



Don't Let Him Die: A Critical Review And Psycho-Humanistic Analyses Of Some Selected Lucky Dube's Reggae Songs (Part I)

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Abstract

The famous young South African Reggae Star, Lucky Dube, met his untimely death on the 18th of October 2007. When this news was made public panic gripped the entire Black people of South Africa. Indeed, the magnitude of fear that that news came with caused mental anguish on the generality of his fans all over Africa. Following his demise, many scholars of African psychology started to ask and wonder interiorly about the grounds for Dube's enormous popularity and stardom in the reggae music industry in which he had excelled. The key questions that came to mind at that time included the issue of what about his music that makes his variety of fans, both young and old, to place him in such a high esteem. Could this be due to the captivating melody and creative lyrics of his music or rather the superior quality and energetic flow of his reggae music performance? Whatever answers that one gives to these questions will surely depend on how much one knows about music as an art form, and the history and psychology of Dube as a human artist. However, what has remained an enigma is the fact that up to today sufficient attention has not been extended to the task of examining the psychological dimensions that embed his music, the story of his life up to the time of his death, and the key socio-cultural/political messages populating his major songs. The central purpose of this article is to response to this need.

Keywords: *Lucky Dube, Borderline Personality Traits, Emotional Trauma, Identity Disturbance, Music, Emotional Expression*

1. Introduction

Throughout human history music has remained a medium for producing a form of entertainment and a profound resource for emotional survival, identity expression, and collective healing (Tewolde, 2025). Among artists who have transcended traditional musical boundaries to become emotional historians of their time, Lucky Dube stands as a shining example. Born in 1964 in the Apartheid-era South Africa, Dube became a global reggae icon, celebrated for his poignant narratives on injustice, human dignity, and social unity. However, more than this, his music reveals a deeper psychological landscape beyond political activism, shaped by the unseen, enduring emotional wounds inflicted by systemic oppression (Tewolde, 2025).

The Apartheid system in South Africa did not merely impose external political restrictions; it generated a multiplier effect of profound emotional damage, disintegrating families, fueling substance abuse, perpetuating violence, and severing identities (Cooper & Nicholas, 2012). Lucky Dube's lyrics often resonate not merely because of their political relevance, but because they articulate these hidden emotional experiences that many affected individuals could neither name nor express (Duhoe, 2020). His songs reflect the silent suffering of those grappling with abandonment, emotional chaos, and existential confusion; people who, trapped in the aftermath of structural violence and childhood adversities (Tewolde, 2025), found themselves unable to voice their inner struggles. Through his music, Dube became more than a political activist (Agwu, 2021); he became a surrogate voice for the emotionally voiceless, channeling the silent cries of those caught in invisible emotional battles spawned by the deep psychological scars of the Apartheid system.

1.2. *The Problem*

While many of his fans are enthused by the wonderful melody of his music, and the admirable quality of his reggae dancing steps, some of them are not even aware of the social-political background and the psychological dimensions embedding the lyrics of his music. Given that Dube died at the untimely age of 43; an age when opportunity to make him and his music a subject of in-depth academic research, it is obvious that much of the basis for his lyrics and music are not able to see the light of day.

Against this background what it is argued in this article is that one way in which those of us surviving his would not allow his music legacy and message to die with his physical death is to engage in a psychological study like the present one aimed at addressing the problem of achieving a detailed understanding of the grounds of his music and what message and history (both psychological and political) he had wanted to share with the world in composing them. It is this problem which the present article is designed to explore.

1.3 *Purpose of the Study*

Hence, the major purpose of this article is to explore Lucky Dube's music through a psychological lens, focusing on how his lyrical narratives mirror features commonly associated with trauma, identity disturbance, and borderline personality traits. Using a humanistic textual analysis of selected songs (Belich, 2024; Pozzobon & Accademico, 2014), the study aims to interpret his music as a form of emotional testimony, a survival strategy for himself and the countless individuals he represented. In this way, the paper is designed to illuminate the profound psychological currents beneath Dube's reggae music artistry by situating his work within frameworks of trauma theory, emotional dysregulation, and attachment disruption. In addition, the paper aims to advocate for a broader recognition of artistic works as vital testimonies of psychological suffering and for developing culturally sensitive mental health outreach to musicians whose creations reveal unspoken emotional pain they are going through.

2. Review of Related Literature

Given that Lucky Dube's lyrical narratives recurrently touch on themes of emotional chaos, abandonment, identity loss, and psychological survival, a focus on borderline traits promises to offer a valuable framework for interpreting his work (Agwu, 2021). In this section, therefore, we plan to first examine the connection between borderline personality disorder and trauma, recognizing trauma not merely as a background risk but as a foundational element shaping emotional survival strategies and artistic expressions.

2.1 Trauma and Borderline Personality Disorder

Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) is a severe mental health condition characterized by pervasive patterns of emotional dysregulation, unstable relationships, identity disturbances, and chronic feelings of emptiness (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Recent literature increasingly acknowledges the strong association between early life trauma, encompassing problems of emotional neglect, physical abuse, and disrupted attachment patterns and the development of BPD symptoms, (Mulder et al., 2018) (Cluver et al., 2015). Research by Zanarini, Temes, Magni, Hein & Goodman (2021) suggest that nearly 90% of individuals diagnosed with BPD report significant histories of childhood trauma, showing that trauma is not merely a risk factor but a near-ubiquitous background element. Similarly, studies by Winsper et al. (2020) highlight that emotional invalidation during critical developmental periods contributes substantially to affective instability and interpersonal hypersensitivity observed in BPD.

