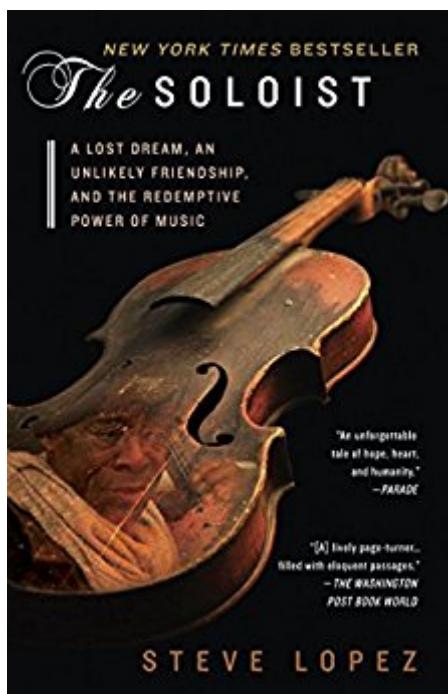


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# The Soloist (Movie Tie-In): A Lost Dream, An Unlikely Friendship, And The Redemptive Power Of Music



## **Synopsis**

Now a major motion picture—"An intimate portrait of mental illness, of atrocious social neglect, and the struggle to resurrect a fallen prodigy." (Mark Bowden, author of *Black Hawk Down*) This is the true story of journalist Steve Lopez's discovery of Nathaniel Ayers, a former classical bass student at Juilliard, playing his heart out on a two-string violin on Los Angeles' Skid Row. Deeply affected by the beauty of Ayers's music, Lopez took it upon himself to change the prodigy's life—only to find that their relationship has had a profound change on his own life.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

This is an unusual sort of biography. Actually, it is more memoir than biography, but there is a definite element of biography here, also, so I don't disagree with the tag. *The Soloist* is about Lopez's experiences in befriending a mentally ill homeless man whom he had noticed to be a startlingly gifted musician. As it turned out, the man, Nathaniel Ayers, had been trained in classical music at Juilliard. As an indication of Ayers' talent, note that he attended Juilliard on a full scholarship from 1970 - 1972, when black students were extremely rare - almost nonexistent -

especially ones from lower-middle-class, single-parent families. He did extremely well in that ultra-competitive and stressful environment (straight A's in music performance classes; and also in other classes until his schizophrenia kicked in and his grades began to fall) until the illness finally forced him out. Ayers had been living on the streets for 33 years and was in his mid-50's when Lopez met him. The book is as much about Lopez's efforts to help Ayers as it is about Ayers himself, which is why I'd consider it primarily a memoir. Finding financial help was the easy part. Lopez's popular columns in the largest newspaper of Los Angeles inspired a barrage of donations and offers of help. The problem was, Ayers didn't want help. He was content with his life as it was. But Lopez was frantic with worry about Ayers' safety on the worst Skid Row in America, where violent (and commonly random) beatings, stabbings, and deaths were a daily occurrence. Lopez does a great job describing his agony and frustration with Ayers' refusal to accept the donated free apartment and free treatment; while at the same time recognizing Ayers' dignity and his right as an adult to make his own decisions. They are feelings I know well. I experienced the same thing once in taking care of an old friend who had become mentally unstable, homeless, and also terminally ill due to alcoholism. It was an awful time in my life, and Lopez's vivid account brought it all back to me. Nathaniel Ayers, however, did not smoke, drink alcohol, or do drugs. In fact, he had a violent disgust towards anyone who did. It makes his situation all the more tragic - there is no way the reader can brush him off with the excuse, "He brought it on himself." One quote from the book really brought it home to me. We now know that most - and probably all - mental illness is caused by physiological dysfunctions that cannot be controlled by willpower or self-discipline. As Stella March, an activist who has a son with schizophrenia, said, "[Why is] it socially acceptable for them to sleep on filthy and dangerous streets? Would anyone tolerate an outdoor dumping ground for victims of cancer, ALS, and Parkinson's?" *The Soloist* is a moving, interesting, and very informative book which has accomplished a great deal in bringing these issues to the attention of the public as well as community leaders. But our economy has worsened considerably in the two years since its publication. I am afraid that the momentum it generated has been lost, and that budget cuts have made services for the homeless and mentally ill even scarcer. All the more reason why we should read this book now. The writing, although competent, isn't perfect. It is a little boring in places when it goes into politics. And Lopez's hopes and fears combined with Ayers' lapses become sadly repetitive after a while (although that is an artifact of the situation rather than the writing, it does influence the reader's experience of the book.) Also, I was surprised by the author's occasional mistakes in language and grammar. Admittedly, they are infrequent and subtle, such as using a word that was okay but not quite right, when a better option was available. Such things surprised me

