

Article

Beyond the Crystal Bowl: Ethnomusicology, Spiritual Transformation, and the Modern Sound Bath

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Abstract

The modern sound bath has emerged as a global wellness phenomenon, widely promoted as a practice for relaxation, healing, and spiritual transformation. Despite its rapid proliferation, a critical social–scientific analysis of this practice remains largely absent. This article addresses that gap by drawing on ethnomusicology, the study of music as cultural and social practice, to examine sound bath culture. Rather than locating efficacy in a de-contextualized collection of instruments, reductive scientific or metaphysical explanations, or universalized techniques of “vibrational healing,” ethnomusicology provides essential tools for understanding the social life of sound healing. In this way, this article argues that the transformative potential of sound baths is better understood through the Greek Pythagorean concept of *harmonia*, or “fitting together,” in which sound operates in conjunction with ritual structure, meaning-making, and practitioner intention. By tracing the emergence of sound baths and situating them within broader comparative frameworks of ritual and sonic practice globally, this article demonstrates that spiritual transformation within a sound bath emerges not from sound alone, but from the integration of acoustic experience with context and interpretation. This article does not dismiss contemporary sound healing practices; rather, it offers a reframing of the practice as a cultural phenomenon, which opens the possibility for a more critically engaged approach to sound-based wellness practices.

Keywords: sound bath; ethnomusicology; spiritual transformation; sonic ritual; sound healing; wellness industry

1. Introduction

The practice of using sound as a tool for healing, relaxation, and spiritual transformation is believed to be ancient, with roots in various cultures and traditions around the world. In modern society, one of the newest practices involving sound and spiritual transformation is the sound bath, a facilitated session in which participants are exposed to sustained tones produced by a variety of instruments, including, but not limited to: crystal or Tibetan singing bowls, gongs, chimes, drums, flutes, voice, and others ([What is a Sound Bath 2025](#)). Sound baths have become a quintessential practice of the New Age global wellness phenomenon, and in Southern California, the practice is so ubiquitous that one can find a sound bath nearly every night of the week. Dimly lit yoga studios fill with participants lying on mats, covered in blankets, and supported with bolsters. Over the course of a session, a facilitator, or several facilitators, fills the space with resonant sounds that vibrate through the air, the floor, and the bodies of the attendees as instruments are circulated and brought close to or even placed on participants.



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Commonly referred to as “sound healing,” sound baths are promoted for relaxation, stress reduction, “energetic” balancing, and meditation, and to support physical and emotional well-being, but the outcomes are largely subjective, and attendees can have a wide range of experiences (Introducing Sound Bath Sessions 2023). Some remain awake and reflective, while others drift into a state of deep, restorative sleep. Many describe varying degrees of spiritual insight or transformation, from releasing repressed thoughts and emotions through tears and catharsis, to entering profoundly meditative states or moments of spiritual ecstasy. In these heightened states, participants often describe receiving “downloads,” or sudden flashes of clarity that illuminate their lives, past experiences, and current challenges. Others have less transformative experiences and report feeling anxious or, in some cases, annoyed by certain sounds that irked them.

Nevertheless, the sound bath phenomenon has become a popular and pervasive practice. Yet despite its widespread appeal and the range of experiences it can evoke, the mechanisms by which sound baths are understood to “work” remain diffuse, often explained through a blend of scientific language, metaphysical and spiritual beliefs, and personal testimony. Terms like “frequency,” “vibration,” and “resonance” are invoked alongside concepts such as “energy fields,” “chakra alignment,” and “quantum healing,” creating a hybrid discourse that resists verification and easy classification within conventional biomedical or psychological frameworks. This ambiguity raises important questions: What exactly is being experienced in a sound bath? How do participants interpret these experiences as healing or transformative? What cultural logics have combined to create this phenomenon and how do they influence interpretation, meaning-making, and spiritual transformation?

To address these questions, this article proposes that sound baths be examined as invented cultural phenomena embedded within a modern system of ritual. Drawing on ethnomusicology, the interpretive study of music in its social and cultural contexts, this analysis seeks to move beyond scientific and vibrational descriptions of sound baths, and instead investigate the subtle mechanisms through which they produce meaning, perceived efficacy, and ultimately affect spiritual transformation. Thus, rather than asking whether sound baths “work,” this article asks how they work as a phenomenon: how sound, space, ritual, and expectation interact to shape subjective experience. Ethnomusicology offers a particularly useful lens for this investigation because numerous studies in the field synthesize the relationship between sound, spirituality, and culture.

This article thus proceeds in several stages. First, it traces the emergence of the sound bath within larger sociological shifts in consciousness, New Age spirituality, and the Western secularization of mindfulness while critically examining claims of ancient origin and continuity. Next, it analyzes the structure of the sound bath as a ritual event, attending to the ritual structure of a sound bath and its function as a broad framework through which individuals construct meaning and personalized metanarratives in the absence of the shared overarching belief systems of specific cultures and organized religion. These ideas are situated within short accounts of global cultures that use sound for healing and spiritual transformation to reveal sound baths as a wholly new system that enables participants to interpret their inner experiences within modern daily life. In doing so, this study aims to demonstrate that the efficacy of the sound bath cannot be reduced to vibrational, rhythmic, or acoustic properties alone. Rather, it emerges from what may be understood through the Greek Pythagorean concept of *harmonia*, or “fitting together,” in which sound operates in conjunction with ritual structure, meaning-making, and practitioner intention, an interplay that offers valuable insight into how contemporary societies understand and pursue healing, meaning, and spiritual transformation.

2. Inventing the Modern Sound Bath

While conducting fieldwork in Bali in 2010, an initial encounter with a sound bath sparked interest in the practice. As an avid meditator and yoga practitioner, I was surprised when the sound bath experience brought me to a meditative state almost instantly. Normal meditation practice in silence would have required at least 10–15 min to achieve a similar state and serious discipline to stay there. The sound bath, however, brought me to meditation quickly, and the various vibrations and timbres of the instruments provided a focal point that enabled me to hold a state of meditation for an extended period of time. The experience was at once physical, visceral, emotional, and mental. My body felt deeply relaxed and, at times, I even felt the vibrations of the instruments as they were brought close to me. Certain sounds brought up emotions and memories. I felt a deep sense of love and gratitude for my life and tears welled up in my eyes unexplainably. Further into the experience, my body and emotions felt more regulated, at which point, a deep sense of mental clarity emerged. I started to envision and see in my mind certain scenarios that I was trying to manifest and even had several insights about my life and hard decisions I was being faced with. I emerged from the experience feeling relaxed, clear-headed, empowered, and transformed.