Presently, the conceptualization of BPD has shifted from being seen purely as a personality flaw to being understood within a trauma framework. For instance, Guo et al.(2015); Zanarini, Temes, Magni, Hein & Goodman (2021); & Saccaro et al., (2024) propose that Complex PTSD (C-PTSD) and BPD share overlapping features, including emotional dysregulation, dissociation, and difficulties in identity integration. This convergence underscores the role of sustained relational trauma in shaping the psychological architecture of individuals with BPD. Neuroscientific studies further support these connections. For instance, a systematic review by Saccaro et al., (2024) found that individuals with BPD exhibit altered functioning in brain regions responsible for emotional regulation (such as the amygdala and prefrontal cortex); patterns often mirrored in individuals with histories of chronic trauma exposure. Additionally, Dvir et al., (2014) demonstrated that unresolved early attachment traumas are directly predictive of the severity of identity disturbance and emotional dysregulation later in life. Indeed, trauma-related models of BPD suggest that behaviors such as self-harm, unstable relationships, and emotional outbursts are better understood as maladaptive survival strategies, originally developed in response to overwhelming early experiences (Weiss et al., 2021). This trauma-adaptive perspective reframes BPD symptoms not as character defects but as emotional scars from relational injury.

These indications come together to suggest that contemporary research converges around the view that trauma, particularly developmental and relational trauma, is a core etiological factor in the emergence and maintenance of borderline personality disorder. This understanding offers a compassionate framework for interpreting emotional chaos and survival strategies, both clinically and artistically, as will be made clearer in the case of Lucky Dube's music.

2.2 Emotional dysregulation and identity disturbance

Emotional dysregulation and identity disturbance are widely recognized as central features of borderline personality disorder and related trauma adaptations (Chapman et al., 2013). Emotional dysregulation refers to the difficulty in modulating emotional responses, often resulting in rapid mood shifts, intense affective experiences, and maladaptive coping behaviours (Weiss et al., 2021). Identity disturbance, on the other hand, involves unstable self-image, chronic feelings of emptiness, and

fluctuating perceptions of one's worth and role in relationships (Saccaro et al., 2024). Current research suggests that emotional dysregulation and identity confusion emerge primarily from disrupted attachment systems during childhood, often exacerbated by environments marked by neglect, inconsistency, or emotional invalidation (Gilgoff & Singh, 2020); & (Carlson et al., 2016). Hence, in individuals exposed to early adversity, emotional reactions can become disorganized and overwhelming, leading to difficulties in self-soothing and maintaining a cohesive sense of identity over time (Crow et al., 2021).

Along the same lines, Peng and his team (2021) emphasize that emotional dysregulation operates as both a cause and a consequence of identity instability (Peng et al., 2021). Hence, in their view, individuals who lack stable emotional regulation frameworks are more likely to experience fragmentation of the self, characterized by sudden shifts in goals, values, and interpersonal styles. These shifts are often attempts to manage unbearable inner states rather than deliberate manipulations, contrary to older misconceptions about borderline behavior. Neuroscientific evidence supports these findings. For instance, imaging studies show that individuals with heightened emotional dysregulation exhibit hyperactivation of the amygdala and impaired prefrontal cortex regulation; including neural patterns that also correlate with unstable self-perception (Leichsenring et al., 2024). Furthermore, identity disturbance has been conceptualized not simply as confusion but as a trauma-linked fragmentation of self-representation, where survivors internalize inconsistent or abusive relational templates (Russolillo et al., 2025).

An emerging model articulated by Gerami & Pourmohamadreza-Tajrishi (2025) and Mullins et al., (2025) suggest that the chronic emotional turmoil seen in individuals with identity disturbance can be understood as a learned survival strategy; a way to adapt to unpredictable and emotionally dangerous environments. Instead of developing a stable inner world, such individuals remain highly reactive to external cues, constantly adjusting their emotional and identity states to maintain psychological equilibrium in unstable settings.

In the context of artistic expression, emotional dysregulation and identity disturbance often find voice through lyrical narratives that oscillate between hope and despair, love and rejection, belonging and alienation. As this paper hopes to demonstrate Lucky Dube's music reflects precisely these oscillations, offering a unique lens into the lived emotional realities of trauma survivors navigating fragmented selfhood and volatile emotional worlds.

2.3 Music as a form of emotional expression and survival

Music has long been understood not only as an artistic pursuit but also as a deeply embedded psychological mechanism for emotional expression and regulation. In recent years, research has intensified around music's role in helping individuals to process trauma, construct identity, and navigate emotional distress. Music, especially lyric-based genres, offers a unique symbolic language through which people articulate inner emotional experiences that may otherwise remain unspoken (Umezina & Esimone, 2020). Psychological studies demonstrate that music can function as a form of emotional regulation, particularly in individuals with histories of adversity. Tewolde (2025) found that listening to and creating music significantly helps individuals modulate mood, process emotional memories, and experience cathartic release, especially in emotionally challenging contexts. In trauma survivors, music-making often becomes a non-verbal narrative tool for expressing fragmented or repressed experiences (Belich, 2024).