in view of Lopez's more than three decades as a professional journalist for highly respected newspapers and magazines. And it would have been nice if some photos had been included. You can see some online - including videos - if you google "Nathaniel Ayers," although it is difficult to differentiate the ones of the real Ayers from the movie stills and promotional photos. Check out this video from CBS's "60 Minutes": [...] I'd especially liked to have seen photos of Ayers' reunion with Yo-Yo Ma, who was a classmate at Juilliard - this was one of my favorite parts of the book. But these are small quibbles compared to the honesty of the writing, the highly interesting person that is Nathaniel Ayers, and the importance of the subject. I'm wondering what has become of Ayers since the book was published in 2008. The reader really comes to care about him. I hope that he is safe and well, that the two men's friendship has continued, and that Lopez will write a sequel. (273 pages) Quote from The Soloist: "The pendulum has swung too far to the side of leaving people like Nathaniel to fend for themselves."

Wow! I read this book as part of a book club. I flew through the first 95 pages and was disappointed to have to put it down! I quickly finished the rest of the book the next day. This author beautifully tells the tale of the difficulties of dealing with mental illness--and the wonderful, powerful possibilities that people possess. The author sheds light on a topic that many people may not know about or would choose to ignore--and how the realities in the cutbacks in mental health care have created "skid row". I consider this a must read book for entertainment as well as for mental health professionals and politicians and anyone who is touched by mental illness. I also love the fact that this book is realistic. There isn't a "perfect solution" presented nor a rosy outcome. Real life rarely has that. The author did a great job with describing how he struggled with the fact that there wasn't a "perfect solution" or rosy outcome and how he came to terms with meeting someone where they were and allowing that connection and friendship create a bridge to possibility. The author repeatedly struggled with wanting to find the "right" help and discovering that love and friendship was the "right" help. And while "the soloist" wouldn't be where he is today without professional mental health treatment and community resources, he would have never been able to access them if he didn't first have the love and friendship that the author offered. This is a wonderfully inspiring story and one, that I hope, encourages people to become active in their own communities offering love and friendship to their neighbors.

This is on my short list of the best books I have ever read. I was taken to extreme highs and extreme lows as Lopez takes me on an incredible journey and an eye opening expedition. This book

was about Mr. Ayers but one can only stand in awe of not just a talented and troubled musician, the lessons of societal breakdowns, and the amazing journey of a writer, but brought to the forefront the possibility of not just changing our views, but doing something about them by changing our lives. My opinion is this should be required reading for everyone who knows something is wrong in our world and wants to do something to help. It brought me tears of joy and tears of despair, it made me look deeply into my own soul and realize that I, one simple man can make a difference if I would just set aside my own foolish pride and just stay the course of friendship for no other reason than the friendship itself. I marvel that there are actually people out there who rated this less than five stars. Thank you Mr. Lopez for touching not just my mind and my heart, but my very soul. And thank you Mr. Ayers for the life lessons you teach us and please "play on".

Read the book and saw the movie. Or maybe I should have done it the other way around. The book written by LA Times columnist Steve Lopez stays with you. I was moved to tears. I'm sure he is a changed man. The movie, as much as I LOVE Robert Downey, Jr. and Jamie Fox, didn't do anything for me. But I'm not here to review the movie. Read the book, it is an eye opener into a world few of us would voluntarily step into. 5 Stars without a doubt. Whoever designed the book cover deserves high recognition as well. Beautifully done. Best wishes to Mr. Ayers as well...

this is an important book. The author, a reporter, befriends this man living on Skid Row. He was formerly a student at Juilliard, a famous music school. He helps him move into his own apartment and start to make music again. He even teaches some students. He becomes a happier human being.

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