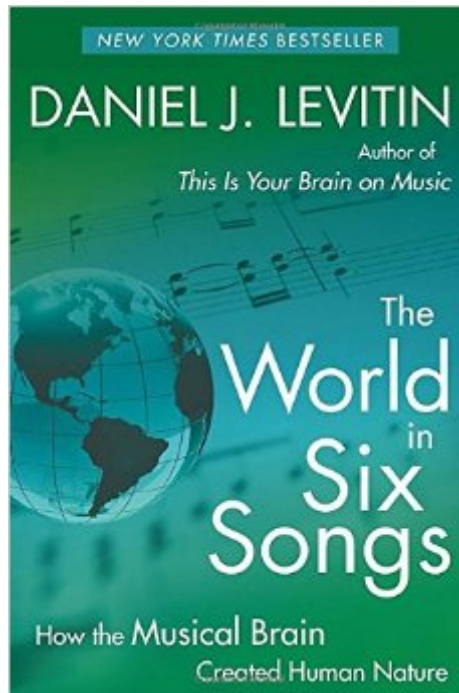


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# The World In Six Songs: How The Musical Brain Created Human Nature



## Synopsis

The author of the New York Times bestseller *This Is Your Brain on Music* reveals music's role in the evolution of human culture-and "will leave you awestruck" (The New York Times) Daniel J. Levitin's astounding debut bestseller, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, enthralled and delighted readers as it transformed our understanding of how music gets in our heads and stays there. Now in his second New York Times bestseller, his genius for combining science and art reveals how music shaped humanity across cultures and throughout history. Dr. Levitin identifies six fundamental song functions or types-friendship, joy, comfort, religion, knowledge, and love-then shows how each in its own way has enabled the social bonding necessary for human culture and society to evolve. He shows, in effect, how these "six songs" work in our brains to preserve the emotional history of our lives and species. Dr. Levitin combines cutting-edge scientific research from his music cognition lab at McGill University and work in an array of related fields; his own sometimes hilarious experiences in the music business; and illuminating interviews with musicians such as Sting and David Byrne, as well as conductors, anthropologists, and evolutionary biologists. *The World in Six Songs* is, ultimately, a revolution in our understanding of how human nature evolved-right up to the iPod. Read Daniel Levitin's posts on the Penguin Blog.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Like many other reviewers here I was entranced by Levitin's first book, and eagerly dug into this new one expecting more of the same. What a disappointment! One is immediately put off by the

constant name-dropping like "my good friend Joni Mitchell," "Sting confided to me..." and "when I was on-stage at the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium with Mel Tormé..." Add to this the fact that Levitin makes a lot of non-obvious broad statements without offering any supporting evidence; for examples snapping fingers to music uses up cortisol (pg. 101), cavemen used songs to remember geography (pg. 108), it is more difficult to fake sincerity in music than in spoken language (pg. 141) and of course the "there are only six types of songs in the world" assertion of the title. Finally, Levitin keeps derailing the book with long rambling personal stories, most of which have little if anything to do with his subject matter. Though amusing and humanizing they are a distraction and ultimately become another irritant. There *is* a lot of good information in the book, and the reader learns a lot of interesting facts and ponderable hypotheses. Too bad the presentation is so obnoxious.