In populations exposed to systemic violence or marginalization, such as those who grew up under the Apartheid system in South Africa, music has operated as both resistance and refuge (Nwoye, 2018). In this context, Jemiluyi (2026) observed that for artists emerging from oppressive regimes, music becomes a site of survival, identity formation, and socio-emotional release. Beyond activism, the lyrical content of such music often reveals complex emotional and psychological realities, including grief, abandonment, rage, and longing for connection; themes tightly linked to borderline personality traits and trauma

recovery. Neuropsychological evidence further supports music's role in processing trauma and emotional pain (Daynes, 2010). In this regard, the understanding is that music engages brain regions associated with affect regulation, such as the amygdala, insula, and medial prefrontal cortex - the same areas often dysregulated in individuals with trauma-related disorders (NAMLI et al., 2022). Thus, music is not simply therapeutic in a cultural sense; it also operates on a neurobiological level as a tool for self-regulation and emotional organization. Thus, for many artists, particularly in contexts marked by violence and familial disruption, music becomes an existential anchor, a medium through which fragmented identities are temporarily held together. No wonder Tewolde (2025) described this as a form of "emotional scaffolding", where music provides stability, meaning, and expression in the absence of secure attachment or consistent emotional support. Following this understanding, music can thus be seen to serve as a bridge between internal chaos and external connection. In this way, in communities where emotional expression is stigmatized or unsupported, music becomes a socially acceptable way to express vulnerability, foster empathy, and validate shared pain (Vuust et al., 2022; Nwoye, 2018). This makes music a potent medium for trauma survivors who feel emotionally silenced or invalidated.

With the particular case of Lucky Dube, music was employed to serve not merely as social commentary but also as a psychological mirror that reflects complex emotional realities of abandonment, confusion, longing, and resilience. Hence, his lyrical storytelling created emotional space for personal survival and collective healing; positioning his music as a vital psychological and cultural resource for facing invisible emotional battles that many blacks were confronted with during the Apartheid period in South Africa.

2.4 Review of previous research on musicians and trauma

Over the past decade, scholarly interest in the psychological lives of musicians has grown significantly, particularly regarding how trauma shapes artistic identity, expression, and emotional coping. Musicians were said to often experience elevated rates of mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety, substance use, and emotional instability; with most of these anomalies frequently linked to early life adversity, social marginalization, and the emotional demands of artistic labor (Gross & Musgrave, 2020; & Musgrave, 2023).

Recent studies suggest that trauma may serve as both a catalyst and a constraint in a musician's creative process. However, while some musicians describe their art as a form of emotional healing, others struggle to separate their creative identity from unresolved psychological pain (Ascenso & Perkins, 2016). Trauma-informed perspectives increasingly emphasize that music often functions not only as a medium of expression, but also as a means of survival; offering containment, coherence, and a sense of community for individuals whose early emotional experiences were disorganizing or invalidating (Vermeersch et al., 2023).

Notably, trauma is especially prevalent among musicians from oppressed populations, whose identities are formed within histories of violence, family disintegration, and systemic marginalization. Jemiluyi (2026) and Tewolde (2025) highlight that in such contexts, music becomes a form of resistance and repair; a way of re-authoring the self in response to cultural trauma. Similarly, Belich (2024) highlights how artists from disadvantaged backgrounds often use lyrical storytelling to metabolize psychological suffering and reclaim agency (Doua, 2020). Yet, the irony is that despite their expressive capacities, many musicians remain psychologically unsupported. Thus, Möller & Vincent (2026) found that professional musicians report high levels of emotional distress even though they are less likely to seek mental health care due to stigma, financial insecurity, or cultural expectations of emotional endurance. This disconnection between emotional need and clinical support contributes to a cycle where trauma becomes embedded in artistic identity but remains unprocessed outside of performance spaces.

From a cultural psychology perspective, artists like Lucky Dube are seen as witnesses and translators of collective pain(Duhoe, 2020). Their music reflects not only individual trauma but shared emotional landscapes shaped by structural violence. Such musicians perform a dual role: they are both *subjects of trauma* and *agents of emotional meaning-making* for their communities(Agwu, 2021). Recognizing these dualities is critical in framing music as a valid domain of psychological research and intervention.

To sum up this section, then, current research supports the view that musicians often operate at the intersection of trauma and creativity. Not just as performers but also as emotional historians of their times. This framework is crucial for interpreting Lucky Dube's music not only as sociopolitical commentary but also as a reservoir of unspoken emotional pain, survival, and identity reconstruction.

2.5 Conceptualization

Understanding Lucky Dube's music as a medium for emotional survival and psychological expression requires an interdisciplinary framework that integrates developmental, emotional, and expressive dimensions of trauma. The study is anchored in three interrelated theories, namely **Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1982)**, **Emotional Dysregulation Theory (Linehan)**, and **Art as Psychological Expression**, drawing from creative coping models. These perspectives provide a conceptual lens for analyzing the emotional subtext and psychological resonance embedded in Dube's lyrical narratives.

2.5.1 Attachment Theory (Bowlby)

Attachment theory, developed by John Bowlby (1969/1982), posits that early interactions with primary caregivers significantly shape an individual's internal working models of self and others(Crow et al., 2021). Secure attachments foster a stable sense of identity, emotional regulation, and trust in relationships, whereas insecure or disorganized attachments often lead to difficulties in affect modulation, relational instability, and self-concept fragmentation; all these being understood as hallmark features of borderline personality traits (Leichsenring et al., 2024).

Empirical research underscores the link between childhood attachment disruptions and the development of emotional and personality difficulties later in life. Disorganized attachment, often resulting from inconsistent, neglectful, or abusive caregiving, has been particularly associated with the emergence of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) and chronic affective instability (Zanarini, Magni, Hein & Goodman, 2021). Individuals with such attachment histories frequently experience a pervasive fear of abandonment, difficulty maintaining stable relationships, and oscillations between idealization and devaluation (Bogaerts et al., 2024); patterns often mirrored in the affective tone and lyrical themes in Dube's music.

Additionally, Bowlby (1982) emphasized that attachment injuries are not only personal but can be intergenerational and systemic, particularly in contexts of societal disintegration and historical trauma (Crow et al., 2021). In Apartheid South Africa, forced family separations, state violence, and socio-political exclusion disrupted traditional caregiving structures, rendering secure attachment development nearly impossible for many. Dube's songs reflect this relational vacuum and the yearning for connection, often portraying themes of abandonment, betrayal, and longing for unconditional love (Agwu, 2021). These recurring motifs suggest unresolved attachment wounds, making Bowlby's framework essential for interpreting Dube's music as a medium of relational mourning and psychological protest.

