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He Missed Woodstock, and It Inspired His Life's Work

Dan Cohen, founder of nonprofit Music & Memory, believes he is improving quality of life for older people by making personalized playlists of songs from their youth

By **HEIDI MITCHELL** June 8, 2016 3:27 p.m. ET



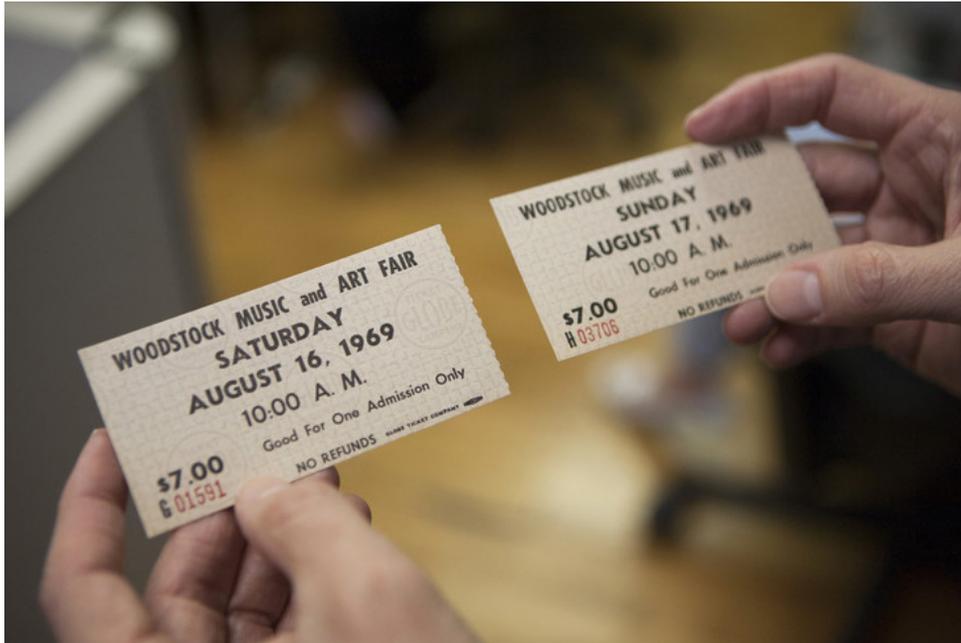
Dan Cohen, executive director of Music & Memory, a nonprofit organization that brings personalized iPod playlists to older and infirm people in some 2,900 care facilities in the U.S. and other countries. *PHOTO: LEAH LATELLA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Two tickets to the historic Woodstock Music Festival sit in a well-worn envelope in the drawer beside Dan Cohen's bed. But Mr. Cohen, then a high school senior in Westbury, N.Y., never made it to the 1969 concert that featured Janis Joplin, Santana, The Who and many other musical groups of the day.

The unused tickets "remind me of how much emotion and joy comes from listening to your favorite music, and how much is lost when you don't," says Mr. Cohen, the founder of the nonprofit organization Music & Memory.

Mr. Cohen, who is now 64 years old, recalls waiting until school was out that day nearly 50 years ago. The radio reported the New York State Thruway was closed due to traffic from concertgoers and ominous weather. "I didn't want to be sitting stuck on the side of the road in the pouring rain, or abandoning my car in the mud and walking," he says. So he stayed home.

Still, Mr. Cohen can't part with the tickets—one for each of the first two days of the concert. He says recalling music from his youth was part of what inspired him to bring music to people in eldercare a decade ago, and eventually to set up Music & Memory in 2010. The organization now helps deliver personalized music playlists to 2,900 care facilities around the U.S. and in other countries.



Dan Cohen, an ardent music fan, keeps his original, never-used Woodstock concert tickets from 1969 in an envelope beside his bed. They remind him of the sorrow that can come from missing your favorite music. Nearly 47 years later, he can't part with these bits of nostalgia. *PHOTO: LEAH LATELLA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

In 2006, Mr. Cohen heard a radio report on the ubiquity of iPods and the digital divide, how rich and poor had uneven access to technology. “I thought about the aging population and how the digital divide must be even more gaping between the young and the old,” he says.

He did research online through the New York State Department of Health, which recommends that all nursing homes use individualized music as therapy, and found evidence of music’s impact on Alzheimer’s patients through the American Music Therapy Association. Through talking to caregivers, he came to understand that elderly people in health-care facilities spend a large part of their time idle.

“I thought providing a personalized playlist of a patient’s favorite music could transform their experience, and remove them from the dullness of just waiting for the next meal, which is a recipe for decline,” he says.

Mr. Cohen, who has a Master of Social Work degree, cold-called an eldercare facility in New York’s Long Island and convinced administrators to let him pilot a volunteer program. Armed with a laptop and three iPods, he worked with 10 patients to create their own playlists with at least 100 songs per device. He returned every two weeks to hone the lists. “I saw an uplift in the patients’ moods. Staff noticed they were less agitated. They loved having their own music.”

Music & Memory now trains nursing-home staff and other caregivers how to create personalized playlists. In 2012, the group released a video on YouTube about Henry, a nonverbal dementia patient who had been in a home for a decade. The video, which also features the late neurologist Oliver Sacks, has been viewed more than 13 million times and drew interest in the project from health-care companies across the country.



Dan Cohen sorts through iPhone Nanos at the New York City offices of Music & Memory, which helps bring personalized music playlists to people in eldercare. Each iPod is loaded with more than 100 songs. *PHOTO: LEAH LATELLA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Country musician Kenny Chesney has since filmed a public service announcement about Music & Memory, and rock legend Paul McCartney has donated 80 songs to the organization's library

Mr. Cohen believes he is helping to improve the quality of life of older people through songs from their youth. "They may have gone years or even decades without listening to their favorite music," he says, "and to have that restored is kind of like me being able to go back in time and actually go to Woodstock."

His own music library is filled with songs from the 1960s. "Like most people, I still connect to the artists from when I was a teenager," Mr. Cohen says. As for the Woodstock tickets, he says he pulls them out every decade or so. They remain bittersweet. "I wish I made it to the show. I didn't. But I still can't seem to throw those tickets out," he says.

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