Although I could not explain it, I knew that something powerful had happened within the sound bath experience. I not only wanted to explore the practice further, but also be able to offer this to other people. As an ethnomusicologist and yoga teacher, I felt uniquely positioned to learn sound bath facilitation, as I could marry my skills as a musician, yoga teacher, and musical anthropologist. In 2021, I decided to undergo a comprehensive multi-level 200-h sound bath facilitation training with Shervin Bolorian of Sound Healing Bali. This training, combined with participation in hundreds of sessions as both a facilitator and receiver, provided deeper insight into the internal culture of contemporary sound healing and the ambiguity surrounding its meaning, mechanisms, and efficacy.

Although my first experience was deeply moving, every sound bath I attended was different. Some sound baths made me fall asleep, while others felt like an assault on my senses, as some facilitators were not trained in the subtleties of the practice and played sounds at such a high decibel level that my body registered the experience as an attack. At other times, the ways in which the sounds were being played (too loudly, melodically, or busily) were not conducive to relaxation, and I have had experiences in which I was so irked by the way the facilitator was playing that I just laid there observing my state of being annoyed. These experiences often revealed a rhetoric surrounding the efficacy of the vibrations themselves as the medium for transformation, one in which loud vibrations just “worked” on the body. This form of practice did not resonate with me or my nervous system and instead seemed like an excuse offered by those with a lack of training or awareness of the subtlety required to coax receivers into a meditative state.

Other times, sound baths transported me to such a profound state of relaxation and contemplation that I would experience visions, recall long lost memories, cry for no reason, and feel a deep sense of release. This was often within experiences that delicately juxtaposed sound with silence and in which instruments were sounded at an appropriate volume. Interestingly, melodic instruments played in an improvised way rather than as highly structured melody in a musical performance proved to be effective, as it allowed the mind to relax rather than anticipate how a melody was going to unfold. Many other factors regarding facilitation and execution influence the experience of the receiver, but these are best reserved for a training manual on sound bath facilitation.

What is of note is that the people who received sound baths from me reported the same diversity of responses. Some instruments scared them, triggered them, or made them feel annoyed, while others invoked love and made them relax so deeply that they emerged

more restored than they would from a full night of sleep. One of the most memorable sound baths I did was for a group of women, and the sharing afterward brought up a lot of reflection about loneliness, feeling disconnected from community and from other women, and the power of the sound bath experience to create a sense of belonging with other women that they have not felt in a long time. While some individuals in this group felt love, gratitude, and peace following the experience, others had a hard time staying still and could not relax enough to report an impactful or transformative experience. They shared that this was not necessarily because of the way the instruments were being played, but because they arrived so worried or stressed that they were trapped in a persistent cycle of rumination in which repetitive, often negative loops of thought. Prevented them from letting go and relaxing. The fact that this dichotomy and range of experiences existed within one session evoked larger questions about the various factors involved that lead someone to have a transformative experience in a sound bath.

Existing explanations for sound bath efficacy tend to balance precariously between two dominant frameworks. On one hand, scientific approaches focus on measurable physiological processes such as brainwave entrainment, nervous system regulation, or acoustic resonance, often drawing loosely on clinical research in music therapy and neuroscience, for example, Mitchell Gaynor's work *The Healing Power of Sound: Recovery from Life-Threatening Illness Using Sound, Voice, and Music* (Gaynor 2002). Comprehensive manuals like *The Complete Guide to Sound Healing* (Gibson 2018) are both scientific and highly practice-oriented, and outline procedures for conducting sound healing sessions, voice-based healing practices, and sound baths using instruments such as singing bowls, tuning forks, drums, and vocal toning. On the other hand, training handbooks such as *The Three Zones of Sound* (Bolorian 2022) present metaphysical and integrative frameworks for sound healing that draw on Indian yogic chakra systems, energetic zonal models of the body, and elemental correspondences with principles derived from Chinese medicine. These approaches conceptualize instruments and frequencies as tools for restoring energetic balance and facilitating emotional or spiritual alignment. In his 2023 article, "Sacred and Profane in Music Therapy," Joscelyn Godwin demonstrates that claims about music's efficacy have historically been grounded not only in empirical observation but in underlying metaphysical systems, including Pythagorean number theory, Neoplatonic cosmology, and Galenic humoral theory. These frameworks conceptualized music as a means of restoring harmony between the human microcosm and a larger cosmic order, whether through numerical ratios, sympathetic vibration, or the balancing of internal forces. Godwin concludes that the development of music therapy reflects shifting epistemologies rather than a linear progression toward scientific objectivity (Godwin 2023).

While this is a move in the right direction and metaphysical correspondences can shape explanatory models, such analyses largely remain within a history-of-ideas framework. Scientific and metaphysical frameworks each offer valid, but partial insights, as they ultimately fail to account for the social, cultural, and subjective dimensions through which sound becomes meaningful and effective for spiritual transformation in a modern context. Ethnomusicology and Christopher Small's notion of *musicking* contributes a crucial third perspective by shifting attention to music and sound production as lived practice and reminds us that sound baths never float free of social life (Small 1998, p. 155). As Gilbert Rouget has demonstrated in his work *Music and Trance* (Rouget 1985), the transformative power of music cannot be reduced to sound alone, but emerges through culturally structured relationships amongst sound, belief, bodily practice, and social context. Therefore, sound baths, as human practices, are performed, contested, and transformed in the everyday sphere of communities and people coming together to participate in them.

Approaching sound healing from this ethnomusicological perspective reframes the question away from whether contemporary practices are scientifically “effective” or metaphysically “authentic” to how they produce meaning, authority, and experiences of transformation in the present. From this vantage point, the modern sound bath becomes a social process worthy of examination in its own right and can mirror back much about the state of society today. This perspective became increasingly clear through my own involvement in contemporary sound healing communities, particularly when I was invited as an ethnomusicologist to lecture in sound healing trainings on the history of music, healing, and spiritual transformation across cultures. In these settings, a recurring tension emerged, as the musical and ritual practices I discussed in various global contexts were quite different from the techniques practitioners were being trained to perform in modern sound sessions. In addition, contemporary sound healing practices rarely adopted the broader cosmological, ritual, or social systems that historically accompanied many of the traditions being referenced.

Over time, I came to understand that these cross-cultural references functioned less as evidence of direct historical continuity and more as mechanisms for producing legitimacy, depth, and symbolic resonance within a contemporary spiritual marketplace. Modern sound healing was not simply preserving ancient traditions, but actively constructing relationships to the past through selective borrowing, reinterpretation, and symbolic framing. In this sense, contemporary sound bath practices closely resemble what Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger describe as “invented traditions,” practices that establish continuity with an imagined or selectively reconstructed past in order to create meaning, authority, and collective identity in the present (Hobsbawm 1992, p. 1). If sound baths are an invented tradition that derives meaning through socially constructed relationships, then it becomes necessary to examine how these relationships were historically configured. A developmental overview helps to analyze how sound baths operate socially, culturally, and spiritually within modern wellness and healing communities.