2.5.2 Emotional Dysregulation Theory

Marsha Linehan's biosocial theory of borderline personality disorder offers a complementary lens by focusing on **emotional dysregulation**; the core mechanism underlying BPD symptomatology (Linehan, 1993). According to Linehan, emotional dysregulation arises from the interplay between heightened biological sensitivity to emotional stimuli and chronic exposure to invalidating environments during development. The individual becomes unable to effectively identify, manage, or express emotions, leading to impulsive behaviors, unstable interpersonal relationships, and chronic affective pain.

Linehan's model emphasizes that emotional dysregulation is not merely an internal deficit but an adaptive response to early experiences of emotional invalidation; when one's feelings are ignored, trivialized, or punished by caregivers or the broader environment. In Dube's sociopolitical context, widespread invalidation occurred not only within families fractured by systemic violence but also at the societal level, where Black South Africans were routinely dehumanized and stripped of emotional agency. This dual-layer invalidation fostered emotional chaos that often-lacked language or social space for articulation.

Dube's lyrics exhibit many hallmarks of emotional dysregulation: rapid shifts between despair and hope, idealization and rejection, longing and detachment (Daynes, 2010). These themes parallel the inner emotional turbulence described in Linehan's framework and suggest that music functioned for Dube as a compensatory regulation tool, or a means of externalizing, organizing, and surviving overwhelming affective states. Through singing, songwriting, and performance (Peters et al., 2024), Dube may have accessed a temporary emotional equilibrium otherwise unavailable in his socio-emotional milieu.

Neurobiological evidence supports this intersection: the same limbic structures (e.g., the amygdala and anterior insula) implicated in emotional dysregulation are activated during musical engagement, particularly in emotionally evocative genres like reggae (Agapaki et al., 2022; Koelsch, 2020; Sayal et al., 2024). This reinforces the idea that Dube's artistic output was not merely expressive but biologically grounded in affect regulation, consistent with Linehan's conceptualization of emotional instability as a psychophysiological process shaped by trauma and context.

2.5.3 Art as Psychological Expression and Creative Coping

The third pillar of this framework draws on theories of **art as psychological expression (Journal & Boker, 2025)**, where creative activity functions as a mechanism for emotional processing, narrative reconstruction, and identity preservation. Scholars in expressive arts therapy and trauma studies, e.g., Malchiodi (2023) argue that creative expression provides symbolic pathways for survivors to externalize internal pain, especially when language fails to contain overwhelming affect. Music, in particular, facilitates the expression of fragmented or dissociated emotions through metaphor, rhythm, and tone, forms that resonate deeply with trauma's non-verbal imprint on the psyche (Umezina & Esimone, 2020). For individuals navigating identity disturbance and affective fragmentation, the act of music-making offers a structure through which chaotic inner experiences can be symbolically organized. Carlson et al., (2021) describes this function as "emotional scaffolding," whereby music provides temporary coherence and containment to disrupted emotional states. This is especially pertinent in contexts where individuals lack access to secure relationships, therapeutic support, or culturally relevant mental health resources.

In the case of Lucky Dube, music appeared to function as both **auto-therapy** and **collective catharsis**; offering personal healing while simultaneously giving voice to a community traumatized by Apartheid system's brutality (Agwu, 2021). His songs contain autobiographical elements of loss, alienation, and resilience, suggesting that Dube engaged in a form of self-narration where his musical

identity became an emotional safe space, a re-authored self in defiance of emotional annihilation. Creative coping theories also recognize that trauma survivors often use music to access “emotionally safe” expression, a culturally sanctioned medium that allows vulnerability without direct disclosure (Vuust et al., 2022), (Tewolde, Menkir, 2025) and (Carlson et al., 2021). This function is especially important in African contexts, where emotional restraint is often valorized, and psychological suffering may be stigmatized. Dube’s ability to weave deeply personal anguish into universally resonant narratives illustrates the potential of music as a culturally valid form of psychological resistance and self-repair.

3. Study Approach

The study from which this paper was drawn employed a qualitative, humanistic methodology to explore the emotional and psychological dimensions of Lucky Dube’s music (Waterman, 2014). Rather than pursuing a clinical diagnostic approach, the objective is to interpret his selected lyrical compositions as reflective texts - emotional narratives that carry within them expressions of trauma, identity disruption, and psychological survival. Central to this approach is the belief that art, particularly music, can function as both a repository of internal experience and a site of meaning-making, especially in contexts marked by systemic violence and emotional silence.

3.1 Humanistic Textual Analysis

The primary analytic approach employed is *humanistic textual analysis*, a method rooted in interpretive and phenomenological traditions. This method focuses on the subjective meanings embedded in texts (in this case, song lyrics) and aims to uncover the emotional and existential layers that underlie artistic expression (Chacón-lópez et al., 2016; Smith, 2024). Humanistic inquiry privileges depth, nuance, and empathy in interpreting the lived experience behind words and metaphors (van Manen, 1990; Wertz, 2011).

Unlike content analysis, which seeks frequency or objective categorization, humanistic textual analysis explores the *emotional texture* and *symbolic resonance* of language. This allows for a psychologically rich and culturally contextualized interpretation of Dube’s lyrics, examining how particular phrases, tonal shifts, or narrative arcs express psychological states such as longing, fragmentation, hope, despair, or existential confusion. The songs are treated as *emotional artifacts*, bearing witness to both individual suffering and collective historical trauma.

