Contagious Rhythm: Infectious Diseases of 20th Century Musicians

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Abstract

Infectious diseases have led to illness and death for many famous musicians, from the classical period to the rock ‘n’ roll era. By the 20th century, as public health improved and orchestral composers began living more settled lives, infections among American and European musicians became less prominent. By mid-century, however, seminal jazz musicians famously pursued lifestyles characterized by drug and alcohol abuse. Among the consequences of this risky lifestyle were tuberculosis, syphilis, and chronic viral hepatitis. More contemporary rock musicians have experienced an epidemic of hepatitis C infection and HIV/AIDS related to intravenous drug use and promiscuity. Musical innovation is thus often accompanied by diseases of neglect and overindulgence, particularly infectious illnesses, although risky behavior and associated infectious illnesses tend to decrease as the style matures.