

# The miracle that is music

'Alive Inside' illustrates its joyous power to reawaken emotions in dementia patients

By **SUSAN KING**  
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One of the most joyous moments in "Alive Inside," a documentary exploring how music helps reawaken memories and emotions in dementia patients, occurs when a nursing home resident with dementia reacts to hearing his favorite music.

Henry Dreher, 94 at the time, had been spending his days sitting in his wheelchair with his head hanging down. Then social worker Dan Cohen, founder of the nonprofit organization Music & Memory, which brings personalized music to the elderly and infirm, puts headphones on Henry and plays some Cab Calloway on an iPod.

Dreher's eyes open, his face lights up, and he starts singing along with the music.

"Henry reacted the same way to music for four years until he passed," said Cohen, adding that the music therapy doesn't work with every patient with dementia.

"It will work from 30 to 60 percent of the time," Cohen said. "Sometimes with advanced dementia, they can't tell us what songs they like, and there is no family or anybody to tell us what they liked. And we haven't figured it out. I hope (families) start picking out those playlists earlier in life and don't wait until someone is no longer able to communicate."

In 2012, Cohen and the film's director, —, posted a six-minute clip of Henry on the Music & Memory website in hopes that they would get funding needed to complete the movie. It

went viral, attracting 7 million views in one week. Donations started pouring in. With private funding, grants and a Kickstarter campaign, they were able to complete "Alive Inside," which won the Audience Award in January at Sundance. The movie opens Friday.

Currently more than 600 nursing homes in 45 states are Music & Memory certified.

Cohen, who is a social worker with a background in high-tech training and software applications, heard a journalist talking in 2006 about how iPods had become ubiquitous.

"I Googled iPods in nursing homes," Cohen said. "Even though there are 16,000 nursing homes in the U.S., I couldn't find one using iPods. I called my local nursing home in Long Island (N.Y.) and said I know that music is the No. 1 recreation activity, can I see if there is any added value if we totally personalize music? They said, 'Sure.' I came with my laptop and a few iPods. It was a definite hit with the residents."

He was enthusiastic, but his friends weren't convinced.

"They would go, 'How nice, you are bringing old people music,'" Cohen recalled. "I thought if I could only get this on film to show people directly. At the time I had been introduced to the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation in New York. I said, 'Do you know a filmmaker?' And they said, 'We have a guy who has done stuff before for us.' That is how it started."

Rossato-Bennett was not prepared for what he saw



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**"I have never seen music be so profound in bringing people solace."**

— Michael Rossato-Bennett

when he went with Cohen to the Long Island nursing homes where Cohen volunteered.

"I have never seen music be so profound in bringing people solace," the director said. "I would like to call it a lifeline, something they can follow. Music provides not just a melodic line or a soundtrack to their life, but the melodies and the rhythms create a path these people can follow because they have such a hard time navigating."