Cultural discourses dealing with the use of sound in healing and transformation have existed for centuries, but it was not until the mid-20th century that a wholly Western discourse began to emerge. While institutional music therapy developed after World War II as a clinical discipline grounded in measurable outcomes (see Horden 2000), modern sound healing arguably took shape through a convergence of experimental music, countercultural spirituality, increasing interest in Eastern philosophy and medicine, and evolving scientific and metaphysical discourses that emphasized vibration, consciousness, and the transformative potential of sound. This convergence was not a rediscovery of ancient wisdom, but an active process of borrowing and recombining elements of various philosophies to meet contemporary needs. In the interest of not being too exhaustive, I begin to trace this in the mid-20th century and highlight a handful of thinkers, artists, and creative works that demonstrate several of the streams of thought that converged. There are certainly more figures and moments than the ones mentioned here.

In the 1960s, artists and thinkers associated with the avant-garde and the psychedelic movement began to reconceptualize sound as more than esthetic material, treating it as a medium capable of altering consciousness and facilitating transformation. This shift was articulated in widely disseminated works such as Aldous Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception* (Huxley 1954) and *The Joyous Cosmology: Adventures in the Chemistry of Consciousness* (Watts 1962), a memoir by Alan Watts that explores the mystical insights gained through the intentional use of psychedelic substances. In these works, sound is a major component, both as a sensory experience and as an important concept for ordering the Universe and the physical world as vibration. These books, which framed perception itself as a gateway to transcendence, influenced *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book*

of the Dead (Leary et al. 1964), co-authored by Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner, and Richard Alpert, which explicitly positioned altered sensory states as tools for psychological and spiritual transformation. Around the same period, Shunryu Suzuki's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (Suzuki 1970) helped popularize meditative attention and mindful awareness in the United States, laying important groundwork for later listening-based practices.

If the desire for inner stillness had been newly cultivated, the objects marketed to fulfill it were often not what they seemed. The instruments central to sound bath practice are a clear example of invented tradition at work. Organological research demonstrates that so-called "Tibetan singing bowls" are largely a twentieth-century invention, created for the export market with little evidence that Tibetan Buddhist monastics used them historically for meditation or healing in the ways now commonly claimed. They were ordinary food vessels from India and Nepal that resonated when struck, and savvy entrepreneurs recognized their marketability as "sacred instruments" when Western interest in Eastern spirituality grew in the 1960s and 1970s (Gunther Brown 2020, p. 52). These bowls originated as utilitarian vessels in regions of India and Nepal and were later recontextualized as sacred instruments in response to Western demand. Here again, we see factitious continuity constructed for a contemporary market, authority derived not from unbroken lineage but from creative association.

Crystal bowls emerged in a similar way. In the 1980s, the semiconductor industry required extremely pure containers, or "quartz crucibles," made from nearly 100% silica sand, and in 1994, Pauline and Gaudry Normand discovered that, when played, these bowls produced unique and powerful sounds. They coined the name "crystal vessels" and, in 1995, traveled to the Giza pyramid in Egypt with a full set to record the world's first album dedicated to this new instrument and later became pioneers of the crystal singing bowl as a tool for music and sound therapy (Crystal Singing Bowls n.d.). Therefore, crystal singing bowls emerged from industrial quartz technologies developed in the late twentieth century and were subsequently reframed as sacred instruments with chakra-healing properties for which there is no historical precedent.

Their capability as frequency-producing instruments is noteworthy and parallels developments in experimental music during the early-to-mid-1960s, which reoriented sound itself as an immersive and transformative medium. Terry Riley's composition "In C" (written in 1964) introduced repetitive structures and sustained tonal fields that encouraged altered temporal perception, while composers such as La Monte Young throughout the 1960s developed extended drone works that emphasized vibration and duration as experiential phenomena. Influenced by city hums, Indonesian gamelan, and Indian classical music, he and his ensemble, the Theater of Eternal Music, explored vibration as a physical experience. In Europe, Karlheinz Stockhausen's writings collected in *Texte zur Musik* (published across the 1960s and 1970s and collected into a 17 volume series in 2014) advanced the idea of sound as a cosmic and structuring force (Stockhausen et al. 2014). These explorations culminated in explicitly meditative and participatory practices in the early 1970s, most notably Pauline Oliveros's *Sonic Meditations* (Oliveros 1971), which proposed explicit instructions for cultivating expanded listening awareness through structured sonic exercises. Her practice was intentionally experimental and often decontextualized from specific cultural traditions, focusing on attention, perception, and collective sonic awareness, arguably one of the clearest direct antecedents to the modern sound bath.

Between 1967 and 1972, scientific investigations into vibration began to circulate widely beyond laboratory contexts. Hans Jenny's *Cymatics: A Study of Wave Phenomena and Vibration* (Jenny [1967] 1972) demonstrated how sound frequencies could organize matter into visible patterns and provided the scientific evidence for the "physical world as vibration" idea. Jenny's work was a bridge between science, art, and spirituality. It validated the mystical

claims of Alan Watts and others by providing scientific evidence that sound can shape matter, which would later be reinterpreted within New Age frameworks as evidence of sound's healing potential on the physical body. This helped fuel the era's interest in science, sound therapy, and sacred geometry, as it suggested, in a very Pythagorean way, that by "tuning" our own vibrations, we could restore balance to the mind and body. Building on this work in the late 1970s, British voice teacher and author Jill Purce developed practices of overtone chanting that linked vibration, embodiment, and spiritual transformation (Purce 1974). For this, she is often credited with pioneering the international sound healing movement and helping translate abstract acoustic principles into experiential techniques.

Parallel to these developments, the late 1960s and 1970s saw the rise of recorded sound environments designed explicitly for psychological and physiological effect. Between 1969 and 1979, Irv Teibel produced the *Environments* series, recordings that used natural and ambient soundscapes as tools for relaxation, sleep, and mood regulation. By the mid-1970s, these currents were further consolidated and made more explicitly therapeutic through the work of Steven Halpern, whose recordings helped define what would soon be recognized as New Age healing music. His album *Spectrum Suite* (1976) is often cited as foundational in this emerging genre, presenting slow, consonant, and non-metric musical textures explicitly intended to balance the body and mind. His work marked a shift toward intentional functional listening, where sound was composed, marketed, and consumed specifically for healing purposes. In this context, Halpern's work served as a bridge between the experimental and countercultural sound practices of the 1960s with the sound healing and wellness industries that would emerge in the 1980s and beyond.

