around it really.

Bryson: Right. Me neither.

Jody: It's either through or we just intensify it actually and make it last longer and feel more unbearable. I love how you described that experience where you played the piano and you just did sad. And it actually does feel, you feel more alive, you feel more human. And it's not terrible when you just allow it, right?

Bryson: Yeah. And I think it's important to keep in mind that like you said, our brains don't understand that. And so, at first especially if you're not used to processing and challenging emotions like anxiety then it can be challenging to allow that. Because it's a skill that has to be developed but yeah, if you're willing to just stick it out and make it through that first song in that playlist, the second song in that playlist. It kind of drops off a cliff. And I did that intentionally just because I experience quite a bit of anxiety in my own life.

And so, the contrast in the music kind of brings this immediate sense of relief and relaxation. And then the remainder of the playlist it kind of just supports staying in more of just kind of a calmer, more peaceful state. So yeah, so that's how each playlist is designed, it's kind of to help you move through that emotion. But then by the end to kind of help you get to a more positive place than maybe where you started. And the goal isn't to become a 100% happy by the end of the playlist. It's just to kind of cue your brain to move more towards that, that direction.

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Jody: That's awesome. I think that's such a great way to go through it. And I do want to say too for people that are going to try this. There's a difference between spinning in your head with the thoughts. What Bryson's describing is an experience, don't you think it's more in your body than in your head?

Bryson: Yes.

Jody: So, you have to be willing to kind of set the thoughts on the top shelf. For me they're not ever totally gone when I'm in the middle of processing fear and anxiety. But I sort of set them to the side, okay, we'll look at you later. But right now we're just going to be in the body and feel these emotions. And so, I love the idea of music being kind of a way to center yourself in your body. I just want to be clear because if you spin in your thoughts that is when it will escalate and can turn into panic attacks and things. So, get in your body, not in your head.

Bryson: Yeah. I love that and that's actually another reason why music can be so powerful in this work is because it can help you to very clearly isolate what that emotion feels like in your body. And I know they have videos and things out there where they'll pull music out of a movie. And it kind of totally changes the feel of a movie. Or they'll change the music to something goofy and it just makes it hilarious instead of terrifying. And so, it kind of helps to emphasize the emotional content of a storyline. And so that's how we can leverage the music to kind of make it very clear to us this is anxiety.

And we can describe how it feels in our bodies. And then in the future we'll be more prepared to be able to process those on the go.

Jody: Yes. That's so awesome. My brother-in-law is into film and one of his projects they had to take a film and make a preview that like you said, totally changed the genre of the movie. So, he took *The Shining*, a horror movie with Jack Nicholson and renamed it *Shining* and put like you said, all the same video clips from the actual preview but changed the music to light

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happy music and sort of rearranged the order of the clips a little bit. And all of a sudden it looked like this happy family show.

So yeah, it really is so powerful what music does to connect the dots for us, so I love that. Okay, so do you have other playlists that aren't fear and anxiety filled?

Bryson: Yes, I do. So, there's the fear and anxiety playlist. There's a playlist for grief and sadness, anger and frustration. There's even a playlist on there for depression and let's see, loneliness and a couple more on there as well.

Jody: Okay. So where do people go to find these playlists?

Bryson: So, they can go to voicesofthevalleyaz.com/offer.

Jody: Okay, we'll put that in the show notes, voicesofthevalleyaz.com/offer.

Bryson: You can sign up to, we sent the link to get to all of the things. And there's also a couple of little videos on there that talk a little bit about it.

Jody: This is so amazing, Bryson, I love it. These things that you're talking about I never really connected the dots in these ways. But you're right, I think that music really is such a powerful tool for all this. Tell us more about the choir and orchestra business that you have for folks that are – there's a lot of Arizona listeners that listen to this podcast.

Bryson: Perfect, yeah. So, the ensemble is called Voices of the Valley Choir and Orchestra. And we perform all pops music. And if you're not familiar with that, basically we perform music from movies, videogames, Broadway and arrangements of pop music. And it kind of stemmed out of a desire, some of what we've talked about today, but out of a desire to give people more music that is within orchestra. That is with a choir but that they recognize much of the music that's performed in that kind of an ensemble these days either is really old or it's really new and kind of hard to get into.

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Jody: Okay. So, it's sort of that what most of us are more familiar with territory. And is it for a certain age? Are we talking youth, or is this for adults, or everyone, or what is that demographic?

Bryson: This is for adults mainly. And the thought is to kind of, like I said earlier, to kind of give people who would attend an orchestra or a choir concert but might not because of the kind of music that's performed. It's kind of to reach out to those people and still allow them to have those opportunities to hear this music live but to be able to really enjoy the music and recognize it.

Jody: Okay. And so, are you promoting the opportunity to come and hear or is this something people could participate in as well if they're like, "I want to sing or I play an instrument?"

Bryson: Actually both.

Jody: Both, okay.

Bryson: Yes. We have a concert coming up in the beginning of May and we still have some spots open for musicians if they're interested. And if they are interested they can just go to voicesofthevallyaz.com. And then our concert of course is in May and so we would love for anyone and everyone to come. Our tickets go on sale this Friday.

Jody: Okay, nice. What if I'm thinking I kind of want to sing in your ensemble but I don't have the most amazing voice ever?

Bryson: Sure. So, if that's the case we do have, if you go to the website, there's a little form to fill out. And if you put just a little recording or a little video of you singing then we'll listen to it. And at this point we're pretty new and so we're taking most people in to get this going.

Jody: Okay, alright, cool. So, everyone check it out. It sounds awesome. And when I'm in Arizona I'm going to have to look you guys up. It sounds

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like a great opportunity. I love what you're doing. And meeting people where they're at with the music they're familiar with, it's so powerful.

Bryson: Yeah. It's a lot of fun.

Jody: And I'll be getting your playlist. Anything else that we've left out that you wanted to say today?

Bryson: I think that's about everything.

Jody: Okay, I appreciate it so much, Bryson, such a great message, thank you for your time.

Bryson: Yeah, thank you. Of course, thank you, I appreciate you so much for having me on.

Jody: You bet.

Hey there, if you enjoy this podcast or even if you just find that it sort of piques your curiosity, or it makes you think, you're going to love the book that I wrote. It's called *Better Than Happy: Connecting with Divinity Through Conscious Thinking*. And it's available now at Amazon in print or kindle version. Or if you want me to read it to you, head over to audible and grab the audio version. And why not grab a copy for your sister, your best friend, or your mom while you're there too. Just saying.