Given Lucky Dube’s socio-political background and the emotionally charged content of his music, this method is considered particularly appropriate. It allows the researcher to situate his lyrical expressions within both personal and historical contexts without reducing them to simplistic clinical labels or solely political interpretations.

3.2 Psychological Interpretation of Song Lyrics

The second level of analysis engages in psychological interpretation, drawing from trauma theory, attachment psychology, and affective neuroscience to explore the emotional content of selected songs. This process entailed:

- 1) Close reading of lyrics to identify recurring emotional themes (e.g., abandonment, betrayal, identity confusion, yearning for connection).
- 2) Interpreting metaphors and symbolic language as expressions of psychological states (e.g., “prison” as emotional entrapment; “house of exile” as identity dislocation).

- 3) Linking lyrical patterns to concepts such as emotional dysregulation, identity disturbance, and traumatic memory.

This interpretation is informed by contemporary trauma-informed frameworks (e.g., (Herman, 2022; van der Kolk, 2014), which view emotional chaos and fragmentation not as pathologies, but as adaptive responses to overwhelming or disorganizing environments. Through this lens, Dube's lyrics become case studies in lived trauma, not clinical symptoms, but emotional narratives seeking containment, validation, and coherence.

Importantly, psychological interpretation in this study does not seek to diagnose Lucky Dube posthumously. Rather, it uses psychological theory as a language of empathy and understanding, interpreting his artistic output as an authentic and culturally embedded mode of emotional survival.

3.3 Focus on Emotional Themes, Not Clinical Diagnosis

A key methodological commitment in the study that gave rise to this paper is the avoidance of retrospective diagnosis or clinical labeling. While the present paper draws on psychological theories, particularly those relevant to borderline personality traits and trauma-related conditions, the goal is not to pathologize Dube or his experiences. Instead, the focus remains on search for emotional themes in his music; with particular emphasis on how his music articulates states of inner turmoil, resilience, fragmentation, and healing.

This approach aligns with trauma-informed research ethics, which caution against imposing clinical frameworks on individuals without context, consent, or direct assessment (Elliott et al., 2005; Kearns et al., 2026). It also reflects the broader aim of the study: to elevate music as a legitimate and culturally grounded form of psychological testimony.

4. Analyses of Findings

The following section presents a psychological interpretation of four selected songs by Lucky Dube, each examined through a trauma-informed, humanistic textual analysis. These songs were chosen for their thematic richness and emotional resonance with core constructs explored in this study: *emotional dysregulation, abandonment, identity disturbance, systemic oppression, and the use of music as a medium of survival and psychological testimony*. The lyrics are treated as emotionally symbolic texts that reflect not only Dube's personal experiences but also collective trauma shaped by Apartheid, systemic injustice, moral fragmentation, and relational disintegration.

4.1 Song No. 1: "It's Not Easy" (1991)

Core Message: This song is narrated as a confession to his mother. The song traces the arc of a man who married with confident optimism, only to find himself returning to the maternal figure he initially left behind; now broken, seeking comfort in the face of marital collapse and divorce. The mother's repeated refrain, "*it's not easy to understand it, son, but I hope you'll make it*" becomes the emotional anchor of the song. Beneath the romantic narrative lies a profound psychological story: of idealization and its collapse, of impulsive relational choices, and of the enduring primacy of the original maternal attachment bond.

Psycho-Humanistic Analyses:

"It's Not Easy" offers a psychologically layered account of one of the most clinically significant patterns in borderline personality and trauma-related presentations: the cycle of idealization, impulsive commitment, and catastrophic devaluation in intimate relationships. The narrator does not enter marriage with ambivalence, he enters it with absolute certainty, telling his mother with pride that his partner *"is the best."* This unqualified idealization, in which the other is perceived as perfect and the relationship as the solution to inner emptiness, is a hallmark feature of BPD interpersonal dynamics identified by Bogaerts et al. (2024) and central to Linehan's (1993) model of emotional dysregulation: the individual, lacking stable internal affect regulation, invests in another person as the primary source of emotional containment, and in doing so, elevates that person to an idealized status that reality can never sustain (Kyranides et al., 2023). The speed and confidence of the narrator's commitment, a choice made apparently without adequate time to truly know his partner, as the mother's prescient question subtly implies; reflects the impulsivity that Linehan (1993) identifies as one of the nine core criteria of BPD: acting on intense emotional states rather than reflective appraisal, with consequences that cannot be foreseen because the emotional urgency of the moment overrides deliberative judgment (Leichsenring et al., 2024; Triantafyllou et al., 2025). The subsequent collapse; the discovery that *"behind that beauty lies the true colors that will destroy me"* represents the devaluation phase of the idealization-devaluation split; a relational pattern in which the previously idealized other is suddenly experienced as wholly threatening or destructive (Bogaerts et al., 2024). This cognitive split, oscillating between extremes without integration, is one of the most characteristic and destabilizing features of unstable interpersonal relationships in borderline presentations, and Dube captures it here with striking lyrical precision.

Equally significant is the structural role of the maternal figure in the song. When the romantic attachment fails catastrophically, the narrator does not collapse into isolation, he returns to his mother. Within Bowlby's (1982) attachment framework, this return enacts the function of the secure base: the primary attachment figure to whom the distressed individual retreats when the world becomes emotionally unmanageable. The mother's response is clinically remarkable. She does not judge, shame, or distance. Instead, she offers the three elements that Linehan's (1993) model identifies as core to the validating environment: acknowledgment of pain, sustained presence, and realistic hope. Her refrain; *"it's not easy to understand it, son, but I hope you'll make it"* does not minimize the pain or offer false resolution. It validates the difficulty while holding open the possibility of recovery: a precise model of the emotionally attuned response that trauma-informed caregiving requires (Herman, 2022). In a song filled with relational failure, the mother's voice is the one consistent source of emotional stability; the original secure attachment that the narrator's subsequent impulsive choices could not replicate but ultimately could not replace. The song thus functions as a lyrical map of relational dysregulation and its repair, demonstrating that beneath the cycle of idealization and collapse, the yearning for a genuinely attuned relational connection remains, and that healing, when it begins, begins not in the arms of the idealized partner but in the steadier presence of the original attachment bond.