By the late 1970s and into the 1980s, the emerging New Age movement increasingly framed sound as a functional tool for self-regulation, meditation, and healing. This period saw the publication of more systematized "sound healing" texts by French musician and acupuncturist Fabien Maman. He is known for conducting pioneering research at the University of Jussieu in Paris, where he used a microscope and camera to document the physical impact of sound on human cells. Maman went on to found the Tama-Do Academy (The Academy of Sound, Color, and Movement), where he released *From Star to Cell: A Sound Structure for the Twenty-First Century* (Maman 1997) and *The Tao of Sound: Acoustic Sound Healing for the 21st Century* (Maman 2008). Most noteworthy is his discovery that certain acoustic sounds, when played at specific frequencies, could cause cancer cells to disintegrate and the idea that acoustic instruments (like the human voice or a cello) strengthened the cells' vitality and electronic or synthesized sounds tended to weaken them (Maman 1997). He also researched the idea that every cell in the human body has its own "note" or frequency. According to Maman, when the correct musical note was played, the cell would "vibrate in harmony" and its internal structure would become more orderly and vibrant. For this he developed a sound-cellular-acupuncture technique that uses tuning forks on acupuncture meridians to transmit healing vibrations throughout the body (Maman 2008).

Other important figures of the late 20th century include Jonathan Goldman. An international authority and founding pioneer of the field, he founded the Sound Healers Association in 1982. Goldman focused on the human voice as the primary tool for transformation and helped move sound healing from an obscure "New Age" niche into a more structured discipline with standardized practices. He is well-known for his books *Healing Sounds: The Power of Harmonics* (Goldman 1992), *The 7 Secrets of Sound Healing* (Goldman 2008), and *The Humming Effect* (Goldman and Goldman 2017), co-authored with Andi Goldman. He pioneered several large-scale sound events and has produced dozens of award-winning albums, such as *Chakra Chants*, which use specific frequencies to balance the body's energy centers. Similarly, oncologist Mitchell Gaynor brought sound into integrative

medicine through texts such as *The Healing Power of Sound: Recovery from Life-Threatening Illness Using Sound, Voice, and Music* (Gaynor 2002), which describes the use of singing bowls, chanting, and listening practices alongside conventional cancer treatment. These authors contributed to the popularization of sound healing in wellness contexts, particularly in the United States, where such practices became associated with yoga, meditation, and later the rise of sound baths. Other figures such as Don Campbell popularized the idea that sound could influence cognition, emotion, and even physiology, helping to establish a popular discourse around music as a therapeutic force. Campbell's widely read book *The Mozart Effect: Tapping the Power of Music to Heal the Body, Strengthen the Mind, and Unlock the Creative Spirit* (Campbell 1997) exemplifies this moment, arguing that music has measurable benefits for mental and physical well-being. These retrospective analyses highlight how, from approximately 1960 to the present, the idea of sound as a healing modality has evolved through a series of reinterpretations and recombinations. What emerges is not a continuous tradition, but a distinctly modern synthesis, one that synthesizes most clearly in contemporary sound bath practices, which draw simultaneously on Eastern spirituality, mid-century experimental music, New Age therapeutic frameworks, and ongoing wellness culture.

While many others could be mentioned as having contributed to this shift toward using sound within New Age consciousness, these works reflect a massive cultural pivot occurring between the 1950s and early 1970s in which there was a move away from traditional institutions like the church and state to define "truth," encouraging individuals to seek truth through their own direct, subjective experiences. This idea has carried through to sound healing practices today. These developments intersect with broader cultural shifts, in what might be termed the "secularization" of mindfulness, the gradual integration of contemplative practices into mainstream, non-religious contexts. In his book, *A Secular Age* (Taylor 2007), Charles Taylor develops the idea that secularization is not simply the disappearance of religion, but a shift in the conditions of belief, where religious and non-religious worldviews coexist within a "plural" social imaginary. The secularization of mindfulness has been widely discussed in scholarship on Buddhist modernism and contemplative studies, which traces how meditative practices have been reframed in psychological, clinical, and institutional contexts detached from their traditional ethical and religious frameworks (see McMahan 2008; Wilson 2014; Sharf 1998).

These ideas are applicable here, as sound baths emerge as accessible, non-doctrinal forms of spiritual engagement that privilege subjective experience over institutional or religious affiliation. Their appeal lies precisely in this flexibility, allowing participants to engage without committing to a fixed cosmology. Crystal bowls, with their factitious, secular, and technological nature, perfectly meet the needs of a modern wellness culture. They can be discussed in the objective language of vibration, frequency, and resonance, terms that sound measurable and empirically grounded even when supporting unsubstantiated claims. The crystal bowl thus becomes the ideal instrument for a secularized spirituality and is often seen as the quintessential instrument of modern sound baths.

This pattern of constructing factitious continuity is the central mechanism by which sound baths generate authority. They are not an ancient practice transmitted through generations, but rather a distinctly contemporary phenomenon reimagined by the global wellness industry, the commercialization of yoga, and a particular strain of New Age spirituality that blends Eastern imagery with Western metaphysical traditions. Modern day yoga itself is a heterogeneous collection of practices that evolved through colonialism, globalization, and commercialization. This history of adaptation and appropriation established a pattern that sound baths follow. Just as modern postural yoga extracted physical techniques from their philosophical and spiritual contexts and repackaged them for Western consumers, sound baths extract sonic instruments from their cultural frameworks and present them

as universally accessible tools for healing. In both cases, the extraction serves a market. Yoga and sound baths can be taught in weekend workshops, offered in drop-in classes, and marketed to consumers seeking self-improvement without the demands of serious engagement with another culture's worldview (although some do go to great lengths to do this). The sound bath therefore gains its credibility not from historical accuracy, but from its construction of a tradition that feels ancient, largely through its rituals, tokenistic instruments, and associated beliefs synthesized to create meaning and meet the spiritual and commercial needs of the present. Let us now return to the notion that sound baths are a form of human action in which participants and facilitators co-produce meaning through roles, attention, and shared ritual.

3. The Sound Bath Ritual

Sound baths closely resemble ritual processes in which sound is the primary medium for organizing time, transformation, and meaning-making. Their general structure closely aligns with classic structural ideas of ritual, yet few sources on sound baths include ritual process theory in their methodological approaches to the practice. As a result, concepts like separation, liminality, and incorporation are not typically employed within sound bath discourse, but may reveal much about the function of music and sound in personal spiritual transformation.

In general, sound baths follow a typical arc. Facilitators choose a location for the event, typically a yoga studio, church, outdoor area, or wellness center, and prepare the space (see Figure 1: sample sound bath arrangements).



Figure 1. Sample sound bath arrangements (photos by the author).

