

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

Jeffrey M. Lyness, MD

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; 25:1295–1299)

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
-

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

Received June 7, 2017; accepted June 8, 2017. From the University of Rochester School of Medicine & Dentistry, Rochester, NY. Send correspondence and reprint requests to Jeffrey M. Lyness, MD, Box 706, Office of Academic Affairs, 601 Elmwood Avenue, Rochester, NY 14642. e-mail: Jeffrey_Lyness@urmc.rochester.edu

© 2017 American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jagp.2017.06.009>

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

brilliance), perspectives that for many listeners convey elements of what is often described as wisdom.³

SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS IS KEY

Empirical research has confirmed clinical impressions that social support is key to resilience in aging.⁴ For these performing artists, connections with fellow musicians and with their audiences were crucial parts of their social network, complementary to other, often more complex relationships in their personal lives. Each of them endeavored to stay “on the road” as much as their health allowed in their later years. Thirty years ago Dylan embarked on what fans call his “Never Ending Tour”—he credited the process of reinventing his music live on stage with reawakening his creative energies.⁵ Cash connected with new, younger crowds through his 1990s appearances at Glastonbury and other music festivals; he delighted in offending what he called “Johnny Cash fans,” meaning his traditional base, partly because his newly broadened listening audience challenged him to take musical risks in the studio, resulting in some of the finest recordings of his life. Echoing observations made of so many older musicians, young bandmates of both Armstrong and Ellington noted how each might appear tired and old waiting in the wings, but would spring to life with youthful energy as he took the stage and interacted with the audience.

THE PAST AS PRESENT AND FUTURE

One of the ways in which Faulkner’s widely known quotation manifests itself is the process of the life review: A normal psychological process with aging, sometimes encouraged as part of psychotherapy, in which review of personal history becomes a means of making meaning in the present and in their remaining years of life.⁶ Several of these artists have used a public form of life review to invigorate their work. In his last decade, Johnny Cash spoke openly about his working relationship with producer Rick Rubin as comparable to what he had had with Sun Records producer Sam Phillips, with whom he began his recording career in the 1950s. Louis Armstrong, in his last years forced by physical ailments to spend extended periods of time recuperating at home, made hundreds of hours of reel-

to-reel tapes on which he played recordings that he admired, contributed his own live snippets of trumpet or vocal performances, and talked about people and events that mattered to him. As well, he decorated the tape boxes with collages of images and media headlines of personal importance, while also assembling dozens of scrapbooks of his career. These activities helped sustain him during what were otherwise difficult months, as he had never previously been “off the road” for such lengths of time. Even more so, Armstrong did this with a clear eye to his legacy, and indeed these items are now available to the public in the collections of the Louis Armstrong House Museum.⁷ Bob Dylan’s public life review has included many lyrical, musical, and visual references to music, popular culture, and public events of his mid-20th-century childhood years, culminating in his three most recent albums focusing (to most fans’ surprise) on Tin Pan Alley popular song standards originally made famous by the likes of Frank Sinatra and Tony Bennett. Not-so-paradoxically, these and his other explorations of the past century have intensified his passionate engagement with his art and his audience in, as per the epigraph, the here and now.

Of course, focus on the future does not always depend on overt life review. As an older adult with a half-century of success behind him, Duke Ellington was frequently asked which of his compositions was his favorite. His typical answer: “Why, the next one, of course!”

STAYING “AUTHENTIC” TO ONESELF WHILE INCORPORATING THE CONTEMPORARY

Successful adaptation in aging may require engaging with at least some aspects of contemporary life and culture. When the long-playing record became widely available in the 1950s, Armstrong and Sinatra took advantage of the format to produce thematically organized concept albums; Ellington used the new medium to present concert-length suites. In his 60s and 70s, Ellington also effectively integrated then-fashionable trends in instrumentation (e.g., electric organ, flute) and influences (e.g., Indian musical modes). Armstrong, Cash, Ellington, and Sinatra all furthered their work and connection with audiences through successive waves of mass media and technology, from recordings through radio, television, and touring distances

made possible by automobile, rail, and plane travel. Dylan has extended his reach through satellite radio and an active presence on the Internet, including a website, availability of downloadable music, and streaming videos of live performances. Yet such engagement with the new must be done in ways that remain true to one's core values and strengths. During the 1980s, Dylan used trendy electronic keyboards and rhythm sections that were a poor match for his musical strengths, in the process losing much of his audience and (for many) his artistic credibility. In the 1970s, Sinatra teamed with a highly regarded producer to make disco versions of some of his best-known songs; unsurprisingly, the results pleased neither his traditional base nor fans of contemporaneous rhythm and blues.