4.2 Song No. 2: *"Remember Me"* (1987)

Core Message

Told from the perspective of a child reaching out to an absent father, this song encapsulates the longing for recognition, paternal acknowledgment, and relational repair across an unbridgeable emotional distance.

Psycho-Humanistic Analyses:

"Remember Me" provides a quintessential representation of paternal attachment rupture. The recurring plea, *"Daddy, remember me,"* signifies the child's unfulfilled desire for emotional sustenance, acknowledgment, and validation. This unmet longing aligns with anxious attachment patterns, where the self becomes organized around the fear of being forgotten or unloved (Bowlby, 1982). The absence of paternal presence is not merely physical but existential, impairing the development of a stable self-concept and contributing to internalized feelings of self-insignificance and unworthiness. The track reflects both relational trauma and developmental mourning, wherein the child grieves not only a lost parent but also that of secure identity that such a figure might have provided. In the Apartheid context this grief was compounded by systemic forces (Belich, 2024; Daynes, 2010), that physically and economically separated fathers from families, rendering Dube's personal plea simultaneously a collective lament shared by an entire generation.

4.3 Song No. 3: *"Prisoner"* (1989)

Core Message

Narrated from the perspective of a young man who has ended up incarcerated, this song traces the trajectory from a childhood in which warnings about crime went unheeded, through adolescent conduct problems, to the reality of imprisonment. A police officer's haunting refrain; that the system builds prisons instead of schools, situates the narrator's personal failure within a deliberate political architecture designed to criminalize rather than educate Black youth. The song is not a love story; it is both a confession, a lament, and an indictment all in one.

Psycho-Humanistic Analyses:

"Prisoner" offers one of the most clinically instructive narratives in Dube's discography, tracing a developmental arc that contemporary psychopathology would recognize as a prodromal trajectory toward borderline personality disorder. The narrator's admission that he received warnings in childhood, that crime does not pay, that education is the key - yet proceeded regardless, is not merely a confession of moral failure. It is a lyrical portrait of conduct and oppositional defiant behaviours; the cluster of externalizing behaviors that the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2022) recognizes as among the earliest and most reliable developmental precursors to borderline personality pathology in adulthood. Research consistently demonstrates that children raised in environments characterized by emotional invalidation, inconsistent caregiving, systemic deprivation, and exposure to violence; all defining features of Apartheid South Africa, are disproportionately likely to develop conduct problems as a primary regulatory strategy (Dvir et al., 2014). In the absence of internalized emotional scaffolding, the child turns outward: defiance, rule-breaking; and risk-taking become the only available tools for asserting agency in an environment that has stripped the self of legitimate power. Applying Linehan's (1993) biosocial model, such conduct-disordered behaviours is best understood not as willful malice but as impulsive dysregulation in the absence of affect management skills; the behavioural surface of an interior emotional storm that has never been named, contained, or responded to by a validating environment. The narrator's childhood self-thought he knew what he was doing; this lyrical detail captures precisely the cognitive distortion that accompanies emotional dysregulation, wherein impulsive action feels like autonomy but is in fact the symptom of an overwhelmed regulatory system. The destination - a prison cell, four grey walls, is thus not only a legal consequence but a psychological metaphor for the enclosure that unregulated emotional development produces: the self-trapped within patterns it cannot escape, behaviours it cannot modify, and an identity it did not consciously choose. What elevates this song beyond individual case study is the police officer's refrain: *"They won't build schools anymore; all they'll build will be prison."*

This is not metaphor - it is both a historical fact and a psychological indictment simultaneously. The deliberate underfunding of Black education under Apartheid (Cooper & Nicholas, 2012) was a systemic invalidating environment on a civilizational scale: a society that communicated to its Black children that their minds were not worth developing, their futures not worth investing in, their potential not worth recognizing. Commenting in this regard, Cluver et al., (2015) document how such structural deprivation produces precisely the adverse childhood experiences, educational exclusion, community violence, economic destitution; that most powerfully predict conduct disorder, emotional dysregulation, and personality disorder in later life. The Apartheid state thus did not merely fail to prevent the narrator's imprisonment; it engineered the conditions that made it inevitable. In this reading, "*Prisoner*" is not simply a song about crime; it is a clinically resonant account of how systemic invalidation cultivates conduct disorder as a developmental response, and how the prison; literal and psychological, becomes the predictable terminus of a childhood denied both emotional attunement and educational dignity.

4.4 Song No. 4: "*Victims*" (1993)

Core Message:

Narrated through an encounter with an elderly woman whose tears open the song, "*Victims*" is structured as an act of intergenerational transmission. The woman; wrinkled, weeping, carrying the weight of historical memory, takes the narrator to a churchyard and shows him the graves of those who fought for freedom, demanding that their sacrifice not be betrayed by the fratricide now consuming the community. Invoking Bob Marley's words about prophets killed while the world stands aside, the song confronts a devastating reversal: the enemy who once stood and watched has been replaced by brothers who now slash and kill each other. The central wound is a double one - still bleeding from apartheid's brutality and humiliation, the community now inflicts a second layer of violence upon itself.