Instruments are carefully arranged; the lights are dimmed; the space is smudged with sage, palo santo, sweetgrass, or incense; and other sacred-signifying objects may be placed such as crystals, spiritual imagery, and candles. This creates an emphasis on stillness and intention and establishes an expectation that the sound bath itself will be a meaningful, heightened activity. In this sense, the ritual is already underway through what Catherine Bell terms “ritualization,” the strategic marking of certain actions and environments as distinct and transformative (Bell 1992, p. 60).

As participants enter, the prepared space sets the sound bath apart from everyday life and signals a transition to a sacred one. This initial stage corresponds to what Arnold van Gennep describes as “separation,” in which individuals are symbolically removed from ordinary social roles (van Gennep 1960, pp. 10–11). The event then begins with opening

talk designed to ground everyone in which instructions, intention setting, and breathing helps practitioners to settle into the space and create a buffer between the separation phase and the sound bath proper. The transition into the ritual proper is typically marked by a clear sonic threshold, such as chanting, group humming, or the ringing of a bell, chime, gong, or singing bowl. This moment signals a shift from ordinary time into ritual time, reorienting the attention of the participants toward listening as the primary mode of engagement. What follows is an extended period of immersion, in which sustained layered tones, varied timbres, gradual dynamic changes, and a gentle interplay between sound and silence captures the attention of the participants, draws them away from outside world, and brings their awareness inward. Lying still with eyes closed, participants experience a reorganization of perception in which attention narrows, breathing slows, and sound is no longer perceived as external, but as enveloping and spatial. This phase closely parallels Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner's concept of transition and liminality, a state in which ordinary structures are suspended and participants hover betwixt and between who they were when they entered the space and who they will be when they leave (van Gennep 1960, pp. 10–11; Turner 1967, pp. 93–111). Within this liminal space, sound functions to entrain bodily rhythms, shape temporal awareness, slow brainwave activity, and heighten consciousness of the self. Although the focus is on the self in this stage, this point in the ritual structure is also where a sense of *communitas*, in which equal individuals submit to the general order of the ritual, is created (Turner 1969, p. 87).

As the sound bath progresses, the sonic field may change in any number of ways designed by the facilitator. It could build toward a peak of intensity, characterized by dense layering, increased volume, heightened textural complexity, the movement from low frequencies to higher ones, or the use of entraining rhythms or emotion-grabbing melodies. Alternatively, it could move in the opposite direction, becoming less dense and softer to guide mental dissolution in which the participant has “dropped in” and reached a noticeably different and more relaxed energetic state. In most cases, a phase of dissolution, in which textures gradually thin, rhythms slow, and silence becomes more prominent is employed toward the end. For trained practitioners, this arc is not random but carefully shaped, designed to manipulate the energy of the receivers into a transformed state. This pattern of build, climax, and release mirrors widely observed musical-ritual structures across cultures such as the Sufi whirling dervish *sema*, reinforcing the sense that participants have undergone a coherent process rather than a static experience (Markoff 1995, p. 158).

The ritual then moves into re-emergence, typically marked by a final chime or gentle verbal guidance, as participants gradually return to ordinary awareness, opening their eyes, moving their bodies, sitting up, and returning to an awareness of the space. This corresponds to van Gennep's rites of incorporation, in which individuals are reintegrated into social life, often subtly transformed by the experience. A period of integration may follow, either formally through sharing and reflection or informally as participants interpret their experiences internally. In the process chart below (see Figure 2), the ritual arc of the sound bath is expanded and depicted within van Gennep's three-part rites-of-passage framework, including how sound may be used to structure and mediate the conditions for spiritual transformation within a sound bath.

From this vantage point, spiritual transformation in sound baths is mediated by sound and is performed, experienced, and legitimized through ritualized interaction. This ritualized interaction also lends meaning and symbolism to the objects and instruments found in a sound bath. In his book *A History of Religion in 5½ Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to Its Senses* (Plate 2015), S. Brent Plate underscores how material objects acquire sacred meaning through processes of ritualization and culturally structured processes of interpretation and framing rather than through their inherent properties (Plate 2015, p. 18). This insight is

particularly important for analyzing the instruments commonly used in sound baths, such as singing bowls, gongs, chimes, and crystal vessels, which are often presented in wellness discourse as inherently “vibrational,” “ancient,” or spiritually efficacious. Their significance emerges not from any essential acoustic property, but from the ways they are positioned within a ritualized environment, through dim lighting, guided attention, collective stillness, and the framing discourse of healing and transformation. The apparent power and sacredness of sound-producing objects is therefore not located within the objects themselves but in the relational field that connects practitioner intention, participant perception, and culturally available narratives about sound and transformation. This perspective reinforces the broader argument of this article, that sound baths should not be understood as practices grounded in universal properties of vibration or frequency, but as contemporary rituals in which meaning, affect, and transformation emerge through processes of interpretation. Plate comments that spiritual people, as “technologists,” use physical objects like stones, incense, drums, and other symbols in a technological way, and by using religious language, it gives them meaning (ibid., pp. 100, 140).

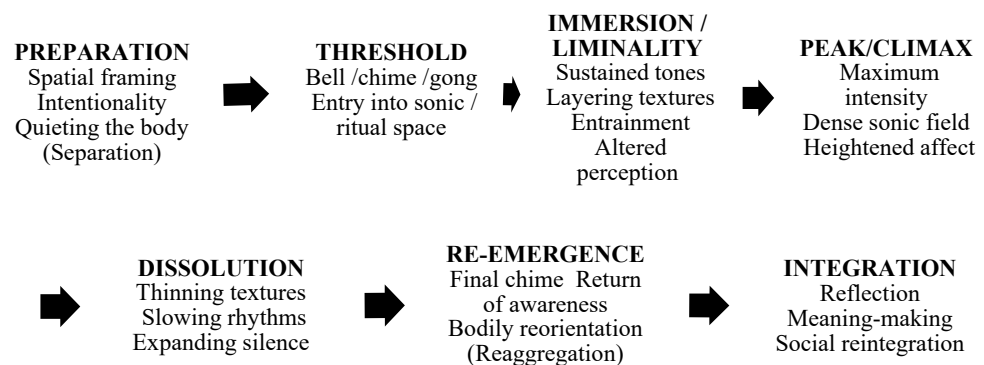


Figure 2. Process chart depicting the ritual arc of a sound bath (by the author).

The idea that ritual can shape meaning-making is examined at length in Catherine Bell’s book *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* in which she describes as the “thought–action dichotomy” (Bell 1992, p. 21). As she argues, rituals are often treated as external expressions of internal beliefs; basically, you perform a ritual because you already believe something, but according to Bell, meaning, belief, and social order are produced through practice, not prior to it. So rather than belief shaping action, she argues that belief and action mutually shape each other. Her broader point is that separating thought and action too cleanly prevents us from understanding how ritual creates meaning, authority, and social structure.