2.0 out of 5 stars Seriously unreadable, July 2, 2010 By Shannon Thornton-Walsh (Dallas, TX USA)  
- See all my reviews This review is from: *The World in Six Songs: How the Musical Brain Created Human Nature* (Paperback) I'm giving two stars, because I didn't feel fully justified in giving one star, seeing as I've only read one quarter of the way through Levitin's book. I ordered it as a free sample from the publisher, who was promoting it as a possible secondary or optional classroom text. I was intrigued. My doctoral research was in ethnomusicology. I started to read soon after I received the book last year but was immediately put off by one of Levitin's opening statements: "Anthropologists, archaeologists, biologists, and psychologists all study human origins, but relatively little attention has been paid to the origins of music." Huh? OK. Probably true and for good reason. Evidence for music in early human culture is overwhelming, but determining the "why" is an enterprise fraught with complexity and ambiguity. But Anthropology has two entire subfields devoted to evolution on the one hand and the study of music in culture, on the other, which seems to me to be two of the best places to start. Levitin acknowledges and draws on the first, mostly not very confidently, and ignores the second. I lent the book to a friend and recently received it back and thought I'd push past my initial resistance. Levitin draws on cross-cultural examples to begin supporting his thesis, but not once in the entire book can I find a single reference to any of the pioneering work done by ethnomusicologists. Perhaps this is because Levitin only sourced the work of anthropologists, not music/culture specialists within that field. Why the obvious elision of the entire field of study? It seems to me that more source material from that field would be pretty germane to his thesis. Again, I'm only 1/4 of the way into the book, so more may be coming again, under the guise of anthropological sources, but I'm not likely to continue. The oversight is staggering. Levitin's grasp of evolutionary theory even seems weak; he makes up examples to illustrate how natural selection

works in order to illustrate how this might work with music and song writing ability, and his strongest evidence - despite his recognition that world's store of music consists of a staggering diversity - comes from his analysis of Western pop songs. He seems to be drawing more on his experience working in the music industry than his work as a neuroscientist. I can see how his ideas might make for mildly interesting and entertaining undergraduate seminars in American colleges. Not very convincing reading straight out of the gate. I finally put this down after reading Levitin's irrelevant digression into his childhood experience of the Vietnam War. Seriously. If anyone can convince me - as an anthropologist or ethnomusicologist - to continue reading, I'm listening. There's a far more interesting title on my to-read list: *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind, and Body*, by Steven Mithen.

I thought the first and last third of Levitin's first book, "This is your brain on music" were excellent. The middle third was a bit slow. Unfortunately, all of "The World in Six Songs" is slow. The book is full of preposterous statements unsupported by anything other than wild speculation. The best parts are where he repeats information he shared in his first book. The worst parts are the rambling personal anecdotes which have nothing whatsoever to do with the purported objective of the book. Read "This is your brain on music" - avoid "The World in Six Songs."

I thoroughly enjoyed "This is Your Brain on Music" and anticipated a similar combination of witty, widely observed (pop, jazz, classical), and helpfully presented (science-for-non-specialists) material. All those qualities are present but distractingly encumbered by puffery (yes, yes, you lunch with rock stars and academic luminaries) and organization-by-digression. The dangers of first success? A timid editor? I'd wait for a revised edition.

This fascinating book explores the powerful force music has played in shaping our common humanity. It's evolution, with a backbeat. Author Levitin makes the case that six basic types of songs have existed throughout the course of human history, all over the world. Mankind, apparently, shares a soundtrack. The six broad categories of music are songs about friendship, joy, comfort, knowledge, religion and love. Each has a different function, but all serve to bind us together. They make us stronger as a species. Levitin, a musician and scientist, cites anthropologists, evolutionary biologists, neurosurgeons, psychologists, and many famous musicians in this book. He includes lyrics from a great range of songs, including "At Seventeen," "The Hokey Pokey," "I Walk the Line," "Twist and Shout," and "Log Blues" from Ren & Stimpy. Music can be so evocative. A snippet of

song can take you back to the exact moment you heard it in childhood or high school or whenever. It's like there is a direct link that exists in the human brain between music and memory. This book tells us that Americans spend more money on music than they do on prescription drugs or sex, and the average American hears more than five hours of music per day. It's obviously important to us. After reading *The World in Six Songs*, you'll have a much better idea why. Here's the chapter list: 1. Taking It from the Top or "The Hills Are Alive..." 2. Friendship or "War (What Is It Good For)?" 3. Joy or "Sometimes You Feel Like a Nut" 4. Comfort or "Before There Was Prozac, There Was You" 5. Knowledge or "I Need to Know" 6. Religion or "People Get Ready" 7. Love or "Bring 'Em All In"

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