WHY DO WE DO MUSIC?
Lee Bartel

The big question today is not "how to make music" but "why we should do music." It is easy to echo "music makes them smarter" as a justification for music. Because math has symbolic value to the corporate business agenda, increasing math scores seems adequate justification for music in school. However, as Eisner points out (see Willingham's review) "The 'music makes them smarter' justifications for music miss the point of teaching music." Face it, we do not do music to "fine-tune muscular systems" or "integrate emotion and logic" although these are "side-effects" of music as Sylwester argues on page 17. We do not do it because it enhances self-growth as Czikszentmihaly suggests although it may have that function. We do not do it to keep the boys off the streets or out of the "pool halls" or to sell instruments as The Music Man suggested (see review on page 24). Music has many "side effects" and many of these are very desirable but they do not justify music musically.

According to Dennis Tupman we do music to "find the music" "to find our very souls." This touches a locus of justification for which many people have tried to find appropriate words. Eisner says we do music because "words are too limiting as the only means of developing knowledge and meaning." The justification for music lies in non-verbal, non-practical, non-mundane experience -- the plane of the transcendent. Czikszentmihaly, who studies happiness, calls the moment of keen happiness a state of "flow" and musical experience gives you that. Beardsley and Dewey call it the aesthetic experience. Robert Jourdain calls it ecstasy "..[music] makes us larger than we really are, and the world more orderly... we feel our very existence expand and realize that we can be more than we normally are, and that the world is more than it seems" (Music, the Brain, and Ecstasy p. 331).

Neil Postman laments the fact that since the age of the Enlightenment and scepticism, we have lost our cultural narratives (the explanatory big stories) that offer a sense of continuity and purpose to society. In music we have lost our narrative and "music makes you smarter" will not do. Rusbihan Baqli observes that in "standard Sufi interpretation, the love of music is based upon the faint recollection of hearing the beautiful voice of God saying, "Am I not your Lord?" Listening to music therefore becomes a way of transporting oneself back to that moment of harmony with God in pre-eternity" (Teachings of Sufism. Trans. Carl W Ernst, p. 96). That is an orienting narrative. In Judeo/Christian tradition one might say: In the beginning God created and at the end of the day appreciated the creation. Man and woman were then created in God's image and set in a garden with a symbolic tree of knowledge in the middle. End story. What we know about God in this story is that God creates, appreciates the creation, and makes and uses symbols. People in "God's image" are creative, appreciate the created, and make and
use symbols. When we engage in these tasks we fulfill the "image of God" – we become more God-like. Music builds the image of God in us. Music education is soul-making.

What is your "big story" for why you do music?