

Lessons From the Lives of Celebrated Musicians: What Armstrong, Cash, Dylan, Ellington, Fitzgerald, and Sinatra Can Teach Us About Creative Resilience and Aging

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For a decade the author has delivered presentations using techniques from the humanities, principally biography, to elucidate themes of creative resilience and aging in the lives of well-known musicians, illustrated with excerpted images, audio clips, and videos. The goal has been to stimulate discussions about the potential for creative growth in later years, even in the face of the professional and personal setbacks inevitable in the course of life, with implications for clinical work with older adults and for ourselves as we age. This summary describes key take-home points that have recurred across these varied artists' stories and the interactions they have sparked with audiences and colleagues. (Am J Geriatr Psychiatry 2017; ■■■:■■■-■■■)

Key Words: Successful aging, creativity, resilience, humanities, music

Highlights

- Presentations using techniques from biography have elucidated themes of creative resilience and aging in the lives of well-known musicians
 - The goal has been to stimulate discussions about the potential for creative growth in later years
 - This summary describes key “take-home” points that have recurred across these varied artists' stories and the interactions they have sparked with audiences and colleagues
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The past is never dead. It's not even past.

—William Faulkner

Nostalgic? No, I wouldn't say that. It's not taking a trip down memory lane or longing and yearning for the good

old days or fond memories of what's no more... (It's) in the here and now.

—Bob Dylan, asked whether his 2017 recording of decades-old Great American Songbook standards is nostalgic

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Lessons from the Lives of Celebrated Musicians

"I am a geriatric psychiatrist—and a music fan—not necessarily in that order..." For the past decade I have used these words to begin presentations in which techniques from the humanities, principally biography, elucidate themes of what I have called creative resilience and aging. These presentations, illustrated with excerpted images, audio clips, and videos, to date have focused in turn on Duke Ellington, Bob Dylan, Frank Sinatra, Louis Armstrong, and Johnny Cash, with Ella Fitzgerald in preparation. My goal has been to stimulate discussions about the potential for creative growth in later years, even in the face of the professional and personal setbacks inevitable in the course of life, with implications for our clinical work with older adults and for ourselves as we age. In this essay, I will summarize key take-home points that have recurred across these varied artists' stories and the interactions they have sparked with audiences and colleagues.

ADVERSITY AFFECTS US ALL, BUT CAN BE OVERCOME

Overcoming early life adversity is a truism that actually holds true for these musicians. Ellington, Sinatra, and Dylan came from relatively humble beginnings, and Cash, Armstrong, and Fitzgerald faced enormous challenges as children, including bereavements, poverty, and/or isolation from family. Even as famous and wealthy adults, each overcame substantial personal and professional setbacks in mid- or later-life. In the 1980s both Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash came close to obscurity, to being "written off" as obsolete by their fans and their peers, but found ways to re-energize their careers and reconnect with their audiences. Duke Ellington faced a similar career setback in the mid 1950s, but went on to some of the greatest commercial and artistic successes of his career during the last 18 years of his life. Louis Armstrong had to limit his trumpet playing in his later 60s because of physical ailments, so he emphasized his vocals and continued to entertain live audiences and create enduring recordings such as "What a Wonderful World." Frank Sinatra developed progressive neurocognitive difficulties in his 70s, but for many years he continued his ongoing world concert tours and recorded best-selling duet albums. Ella Fitzgerald's aging voice precluded the virtuosity that had defined her performances for decades, so she changed her vocal approach and conveyed a deeper

emotional connection to her material. All of these artists embodied the human spirit's potential for resilience.

INSPIRATION AND ENGAGEMENT WILL WAX AND WANE OVER THE YEARS

It is unrealistic to expect a constant high level of inspiration and engagement throughout the life course. Well into his late-career resurgence, looking back on his career decline in the 1980s, Cash stated that he had "taken music for granted"; during those years he largely stopped writing songs and his live and recorded performances were generally desultory. Sinatra felt so disconnected from his art and audience that he retired from performing in 1971, only to re-emerge later in the decade passionate about new recordings (including his 1980 hit "Theme from New York, New York") and filling sports arenas and stadiums around the world with concertgoers. Duke Ellington seemed largely disengaged with composing in the early 1950s, but after a triumphant appearance at the 1956 Newport Jazz Festival, he, together with collaborator Billy Strayhorn, produced a dizzying range of compositions over the next decade, including album-length suites taking their inspiration from Shakespeare, global travels, religious faith, and many other topics. If we remind ourselves and our patients that variable engagement is an expected part of the rhythms of human existence, we hold out the continual prospect for renewal and inspiration during any phase of life.

UNIQUE OR WISE CONTRIBUTIONS IN LATER LIFE

The important and unique artistic contributions each of these performers made in their later years—different from their accomplishments in younger decades—is a more hopeful, nuanced narrative than oft-publicized suggestions that scientists and artists peak by their 30s.^{1,2} Ellington's compositions became increasingly varied in their subject matter, musical devices, and instrumentation. Later in life, Sinatra focused more on concert touring, having abandoned his career as a movie actor. Later performances and recordings by Armstrong, Dylan, and Cash are imbued with a breadth of inclusive, pragmatic perspectives not found in the recordings of their youth (which of course have their own

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