Psycho-Humanistic Analyses:

"*Victims*" is structured around one of the most psychologically significant figures in Dube's entire catalogue: an elderly woman whose body itself has become an archive of collective suffering. The tears that run along the wrinkles of her face are not merely an emotional image; they are a lyrical rendering of what Herman (2022) describes as the traumatic witness: the individual who has survived long enough to carry the full weight of historical memory and who now bears the additional, almost unbearable grief of watching the next generation replicate destruction rather than transcend it. Her tears are not for herself alone, they are communal, historical, and prophetic simultaneously. In Bowlby's (1982) terms, she functions as a transgenerational attachment figure: one whose relational task is not to soothe an individual child, but to hold the emotional continuity of an entire people across time. The song's central psychological concept is what may be termed the double wound, a concept with profound clinical resonance. The community appears to remain psychologically burdened by the unresolved humiliations, violence, and relational ruptures of apartheid while simultaneously reproducing new forms of intra-African violence through xenophobic aggression (Olofinbiyi, 2022; Oyelana & Ngcamu, 2023). From a trauma-informed perspective, this reflects elements of collective traumatic adaptation: social environments whose emotional and regulatory systems were profoundly destabilized by sustained oppression may struggle to metabolize accumulated rage, humiliation, and fear, leading violence to be redirected inward toward vulnerable groups within the broader African community (Beetar, 2019; Duncan, 2024; Frantz Fanon, 1963). In this sense, contemporary xenophobic violence can be understood not merely as political hostility, but as part of an unresolved post-apartheid psychological landscape marked by fragmentation, displaced aggression, and intergenerational trauma (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2008; Van der Merwe & Gobodo-Madikizela, 2008). Van der Kolk (2014) argues that unprocessed trauma does not dissolve. It is discharged, and when external targets of that discharge are removed, the discharge turns against the self or the proximal community. The fratricide Dube describes is not moral failure in a

vacuum; it is collective emotional dysregulation expressed as social violence, the behavioral surface of a community that was never permitted to grieve, heal, or reconstruct its regulatory capacities before being left to govern itself. The churchyard scene is clinically and symbolically the most powerful moment in the song. The woman leads the narrator to the graves of those who *fought for equality* and *died in their struggle*, and asks: “*Can all these heroes die in vain?*” This is a direct enactment of what Herman (1997) calls bearing witness to the dead as a prerequisite for collective recovery. The community must first acknowledge what was sacrificed before it can construct a present worthy of that sacrifice. The graves are not merely memorials; they are moral anchors, psychologically functioning as the shared attachment objects of a community that has lost its relational coherence. The woman’s act of showing them to the narrator is a form of intergenerational trauma transmission with an explicit corrective intent. She transmits not only grief but moral obligation, attempting to interrupt the reenactment loop (Van der Kolk, 2014) by reactivating the community’s connection to its own sacrificial history. Finally, the invocation of Bob Marley introduces a dimension of moral injury at the prophetic level. Marley asked how long the enemy would kill the prophets while the people stood aside and watched. Dube’s devastating answer is that the enemy no longer needs to! the community now does it for him. This inversion represents the deepest form of collective identity fragmentation (Mullins et al., 2025): a people that has lost its narrative coherence, its shared moral framework, and its sense of collective self to such a degree that it can no longer distinguish its enemies from its brothers. In this, “Victims” transcends individual psychology to offer what may be the most clinically complete portrait in Dube’s canon of trauma’s ultimate cost - not only the destruction of the self, but the dissolution of the community’s capacity to protect, recognize, and sustain itself.

5. Discussion of Findings

The preceding lyrical analyses reveal a coherent set of psychological patterns across Lucky Dube’s music. His work, when interpreted through trauma-informed and humanistic frameworks, emerges as a sustained emotional narrative reflecting not only personal suffering but the broader psychic toll of systemic oppression, familial disintegration, and historical displacement. This discussion synthesizes the recurring motifs, emotional expressions, and psychological constructs present across the selected songs to illuminate the deeper implications of Dube’s artistry for trauma scholarship and mental health practice.

5.1 Thematic Convergence:

Across the corpus of analyzed songs, a clear thematic convergence emerges around attachment rupture, identity instability, and emotional dysregulation, three interrelated constructs that closely mirror contemporary understandings of trauma-related psychopathology, particularly those associated with borderline personality disorder (BPD) and Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD). Songs such as “Remember Me” and “Prisoner” directly invoke the pain of abandonment, reflecting early relational trauma and a longing for connection in the life of Dube. In Bowlby’s (1982) terms, these lyrical narratives illustrate the internalization of insecure or disorganized attachment templates, wherein the absence of consistent caregiving contributes to chronic fears of rejection, impaired emotional regulation, and distorted self-representation as reflected in the life of Dube.

5.2 Emotional Survival and the Role of Music as Testimony

Cumulatively, these patterns point to a core function of Dube’s music - emotional survival through symbolic expression. Rather than representing a mere artistic catalogue, his discography appears to serve as an extended autobiographical and cultural narrative, in which pain is transformed into song, and suffering is given structure through melody and metaphor. This trend corroborates the view of trauma theorists such as Herman (1997) and Van der Kolk (2014), who argue that when verbal or narrative expression is unavailable or unsafe, survivors often turn to alternative symbolic forms - such as music, to

process and contain traumatic experience. In this context the act of singing these narratives could be perceived as a form of self-regulation and narrative re-authoring. By articulating his emotional wounds through song, Dube not only preserved psychological coherence but constructed an affective bridge between the personal and the communal. His music gave voice to unspoken cries for help, often camouflaged beneath socially acceptable themes of love, freedom, and justice (Zaatar et al., 2024). This form of affective camouflage, common in trauma expression, enabled Dube, the artist, to engage in emotional testimony without exposure to direct vulnerability; particularly in sociopolitical environments that stigmatized emotional fragility, especially among men.