Framed within Bell’s work, a sound bath is a good modern example of how ritual action can shape thought and feeling, rather than just reflect it. Someone may come into a sound bath knowing a lot or very little about the scientific or physiological effects of a sound bath. Even if someone walks in skeptical, the practice can still generate calm, focus, or even a sense of significance. That does not mean every claim about sound baths like specific healing frequencies is scientifically solid, as many are not well supported, but the experience people report does not require prior belief to exist. Many people would argue that the effect depends on what you believe going into the experience, for example, “I believe this will heal me” or “I am going to meditate, clear my mind, and find clarity.” Bell would argue that the doing, the lying down, the structured activity itself, helps produce the experience and meaning itself. The setup of the quiet room with dim lights and group stillness shapes your attention, the repetitive and enveloping sounds guide your body into relaxation, and the ritualized context signals that it is a meaningful time to hone in on yourself. Let us dive deeper into how this action helps shape perception, emotion, and interpretation amongst individuals and ask how this might affect spiritual transformation.

4. Spiritual Transformation, Global Traditions, and the Individual

Spiritual transformation, ineffable as it may be, has many definitions. It can be defined as a profound, often lifelong process of internal change that alters an individual's core values, beliefs, and relationship with the sacred, whether that be God, Allah, a pantheon of deities, the Divine, or the Universe. More personally, it can involve renewing the mind, shifting from ego-centered living to a higher consciousness, and adopting practices that foster deep growth, inner peace, and alignment with one's true self. These definitions locate the place of spiritual transformation within the individual, what they believe and are experiencing in life, where they seek to ascend to, and ultimately, the meanings that are created or reinforced in such a profound way that they function to change the sense of the spiritual or the self of an individual. It is here that global sound practices and the ways they have historically been used to shape spiritual transformation and meaning-making are analyzed to caution facilitators and practitioners against universalizing assumptions and recenter the site for spiritual transformation within the consciousness of the individual.

5. Sound and Spiritual Transformation in Global Traditions

Ethnomusicology can lend much to the discussion of meaning-making within modern sound baths. When situated within a comparative ethnomusicological framework, sound baths can be recognized as part of a broader cross-cultural pattern in which sound is used to organize time, structure attention, and facilitate altered states of consciousness within socially meaningful and ritually framed contexts. Many sound bath facilitators are quick to notice similar ways of sounding found in other cultures; for example, in Sufi practices such as dhikr and Hindu and Sikh practices like kirtan repetitive vocalization and rhythmic structure serve to focus attention and cultivate states of spiritual absorption (see [Chittick 2000](#); [Schimmel 1975](#), and [Moura 2024](#)), while in shamanic traditions, drumming and vocalization are used to construct what ethnomusicologists describe as a "sound-space," which enables communication with spiritual entities and facilitates healing processes (see [Harvey and Wallis 2007](#)). This has led to an adaptation of techniques used in modern sound baths that are similar across cultural traditions, for example, cyclical repeated rhythms, specific instruments used for healing, or sound techniques like droning.

A major question to be asked here is whether the instruments and sounds, for example, a Native American flute or throat singing, take on the same meaning, or whether they are simply an example of spiritual tokenism to signify broader cultural traditions with robust cosmological and spiritual structures. These penetrating questions are largely absent from sound bath discourse and training, as is the recognition that modern sound baths occur outside of the time, space, and culture of other global practices and thus shape meaning-making in their own way. Gilbert Rouget's distinction between music-induced trance and culturally mediated trance states is particularly useful here and emphasizes that it is not sound alone that produces altered states, but the culturally structured relationship between sound, expectation, and context ([Rouget 1985](#)). If sound alone held the power to transform, certain sounds and frequencies could be broadcast on the radio and everyone listening would fall into trance and be brought to a transformed state. Points such as this remind us that shifts in perception or spiritual transcendence are shaped by participants' expectations, prior experiences, and interpretive frameworks.

The interpretive frameworks shaping a sound bath and the personal worldview of an individual significantly shape experience. This point marks a significant divide between the ancient healing practices from other cultures that so many attempt to equate modern sound baths to. A quick comparison of cross-cultural interpretive frameworks shows that sound baths differ from many established ritual traditions in which symbolic systems, mythological narratives, or institutional authorities guide interpretation. This

is where ethnomusicology becomes relevant, as in many non-Western and Indigenous contexts, music's efficacy is inseparable from kinship structures and cosmological knowledge. Ethnomusicologists like Roseman (1991), Friedson (1996), and Basso (1985) have demonstrated that healing is achieved not through the application of music as a technical intervention, but through the reweaving of social and spiritual relationships in which music is the medium. For example, the concept of sound in traditional African religious music amongst the Yoruba of Nigeria is one in which sound is a bridge between their pantheon of deities known as *orisa*. In their ceremonies, rhythms, speech, and sound are organized into formal patterns that both signify and communicate with specific *orisa*, therefore carrying embedded meanings and intentions designed to connect with entities in a structured cosmology (Adegbite 1991, pp. 49–50). Even within a Yoruba ritual, meaning-making varies from individual to individual, but it is arguably influenced by the meaning system the ritual is occurring in. For example, one could employ Yoruban rhythms in a sound bath in California, but the effect and meanings created from this exposure would be wholly different between a Yoruban person and a receiver who does not know what an *orisa* is. Simply put, a rhythm for the *orisa* Ogun may be powerful for a Yoruban person who equates the rhythm with that deity, whereas the same rhythm played for someone in a sound bath would be heard as a rhythm and not carry any meaningful significance.

Another useful comparison comes from Japanese Shinto ritual practice and the work of John Nelson, who discusses how ritual sound in religious studies functions symbolically and socially rather than merely esthetically or atmospherically. In ceremonies performed at shrines, sound such as the ringing of bells (*suzu*) or rhythmic clapping (*kashiwade*) are not simply ambient or relaxing. These sonic actions are embedded within broader symbolic meaning systems, where they function to purify space, attract the attention of *kami* (deities or spirits), and mark the participant's engagement with the ritual order. The sounds are meaningful because they are tied to shared cosmology, codified practice, and a recognized religious authority structure that shapes how participants understand and experience them (Nelson 1996, pp. 84–101).

In Islamic devotional practice, the call to prayer, or *Azan/Adhan*, is not simply a beautiful vocal performance or ambient sound; it is a highly structured and codified form of recitation that signals specific prayer times and affirms core theological principles. The melodic patterns, phrasing, and even pronunciation are shaped by tradition and are widely recognized across the global Islamic community. For listeners, the sound carries clear, shared meanings. It is a summons to prayer, a reminder of religious obligation, and an auditory marker of sacred time and space (Marcus 2007, pp. 1–11). If the prayer or similar vocal styles or melodic elements were incorporated into a sound bath or secular meditation setting, they would not carry the same meaning or their meaning would shift. Some might interpret them as music, although in Islamic thought and Sharī'ah Law they are not categorized as such (Nasr 1997, pp. 220–23). Outside of the cultural and religious context that gives the *Adhan* its authority and purpose, the sounds might be appreciated for their esthetic or calming qualities rather than as a call to worship. This illustrates how sound, even when it retains similar acoustic features, derives its significance from the cultural systems and practices in which it is embedded, reinforcing the idea that meaning is not inherent in the sound itself but produced through its cultural context.

