



Alive Inside Discussion Guide

Director: Michael Rossato-Bennett

Year: 2014

Time: 78 min

You might know this director from:
ALIVE INSIDE is the first feature film by this director.

FILM SUMMARY

The iPod is everywhere. Music & Memory organization founder Dan Cohen knew this much to be true. But what role does music play in our nursing homes? Working outside conventional practice and railing lovingly against the business of pill bottles as the only recourse for dementia, Cohen makes a strong case for music as healing force.

Initially setting out to make a short film clip that Cohen could use when seeking funding for his program of bringing personalized music to nursing home residents, what director Michael Rossato-Bennett witnessed moved him to his core. Once a pair of headphones were placed on 94-year-old Henry Dreher, who had been in a near vegetative state for close to a decade, he was transformed. The light of life returned to his eyes, the gift of sound to his lips, coherence to his words, clarity to his ears, self-purpose to his nervous system. He was awoken. And so the three-year filmic journey of ALIVE INSIDE began.

This look into the much-feared world of America's elderly care system makes for staggeringly touching viewing. Cohen discovers others sharing his disillusionment at the care of the elderly in our increasingly urbanized world, and tirelessly campaigns for the healing powers of music. Complete with testimony from the medical community and touching visual proof of previously withdrawn people being awoken to themselves and the world around, ALIVE INSIDE is a symphonic overture for anyone fortunate enough to live into old age.

FILM THEMES

Many people succumb to the loneliness and isolation of life inside a care system based around a hospital model once they reach old age. Music resounds, providing a bridge to life, love, and self-worth.

ISOLATION TO DEATH

No one wants to spend their final years in a nursing home. We even damn the experience by saying, "I don't want to **end up** there," as if the end is all that remains once a person passes through those clinical doors. Losing independence, dignity, and withdrawing into one's internal world as the only means of coping with the devastation. The loneliness becomes even more isolating for those suffering from dementia, bodies curled up, turned inwards, seeking safety from the threatening world that has no use for them any longer. Before Music & Memory, a life with dementia in a nursing home largely meant waiting alone for death.

STIMULATION FOR LIFE

All is silent, a blur, a mixed-up confusion of time and days, medication to take, daily rituals to complete. Suddenly - Music! Stimulus from the outside world finding a non-intrusive, happy manner of entering the individual. By personalizing the experience and engaging individual senses, music has the power to awaken someone from a late-life slumber, quickening complacent hearts. Music is tied to our core, playing out in our emotional centers, a spontaneous trickle racing through otherwise entirely dictated existences. Music is untouched by the woes of dementia, the heartache of having lost so much. As a healing force music reaches us all, regardless of the factors that define and confine us.

HEARTBEAT OF LIFE

The most intimate and intricate part of each and every human being - the heartbeat, its rhythm is the beatbox of life. From a physiological standpoint, there are many explanations why music has such a positive impact on the human body and spirit. The rhythm of music is intertwined in the very first cell that splits to become the living, breathing, thinking, feeling entity of each human being. It's no wonder music always remains relevant, possessing its own set of keys to the backdoor of the human mind, able to reach the places that dementia overlooks. By inviting music into a body, we reconnect people to themselves.

ELDERHOOD, A PART OF LIFE

Age is a natural chapter in the story of life, not something contrived or opted for by certain people and not others. Why does the U.S. lock its elders away, treating them as pariahs, a facet of society to be forgotten? The contradiction in praising medical advances while shunning old age is tremendous. On the contrary, our bodies are built to age, and we deny our own humanity when we deny the elderly an humane place in the new world. As the population continues aging, the universal language of music builds a powerful bridge between generations, placing the strength of life back in the hands of our elders.

“Music connects people with who they have been, who they are and their lives.”

Dan Cohen

“What we’re spending on drugs that mostly don’t work dwarfs what it would take to deliver personal music to every nursing home resident in America.”

Dr. Bill Thomas

“Music is inseparable from emotion.”

Dr. Oliver Sacks

FILM FACTS:

- In addition to being awarded the Audience Award and nominated for the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance Film Festival, ALIVE INSIDE has received a number of accolades, including Best Documentary at the Milano International Film Festival Awards and Fort Myers Beach Film Festival. It won 2nd place for Best Documentary at the Seattle International Film Festival.
- After studying film at Temple University, Director Michael Rossato-Bennett went on to make documentary films during the 1980s. For most of the 1990s, he worked as a travel photographer, until setting up his own company producing films for non-profits and causes dear to his heart. While working on ALIVE INSIDE, he was also producing three other documentaries, one on contemporary Tibetan artists, one on a man's year-long quest to become enlightened, and one on prisoners in a maximum-security prison who are being taught modern dance.
- Relatively few people in nursing homes are under the age of 65, with almost half of residents over the age of 85. Around 70% of nursing home residents are women without a spouse.
- More than half of all nursing home residents suffer from some form of dementia, and over 25% of all residents are on antipsychotics.
- Music therapy has been used for many ailments, including helping a woman who survived a bullet wound to her brain regain the power of speech.
- A 2GB iPod Shuffle, the music player introduced to nursing homes by the Music & Memory program, retails for \$49 brand new and holds approximately 500 songs.
- The first public radio broadcast, containing a New York City Metropolitan Opera House performance, took place in 1910.
- Dan Cohen, the founder of Music & Memory, originally got the idea in 2006 to bring iPods into nursing homes when he heard a journalist say that iPods were now ubiquitous. Through some online research, he learned that they were, however, not present in nursing homes. He visited a nursing home in Long Island, New York, near where he lives, armed with a few iPods and his laptop, and found that offering residents personalized music was an instant success.
- Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia, accounting for 60-80% of cases. Although it was first mentioned as a disease over 100 years ago, extensive research into its causes, symptoms, and cures only became focused from the 1980s on. There is still plenty to learn about Alzheimer's disease in general.
- According to the Recording Industry Association of America, the top 5 songs of the 1900s were: "Over the Rainbow" by Judy Garland, "White Christmas" by Bing Crosby, "This Land is Your Land" by Woody Guthrie, "Respect" by Aretha Franklin, and "American Pie" by Don McLean.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Become a Music & Memory volunteer, by organizing an iPod donation drive or donating funds. Their website provides plenty of information on how to help Dan Cohen and his organization.
2. Consider reaching out to the elderly through an Eden Alternative program.
3. Spread the healing powers of music! If you know of someone suffering from dementia or healing from a traumatic experience, turn them on to the intrinsic beauty and wonder of their own personalized music.
4. Ensure that music is available to all. Music Empowers supports music education programs across the U.S.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.