THERE ARE MANY FORMS OF SUCCESSFUL AGING

Long and healthy life will not happen for all. Armstrong, Sinatra, Cash, and Fitzgerald faced acute and chronic illnesses that progressively limited their artistic performances. Armstrong and Cash died at relatively young ages, having become increasingly frail for several years. Some might thus claim that neither was an example of "successful aging." (Although one could argue that they "beat the odds" living as long and as well as they did, given the material and interpersonal poverty from which each came—particularly so for Armstrong, given the sad demography of African American men from his birth cohort.) Importantly, though, both of them, and all the artists considered here, continued to find ways to make meaning and value in their lives until quite close to their final days. In that sense I believe they must be considered part of the spectrum of successful aging.⁸ Part of their legacy, then, is to remind us that such potentials remain open to us. It is our responsibility to live up to this as best we can in our own lives, and to help our patients and their families do the same.

CLOSING THOUGHTS: THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES

My observations to this point have related to these artists' lives. But I also want to comment on what I

have learned through the process of creating and delivering live presentations telling their stories, using biographical methods to illustrate and stimulate conversations about the themes articulated here. Doing so has reaffirmed my fervent belief that the arts and humanities offer perspectives on the human condition that are different from, and add to, scientific perspectives on resilience and successful aging⁸⁻¹²—and that such perspectives can and should enrich and inform our clinical work. As a former double major in biology and English literature, perhaps I am blinded by my own confirmation bias. But the discussions engendered by these presentations add to lengthy, substantial "evidence" supporting the valuable, complementary roles of the arts, humanities, and sciences.

Also, during my formative years, like many young people I found that music appreciation was a ticket to personal relationships. How fondly I remember long days and late nights listening to, applauding, discussing, and, yes, arguing about music with friends and loved ones—and how much I learned and gained in that process. In the past decade, doing these presentations, too, has been a wonderful vehicle for new and re-engaged relationships with family, friends, online forum-dwellers, and other fellow music lovers. This is yet another enduring gift, another valuable legacy of all these artists. To paraphrase Lester Bangs' famous encomium after the death of Elvis Presley:¹³ We may not agree on everything about these musical giants now deceased (*pace* Dylan, fortunately). But I will not say goodbye to their corpses. I will say hello to you.

Please note that, out of concern for professional ethics and respect for these musicians, I have remained firmly on the proper side of the Goldwater Rule:¹⁴ I am not privy to and have not revealed any personally obtained intimate information about these musicians; moreover, the facts described here are already in the public domain. The views expressed intentionally do not include diagnostic assessments or other inappropriate professional clinical opinions about these individuals.

I am grateful to Paul Duberstein, Ph.D., for the conversation that led to my embarking on a decade's worth of presentations, to Benoit Mulsant, M.D., M.S., for encouraging me to write about my experiences, and to both for providing helpful feedback about this essay.

References

1. Jones B, Reedy EJ, Weinberg BA: Age and scientific genius. NBER Working Paper Series, National Bureau of Economic Research; 2014. Available from: <http://www.nber.org/papers/w19866>. Accessed June 2017
2. Kanazawa S: Why productivity fades with age: the crime-genius connection. *J Res Pers* 2003; 37:257–272
3. Bangen KJ, Meeks TW, Jeste DV: Defining and assessing wisdom: a review of the literature. *Am J Geriatr Psychiatry* 2013; 21:1254–1266
4. Moore RC, Eyer LT, Mausbach BT, et al: Complex interplay between health and successful aging: role of perceived stress, resilience, and social support. *Am J Geriatr Psychiatry* 2015; 23:622–632
5. Dylan B: *Chronicles*. Vol. one. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004
6. Kenyon G, Birren JE, Ruth J-E, et al, eds: *Aging and Biography: Explorations in Adult Development*. New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1996
7. Louis Armstrong House Museum. Available from: <https://www.louisarmstronghouse.org>. Accessed June 7, 2017
8. Jeste DV, Palmer BW: A call for a new positive psychiatry of ageing. *Br J Psychiatry* 2013; 202:81–83
9. Harmell AL, Jeste D, Depp C: Strategies for successful aging: a research update. *Curr Psychiatry Rep* 2014; 16:476
10. Jeste DV, Savla GN, Thompson WK, et al: Association between older age and more successful aging: critical role of resilience and depression. *Am J Psychiatry* 2013; 170:188–196
11. Martin A, Distelberg B, Palmer B, et al: Aging and resilience: the role of family and individual resilience in successful aging. *Gerontologist* 2013; 53:147
12. Southwick SM, Charney DS: *Resilience: The Science of Mastering Life's Greatest Challenges*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012
13. Bangs L: Where were you when Elvis died? In: Marcus G, ed. *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung*. New York: Anchor Books, 1987:212–216
14. American Psychiatric Association: *The Principles of Medical Ethics with Annotations Especially Applicable to Psychiatry*, 2013 Edition. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013:9