The emerging field of medical ethnomusicology provides more specific tools for analyzing sound's therapeutic and transformative dimensions. Benjamin D. Koen's work in the Pamir Mountains of Tajikistan demonstrates how music, prayer, and healing are integrated in traditional cultural practices in ways that challenge Western assumptions about their separation. Koen's research reveals what he calls the "ontology of oneness," a worldview in which the spiritual, musical, and physical dimensions of life are not distinct

domains but aspects of a unified whole. In this worldview, healing is not something that music does to a separate physical body; rather, healing emerges from the integrated engagement of the whole person (body, mind, spirit, and community) with musical sound that is itself understood as spiritually charged (Koen 2009, p. 11).

These ideas are furthered by the work of ethnomusicologist Steven Feld, who has argued that sound practices are always embedded in dynamic cultural processes and must be understood in relation to the environments and communities that sustain them. In his work with the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea, Feld develops the concept of “acoustemology” (acoustic epistemology), which refers to how people come to know and understand the world through sound (Feld 1996, p. 91). For the Kaluli, sounds of the rainforest, especially bird calls, are not simply environmental noise or esthetic phenomena; they are tied to social memory, emotion, and cosmology. Certain bird sounds are understood as the voices of ancestral spirits, and musical practices such as weeping songs or vocal performances draw directly on these sonic relationships, embedding meaning within patterned sound (Feld 1982, pp. 20–43). If recordings of Kaluli bird imitations or rainforest soundscapes were played in a sound bath setting, they might evoke relaxation or curiosity, but they would not carry the same layers of emotional significance. Feld’s work therefore reinforces that what sound does and what it means emerge through practice, shared understanding, and cultural context, not from the acoustic properties alone. This is important for sound bath facilitators to remember, as each participant comes from their own unique background, culture, and set of experiences. An instrument that may seem relaxing or evocative of pleasant memories and associations to one participant can be aggravating, triggering, and a reminder of unpleasant times for another.

This is precisely where Marina Roseman’s fourfold framework for cross-cultural, integrative research on music and medicine proves invaluable, as it offers a structured analytic lens for disentangling the very complexities raised above. Roseman (2008) proposes that any comprehensive study of music and healing must attend to four interacting axes: the *musical* (the acoustic properties, formal structures, and performance techniques of sound itself), the *sociocultural* (the beliefs, values, and kinship systems that sound meaning within a particular community), the *performative* (the embodied, interactional, and contextual dynamics of how sound is enacted in real-time ritual settings), and the *biomedical* (the physiological and psychological effects of sound on the human body and mind). For Roseman, these domains are not hierarchical or separable but are mutually constitutive, and her ethnographic work with the Temiar people of peninsular Malaysia demonstrates that healing efficacy emerges precisely from their intersection. Sound heals not because of its acoustic frequency alone, nor solely because of cultural belief, but through the dynamic interplay of sonic structure, social relationships, ritual performance, and embodied experience (see Roseman 1991, 2008).

Applied to the modern sound bath, this framework reveals why any attempt to isolate a single “healing frequency” or to transplant a foreign ritual sound without its sociocultural and performative moorings falls short of the integrative complexity that characterizes traditional healing systems. The musical dimension of a sound bath can certainly be described and measured, but without sustained attention to the sociocultural expectations participants bring into the room, the performative dynamics of the facilitator–participant relationship, and the biomedical realities of individual physiological response, the analysis remains incomplete. Roseman’s framework thus does not dismiss the transformative potential of sound baths but instead calls for a more rigorous, multidimensional approach, one that acknowledges that meaning-making in a modern sound bath is not a pale imitation of ancient traditions but a distinct, contemporary phenomenon deserving of its own integrative study—one that is attentive to the specific musical choices, cultural context (including

Western wellness culture), performative negotiations, and individual embodied outcomes that together constitute its therapeutic reality.

While this review of a select number of global sound traditions is not exhaustive, they all drive home the point that modern sound baths function in their own point in time and in a wholly modern and often Western cultural context. Meaning-making and spiritual transformation in a modern sound bath can certainly be shaped or informed through thorough descriptions and explanations of other cultures, but individuals are also interpreting and reconciling these frameworks within their inherent Western conditioning. This brings us to one final point about spiritual transformation, the role of individual intention in sound baths.

6. Practitioner Intention in the Meaning-Making Process

Unlike ritual traditions in which meaning is collectively prescribed, sound baths operate through what might be described as a guided indeterminacy, a structured experience with an open interpretive field. This combination enables participants to align their experiences with personal needs, whether understood in terms of relaxation, emotional processing, or spiritual insight. What participants bring into the space, their prior experiences with meditation or music, their familiarity with wellness discourses, what they want from the experience, and their broader cultural understandings of healing, spirituality, and the body are just as important for spiritual transformation as the objects used. It is easy to believe that the power lies in the tools, that the crystal bowl holds the frequency, and the ritual creates the shift. When interpreted through a Hermetic and psychospiritual framework informed by the ritual theories of [Regardie \(1938, 1980\)](#), the efficacy of ritual instruments like crystal singing bowls is not understood as residing inherently within the objects themselves. Rather, the participant's degree of attentional coherence, emotional receptivity, and intentional engagement is the key. Many people are looking for the right sound bath experience, the right chant, the perfect altar, the most ancient talisman, something outside of themselves to finally flip the switch and find transcendence. Instead, the source of influence is one's own state of consciousness.

The Hermetic phrase "all is mind" situates consciousness as the primary medium through which transformation occurs. The only instrument that really matters is our own energetic system as an inner technology. Rituals, symbols, crystals, and sound are not magic in themselves; they are amplifiers that work in tandem with the clarity of intention of the person using them. A crystal bowl in the hands of a distracted facilitator played for a receiver who is mentally scattered will do nothing but sound, but in the hands of someone who is centered, aligned, and directing intention with precision, it becomes a tuning fork to enhance clarity. In the absence of focused intention and embodied presence, ritual may become merely performative, reminding us that even ritual, when stripped of presence, becomes theater. When combined with sustained concentration and symbolic meaning, ritualized sound practices can function as structured environments for practitioners to have transformative experiences ([Regardie 1980](#)).

