

# **The Boston Minstrels Heal and Empower Through Music**

By

**Jay Uhler**

**A Member of the Boston Minstrels**

When Tim McHale and the Boston Minstrels take their music into a homeless shelter or a prison, it is not a performance. **It is a happening!**

Tim McHale is a tremendously gifted musician, yet he is far more than that. He uses his talent to “minister” to the heart and soul of the downtrodden. He generates an empowering experience for those who seem powerless.

Tim and his wife, Jane founded The Boston Minstrels caroling in nursing homes and hospitals. Soon they expanded to other venues. Since 1991, their interactive pop, rock and folk events touch “audiences” of about 4,000 each year at more than 40 events.

It is exciting to see the members of the “audiences” become performers. What could be surprising to someone who has never been to one of the Boston Minstrels celebrations of life is the amount and variety of talent in the guests of the homeless shelters and the people in the prisons.

At the Pine Street Inn for men, there was a handsome young man who seemed shy about being involved. He finally with some gentle persuasion joined me at the mic to sing. He loosened up and we had a great time. Then Tim brought out his drums and began to play. The young man joined him and the two of them went wild with a heart beating drum duet. Later the young man told me that his grandfather had taught him to drum on the beach of his native island. A shy appearing young man got in touch with his roots and came alive!

Tim’s troop of troubadours is also encouraged by his wonderful wife, Jane. While Tim is energizing people at the front of the room, Jane is moving through the “audience” talking with, inviting people to sing and hugging those who probably have not had nearly enough hugs in their lives.

Tim is not sequestered at the front of the room either. Sometimes he, with his portable mic, moves through the beaten down looking folks to invite and energize them. He always brings a huge bag or two of percussion instruments which he shares throughout the room to encourage everyone to join in the experience and have fun.

Throughout the evening, people will come to the mic to sing or to play a variety of instruments with astonishing skill! One memorable man was terrific playing his harmonica.

It is thrilling to see the pleasure that these people receive from being appreciated. Tim’s view is that the Minstrels represent the broader community when we go into a prison or homeless shelter. We take an awareness that no matter what our situation in life, we are all one. The Minstrels take the message that someone cares.

The night we were at the Pine Street Inn with the men was a night the Celtics were playing a game during the championship series. What was amazing was how the evening unfolded. Toward the end of our scheduled time at Minstrel events, Tim invites anyone who would like to say something to come to the mic. That evening went on and on. In spite of the Celtics game, men kept coming to the mic. Some talked about personal experiences of the evening, some said prayers, some expressed appreciation for the

Minstrel's presence. The energy was so intimate that they didn't want to leave. Our time together went on for forty-five minutes beyond the closing time. It was fabulous!

One of the nights at a homeless shelter for women and their families was unique. There were more children in the "audience" than adults. That does not mean that they were all performing. Some of them were entertaining the Minstrels by their energy and their antics. Some of the very young ones ran around the room, having a great time to great music.

Tim said later, "I had to reach deep to bring to memory some of those children's songs." He was up to the occasion, as usual, with his flexibility and capacity to adapt to a variety of situations.

A special time for me was when Tim invited the men to the microphone to sing. (Sometimes he will have only the women sing and other times he will have just the men sing). There was a very young "man", about seven months old, in his mother's arms. I ask her if it was ok to hold him while we went to the mic to sing with the other men. She agreed and it was wonderful to hold a small child again singing and rocking to the music. It was especially nice that she would so easily trust her son to be in the arms of a white man.

Later when I was holding him, his older brother, about six years old, came over to us. Realizing that he needed attention too, I asked his mother if it was OK to put him on my shoulders. She agreed. We both loved it as we swayed to the music. He may have enjoyed it more, because he was a lot heavier than his baby brother.

It seemed to me that the Minstrels brought fun music and beautiful energy to that shelter, yet just as important, it brought the presence of many caring men to the male children that night.

Many lives have been changed by the Boston Minstrels. One resident, Melvin, with hesitation, came to the mic, didn't think he did very well, liked his second performance better, joined the Boston Minstrels and went on to become a professional singer.

To learn more about Melvin and others whose lives have been changed by the Boston Minstrels, go to our website [www.bostonminstrel.org](http://www.bostonminstrel.org)

The Boston Minstrels see the healing power of music and enthusiasm at each happening. Professor Peggy Coddling of Berklee College of Music, Music Therapy Department is on the BMC Board of Directors and offers the Boston Minstrel Company program evaluation and design advice and promotes the Company among students and faculty. A music therapist in her own right, she contributes her voice to the healing power of Minstrel happenings.

The Boston Minstrel Company has an alliance with Berklee College of Music and helps talented college interns get practical training with targeted populations.

Tim McHale and the Boston Minstrel Company have received many awards and acknowledgments for their service to the community.

Tim, the music director and prime mover of BMC, was commissioned by First Night Boston to compose the "Boston Millennium song," which he performed in opening ceremonies on New Year's Eve, 2000.

BMC was chosen as a Massachusetts 2005 Catalogue for Philanthropy charity.

The BMC was recognized for its community service by the United Way. As a result, Tim McHale, BMC founder, was selected to carry the Olympic Torch as it came through Massachusetts in 1996.

The BMC was honored by WBZ-TV Channel 4, Boston with an award presented on air by Liz Walker in her “Heroes” community service series.

**To learn more about us**, go to our website: [www.bostonminstrel.org](http://www.bostonminstrel.org)

We are always pleased to have **new people join us**. Enthusiasm, respect for people, a caring attitude and a love of music are the only requirements. The group has a few professional singers, but most are people who want to be a part of the celebration and give of themselves to others.

**Donations are also appreciated.** Boston Minstrels was established as a tax exempt, non-profit organization in keeping with 501(c)(3) of the IRS Code in 1998. As such, all donations to the BMC are tax deductible. We are pleased to have individual contributions or corporate/business sponsorships.

**Your organization can invite us** to bring the Minstrels to perform or to create an event for your people.

Tim encourages people in other cities in the United States and in other countries to **begin Minstrels for their area**. He will assist anyone who is interested in starting one.

**You can contact the Boston Minstrels to join us, to invite us to sing, to donate financial support for our community service or to start your own Minstrel group.**

Tim McHale

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