

# The Third Act: Play It Again, Sam

This year, on Father's Day, I attended an unforgettable concert. It was held, of all places, at an assisted living facility specializing in memory care. A friend of mine now resides there, a preventative decision made after months of thoughtful conversations between him and his grown children as together they weighed other options: living on his own, with family members or in a care home. As is his wont, he has embraced his new circumstances, making more than the best of it. His humor, energy and creative generosity have already made their mark on the staff and residents at his new home.

A longtime singer, songwriter and guitarist, he has played in bands all his life, in addition to his award-winning work in film and video. His children caught the music bug from him, all now accomplished musicians and performers in their own right. So, on this Father's Day, his family gathered in the facility's community room to honor their father and to showcase what he has always done: give to others through song. Guitars, drums, fiddles, amplifiers and microphones were set up. Rattles and tambourines were placed within close reach. The chairs filled. Additional family members and guests, come to celebrate Father's Day, added to the gaiety. Canes and walkers belonging to residents were set to one side. Those confined to wheelchairs were rolled in. Some chatted enthusiastically while others appeared disassociated, detached from what was taking place around them. One in particular, her wheelchair situated near me, sat slumped, chin on her chest, motionless, hands resting listless on her thighs, eyes closed.

My friend positioned a stool in front of the mic, nodded in the direction of his daughter, and the band began to play with him alternately performing as lead singer or singing harmony. How comfortable he was in the saddle of song! They played rock and roll and everything in between. Beatles and Eagles, country and blues were greeted with applause and hoots of appreciation. It seemed at least one of the medley was on the personal playlist of everyone present...maybe a song that hearkened back to a high school prom or one played full volume on a cross country road trip back in the days of cassette tapes.

I glanced at the woman seated near me in her wheelchair. She showed no evidence of connection to herself or her surroundings, no response to the music. But then, about three quarters of the way through the concert (I don't remember the song), she lifted both her hands ever so slightly, ever so slowly, drawing them back and forth as delicately as butterfly wings in time with the drumbeat. Not a clap exactly, but close. Nothing else about her countenance had changed. But she had heard the music. It had spoken to something deep inside her.

Of the millions of Americans living in long-term care facilities, many face cognitive difficulties sometimes made worse by leaving behind their familiar surroundings, friends and even their favorite music. Why would music matter? According to "Harvard Health," "listening to and performing music reactivates areas of the brain associated with memory, reasoning, speech, emotion and reward." The article cites two studies, one in the United States and the other in Japan, that find that music "doesn't just help us

retrieve stored memories, it also helps lay down new ones.” It turns out music, especially songs, from one’s formative years, tap deep memories not lost to dementia, bring listeners back to life, enabling them to feel like themselves again, to converse, socialize, stay present. Dr. Laura Mosqueda, Director of Geriatrics at the University of California, Irvine School of Medicine, states, “music creates an ‘awakening’ of sorts as it reaches areas of the brain that may not be damaged by Alzheimer’s and bring those pathways to the forefront.”

A few years ago, I came across the documentary, “Alive Inside” that follows a man named Dan Cohen who brings music to people suffering from dementia. It chronicles the astounding healing effect that music can have on behavior, mood and quality of life. And there’s more. When a stroke or brain injury has damaged the left-brain region responsible for speech, one can literally sing their way back to speaking, because singing originates in the right (undamaged) side of the brain. First singing their thoughts, patients learn to eventually drop the melody, to speak normally. This was how former Representative Gabrielle Giffords regained her ability to speak and was able to testify to Congress only two years after a gunshot wound to her brain.

In the book “Songlines,” Bruce Chatwin recounts that Australian Aboriginals believed all things must be sung into existence. In considering the effect of music and song on our weary minds, we had better sing our cognitive connection to life into existence every single day.