These indications suggest that Dube's work should be viewed not as a pathological display of emotional volatility, but as a resilient process of adaptation, one that allowed him to metabolize unresolved emotional material through creative output. In this way, his music becomes a form of existential witnessing, wherein the unspeakable is rendered audible, and emotional isolation is transformed into communal recognition. However, a critical reading of Dube's biography alongside this framework demands one further qualification. This is because what the trauma-informed framework we have been alluding to all along, risks overlooking is that what presents as resilience in survivors of early neglect and attachment rupture may itself be a sophisticated expression of the wound. Commenting in this regard, Winnicott (1960) described the false self as a high-functioning social performance constructed not from genuine inner strength but from the internalized conviction that love is conditional, that one must become extraordinary in order to be seen, wanted, or retained. Applied to Dube's biography, this means that his remarkable persistence through commercial failure, his strategic decision to master English, and his relentless pursuit of global recognition may be more accurately understood not as evidence of psychological integration, but as the lifelong enactment of an anxious attachment imperative: "if I become sufficient enough, the abandonment will stop" (Bowlby, 1982; Horney, 1950). In other words, a child raised without consistent parental presence learns early that visibility must be earned, and the stage - with its guaranteed attention, applause, and communal recognition, becomes the most effective attachment strategy available (Ainsworth, 1989). In this reading, Dube's extraordinary music career and his lyrics of abandonment terror are not contradictions; they are the public and private faces of the same unresolved question, asked first in Ermelo and never fully answered: am I wanted simply because I exist?

5.3 Musicians as Emotional Witnesses of Trauma

Lucky Dube's body of work contributes to a broader conceptual understanding of musicians as emotional witnesses, cultural figures who, through their artistic labour, become vessels of collective memory, trauma transmission, and psychological processing. In this capacity, the musician does not merely entertain but performs affective labour, transforming personal suffering into public resonance. This phenomenon is well-documented in cultural psychology and expressive arts literature, where artists from marginalized communities often serve as unintentional therapists or archivists of emotional history (Halawani, 2026; Smith, 2024). However, despite their symbolic importance, musicians are often excluded from trauma-informed discourse and clinical outreach. Their emotional labour remains largely unrecognized, and their psychological vulnerabilities are frequently masked by celebrity or creative identity. As noted by Cases-cunillera et al., (2025); Boker (2025); and Manana (2023), professional musicians report elevated rates of emotional distress but face systemic barriers to mental health care; including stigma, cultural expectations of resilience, and economic precarity.

In Dube's case, the emotional authenticity of his music invites a re-evaluation of the role of artistic expression in trauma studies. His lyrics offer valuable psychological data that illuminate the emotional realities of life under the Apartheid system, the psychological cost of systemic injustice, and the coping mechanisms developed in its wake. Consequently, his work exemplifies how cultural artifacts can serve as trauma testimonies, deserving their being integrated into interdisciplinary frameworks of healing, remembrance, and advocacy. It is also worth considering the dimension of creative experience

that lies beneath conscious craftsmanship: the role of the subconscious in shaping what Dube wrote and how he wrote it. Research on creative cognition consistently demonstrates that the most emotionally resonant artistic work emerges not solely from deliberate intention but from a dual process in which unresolved biographical and collective experience surfaces through the creative act in ways the artist may not fully anticipate or control (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). For Dube, early experiences of abandonment, apartheid's dehumanization, and the accumulated grief of a generation were encoded not only in conscious memory but in what (Campbell, 2021; Haynes, 2025) termed the *unthought known*: pre-verbal experience felt in the body before it is available to language. The creative state; what Dube described in interviews as songs arriving rather than being invented, created conditions under which this subconscious material could surface and find form, bypassing the ego's defensive structures to produce a lyrical urgency and emotional precision that purely conscious composition rarely achieves. In this sense, his lyrics were not only testimony of what he knew but excavations of what he carried without yet knowing he carried it, a process in which music served simultaneously as witness, container, and method of psychological self-discovery.

Given the above, we can therefore conclude by saying that Lucky Dube's selected songs explored analysed in this article function not only as reggae compositions but as lyrical case studies in trauma adaptation, identity negotiation, and emotional survival. His four songs highlighted in this article articulate the silent suffering of those navigating invisible wounds; those whose lives have been shaped by the absence of safe relationships, coherent identities, and psycho-social refuge. In this way, recognizing musicians as emotional historians and healers challenges traditional boundaries between art and psychology and offers fertile ground for trauma-informed engagement with artistic communities. Dube's music, therefore, should be understood not just as performance, but as psychological testimony, deserving of clinical, academic, and cultural recognition.

6. Implications for Public Policy and Practice

In this article the authors invite a re-examination of how artistic expression; particularly music, functions as a legitimate and vital form of psychological testimony. Lucky Dube's emotionally resonant lyrics exemplify how musicians often articulate complex emotional truths that remain unspoken in clinical, familial, or political domains. Recognizing this expressive labour is not merely an academic exercise but a call for interdisciplinary engagement and policy change.

Similarly, this article demonstrates that musicians like Lucky Dube should be acknowledged not only as cultural figures but as emotional witnesses, individuals who bear and voice the affective weight of both personal and collective trauma. Their songs serve as unofficial records of public psychological experience, often reflecting emotional suffering, relational disintegration, and existential confusion with a degree of authenticity rarely captured in traditional mental health narratives. Scholars, clinicians, and policymakers must therefore begin to treat such artistic outputs as emotionally encoded data, deserving of analysis, preservation, and validation within trauma studies, African psychology discipline, and cultural memory frameworks.

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