This is why in traditions across the world, ancient facilitators spent as much time preparing the mind as they did the space. They were initiated, trained, and chosen, because without internal clarity, the external tools were useless. In contemporary sound healing, many cultural instruments have been taken from their cultural contexts, stripped of their meanings, and repurposed for a Western modality, essentially unbraiding or trying to mimic indigenous technologies at best. This tokenism has acted as a mask for where the true transformative power lies—in the individual themselves.

This point redistributes the work of meaning-making from the instrument and the ritual structure itself to the facilitator and the participant. The facilitator, as the one

who shapes these meaning-making experiences, is important. While each facilitator may articulate their sound baths differently, they often draw from a common vocabulary rooted in contemporary wellness culture, and thus, new meta-narratives within sound bath culture have emerged. Terms such as “grounded,” “centered,” “released,” or “realigned” circulate widely amidst scientific and metaphysical explanations mentioned previously. These help stabilize otherwise ineffable experiences into communicable forms in the modern day. This shared language creates a loose but recognizable interpretive framework for how experiences are expressed and understood. As a result, meaning in the sound bath is both deeply personal and subtly standardized, emerging at the intersection of individual perception and collective discourse. Any attempt to explain or detail this would inevitably fall short.

At the same time, this openness introduces a degree of ambiguity. This can be beneficial, allowing for flexibility and personal relevance, but it can also render the experience dependent on broader cultural narratives that may shift over time. Ritual, as scholars like Clifford Geertz have argued, provides a framework through which individuals render their experiences meaningful, linking internal states to broader cultural “models of” and “models for” reality. As Geertz states, ritual has the “power to disclose the world that is the true referent for the text” (Geertz 1980, p. 102). Even when left entirely unguided, participants often construct coherent narratives that align their experience with pre-existing structures that they are attempting to transcend. To “transcend” is to go beyond the limits of something. In this case, a conceptual field of everyday experience and mundane life, which for many living in modernized urban spaces is one of constant stimulation, fast-paced work lives, and stress. Seen in this light, the modern sound bath can be understood as a process of ritualization in which sound baths are interpreted as sacred technologies of experience to transcend the vicissitudes of everyday life and experience.

Without interpretation or proper guidance from a facilitator, the experience risks remaining diffuse or ambiguous. Conversely, sound baths may help practitioners transcend what is really causing them to struggle, as rituals, similar to cultural texts, can become a method of interpretation “with the power to disclose the world that is the true referent of the text” (Bell 1992, p. 51). Modern sound bath practice represents a site to expose the society within which it is functioning, pointing to increasingly fragmented and overstimulated populations of people. Sound baths provide a structured opportunity for reflection, emotional release, and temporary relief from the pressures of productivity-oriented life. Participants enter these spaces seeking not only relaxation, but coherence, connection, and meaning, and the flexibility of the practice allows individuals from diverse backgrounds to interpret their experiences in deeply personal yet culturally legible ways. But it is important that they be framed in skilled ways, as they could just as easily lead to wallowing rather than transcendence.

Recent ethnographic research on sound baths in California has argued for a troubling dimension of sound baths and suggests that by focusing solely on individual healing, practitioners may be dissuaded from using their energies to address the needs of their community. For example, Anthropologist Elisa J. Sobo reveals how these ritual performances “feed on and fuel narratives regarding trauma, stress, and dysregulation, diverting attention from structural and cultural factors creating said disharmony” (Sobo 2024, p. 367). She states that this “trauma talk” positions trauma as endemic and individualizes suffering in ways that serve the wellness market. When sound baths are framed as interventions for personal trauma, they direct attention away from the social, economic, and political conditions that produce distress. The solution becomes a paid workshop rather than collective action or structural change, and ultimately can “perpetuate a trauma-informed self-identification and subjectivity that harmonizes with the American work ethic, diminishes nonproductive

sensual enjoyment, promotes self-care over community care, undermines resilience, and amplifies suffering” (Ibid.).

It is hard to agree with Sobo’s work as a universal quality of modern sound baths, as some practitioners may realize the urban, work-driven life they are leading is the true source of their discomfort and decide to make changes. It is also incorrect to say that sound baths cannot provide genuine relief; however, Sobo’s work does reinforce how important the role of the facilitator is in framing the experience for receivers. When trauma is the focus rather than transcendence (whether spiritual or social structures), the transformative potential of a sound bath is constrained by the structures that shape it. Therefore, facilitators, like the ancient healers of the past, must be skilled and trained to avoid such subconscious portrayals.

7. Harmonia: Toward a Recontextualized Practice of Modern Sound Baths

This article has argued that contemporary sound baths are not simply acoustically driven therapeutic practices, but modern rituals that have emerged alongside secularized spirituality and the global wellness economy. Tracing the emergence of modern sound healing demonstrated that the sound bath and several of its common instruments are not the continuation of an unbroken ancient lineage, but a distinctly modern invention shaped by countercultural spirituality, experimental music, wellness culture, scientific discourse, and selective appropriations of global traditions.

Sound baths function as forms of individualized, experience-based spirituality, reflecting a broader late-modern shift toward self-directed spirituality and the pursuit of what many perceive as a return to one’s “true nature,” a state of balance, coherence, or homeostasis within the self. Ethnomusicology offers important insights here, and the traditions examined throughout this article demonstrate that sound rarely functions alone. Instead, meaning and transformation emerge through the interaction of the sound bath performance, culturally available interpretive frameworks, and individual embodied sensations, expectations, emotions, and intentions. Thus, the transformative power of a modern sound bath lies in what the Greeks called *harmonia*, a “fitting together” of sound, ritual, embodiment, intention, and meaning into a coherent experiential whole.

What might it mean, then, to bring these insights to bear on contemporary sound bath practice? It does not mean replicating Indigenous or non-Western ceremonies in Western wellness spaces, as such appropriations would only reproduce the very problems this article has identified. Rather, it invites facilitators to reconsider how meaning and transformation are cultivated within contemporary sound healing contexts. A recontextualized practice might involve moving beyond passive reception and facilitation toward more participatory forms of ritual creation. It might involve greater attention to the social relationships among participants and the creation of spaces for mutual care, reflection, and shared vulnerability. It may also require facilitators to approach instruments and traditions with greater cultural literacy, acknowledging appropriation, historical discontinuities, and creative adaptations involved in modern practice.

As Jacques Barzun suggests in *From Dawn to Decadence* (Barzun 2000), late modern culture is characterized not by the disappearance of meaning, but by plurality, experimentation, and the recombination of existing forms. Contemporary sound healing reflects precisely this condition, debunking the implication that only “authentic” traditional practices possess real transformative power. Living traditions have always changed, hybridized, and adapted to new historical conditions. Sound baths represent a modern, secular, yet deeply ritualized space through which individuals pursue healing and spiritual transformation in a new cultural era.

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