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## And the Stars Look Very Different Today

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### Abstract

A personal reflection about synesthesia

### Keywords

Synesthesia, colors, David Bowie, music, art

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## And the Stars Look Very Different Today

*Amy Rogin*

It was a summer night in 1985. I laid down in my usual spot under a canopy of twinkling lights.

The stars...aah! They were always there to accompany me when listening to my Walkman.



I was obsessed with “Ziggy Stardust” and all things Bowie. I put on my favorite tune; a trippy piece called “Ashes to Ashes.”

The atmospheric quality of this song never took me on the same trip twice. I closed my eyes, and the light show began.

A flash of red exploded into my mind’s eye, and blended orange and fuschia into every color in the rainbow. Some colors were

not explicable. Bleen, blurple...yes! For these colors had interwoven a magical tapestry of shapes, texture and light. All of my life had been one psychedelic trip.

No, I wasn’t trying LSD. I was experiencing what I had done every night and every day for my entire life. What I was experiencing was **synesthesia**, an unusual neurological condition that is

triggered by one sensory pathway in the brain to stimulate a second involuntary sensory or cognitive pathway. About one in every 20,000 people have synesthesia. It is genetic and is prominent mostly amongst women.



I grew up in a highly musical family. Imagine the fireworks my brain produced as my brother played *Queen* on the turntable, my sister practiced scales on flute, and my virtuoso father played any instrument he could get his hands on...all simultaneously! I thought that everybody experienced a similar “high” through music.

It wasn't until an excruciating summer a few years ago, when I developed chronic migraines, that I found the headaches had increased this "gift." It had progressively turned it into an all-encompassing sensory experience. An F sharp would produce an indigo hue, a geometric helix, and (as a bonus) an involuntary movement in my neck. Because I was a dancer, my body has always been fine-tuned to music. But this was crazy!



I sought medical treatment for the migraines in 2013, when I went in for an MRI. The doctor's aim was to actually induce a migraine to map my brain under duress. He asked me what I was feeling and seeing during the procedure. I told him about the colors, shapes and textures I was seeing. He said, "Is this specifically due to the machine or to the migraine?" I then told him that it was no different from any other time I close my eyes when there is any music or aural dissonance. He was surprised and excited to share the news.





This was the moment that I got my diagnosis. My doctor explained that I had an unusual gift. Every day I'm thankful that I have this "superpower," as my musician friends call it. Ironically, I even bless the migraine experience for awakening me to other states of my being.

For some, music is entertainment. For me, it is a way to align with the stars!