

The 5th Dementia

by Serene Meschel-Dillman,
Director

Where does one find the inspiration for the subject of a documentary?

For me, of all places, it was at my annual mammogram with Dr. Ross Goldberg. When Dr. Goldberg and I were making the small talk that's necessary to get through the examination, he suggested that I have a look at a band made up of musicians and singers, all of whom are living with neurodegenerative diseases.

I'm 55 years old and have had little exposure to diseases like Alzheimers and Parkinsons, so I was somewhat apprehensive. Documentary filmmaking is always a labor of love. It is a discipline that pays almost nothing, makes very little in the end, and requires years of passionate dedication to see the project through. I would have to be convinced that the story of these intrepid musicians would be worth the time and effort.

Two days later, I was sitting in the pews at the Brentwood Presbyterian Church watching rehearsals of The 5th Dementia band. The former music professionals and eager amateurs entered the building in various states of difficulty. Some walked in under their own power, some in wheelchairs or leaning on canes guided by care partners, and others were led, in nearly catatonic states, by loved ones, to their places on stage.

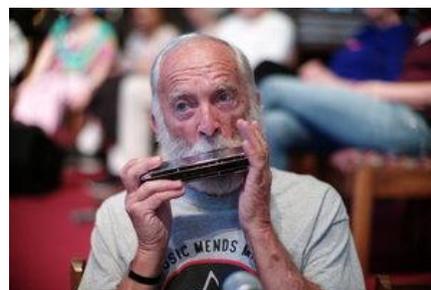
Then they were transformed.



It's difficult to express just how much joy emanates from this special assembly of talent when they play their instruments and unleash their voices. Songs that I didn't realize I knew so well came back from some place in my childhood memory. The singers enthusiastically belted out standards like *Moon River*, *Singin' in the Rain*, *My Funny Valentine*, *Blue Moon*, *Tea for Two*, and *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* while the musicians expertly provided accompaniment. The band has over 1,500 songs in their repertoire, most of the material committed to memory, that they perform for an hour and a half twice a week, year round.

There was no doubt, from the moment the music started, that I had found the subject for my next documentary.

Carol Rosenstein, a patient of Dr. Goldberg's, started the band when she noticed that her husband Irwin, who is living with Parkinsons and dementia, "resurrected" when he played the piano. Music changed him in a way that no medication was able to replicate. Apparently, cells in the brain that process music are not as affected by the diseases. Carol eventually parlayed using music to help heighten cognitive awareness, happiness, and even physical recovery into founding the [Music Mends Minds Organization](#).



Burritt

About some of the band members:

- Paul L. (Alzheimers) needs only to hear someone hum the first few bars of any song and he can play a flawless rendition on his piano.
- Gene, the bandleader, (Parkinsons) prepares the song list each week and counts Paul in on his drum kit.
- Mike, (early-onset Alzheimers) riffs perfectly on his trumpet.
- There is Peter (traumatic brain injury) who conjures Charlie Parker on sax.
- Michael, a lifelong violinist, is pitch perfect.
- Paul F. (early-onset Alzheimers) fills in on percussion, piano, or both. Paul F. is a former music producer and if someone is a little off, it disturbs him so that he puts his fingers in his ears and rolls his eyes.



Practice!

Warner Brothers Music. Gary also sings beautiful harmonies and I plan to have him record the opening song for the documentary.

All of them play without sheet music.

The number of singers varies with each rehearsal between fifteen to twenty. Gary (Parkinsons and dementia) is the lead singer and is a true former musician. Most of the other band members have other professional backgrounds (teachers, attorneys, doctors, nurses, artists) but Gary was a legitimate recording artist and was president of

Diana (Parkinsons and dementia) holds the microphone in a trembling hand while smiling and tapping her feet to every song. Occasionally she'll get up and dance in the aisles.

Next to Diana sits Pat (Parkinsons), Carol H. (Parkinsons) and Gail (Parkinsons). Pat doesn't think she sings very well, so she won't hold a mic, but she never misses a rehearsal because she says she gets to see her friends, and the music makes her so happy that she credits it with pulling her out of a depression that lasted many years. Gail has a beautiful voice, and with Carol, they make up for their friend Pat's quieter voice.



Leola (Alzheimers) is 90. Her smile might be the most contagious of the group. She arrives like clockwork with her care partner and using her walker, slowly makes her way to a seat on stage. For many rehearsals, Leola's daughter thought that she was unable to read the lyrics projected on a screen for the singers, since her reading ability was thought to be lost. But when asked to read the lyrics aloud, to her daughter's surprise, she was word perfect.

Don (Parkinsons and dementia) used to be the life of the party. His wife Joanie says he would sing, make jokes, and dance wherever he went. Don sang for me when I interviewed him, and he's still got it. Joanie says Don looks forward to the rehearsals so much that some days it's the only reason he'll get out of bed.

Len isn't a musician at all; he simply had "conducting a band" on his bucket list. His wife wasn't sure he would be allowed to join the band. But now, he conducts The 5th Dementia from the front pew where the lyrics often move him to tears.

All are welcome to either play, sing, dance, or just watch.

Aside from Gene, none of the band members come to the rehearsals alone. They are accompanied by care partners and spouses. All of the care partners sing along too. Margreth, wife of Ken (Alzheimers), says she looks forward to the break each week at the church when Ken will join his friends on stage and she can relax and sing from her seat in the pews. Bodies are embraced, hands are held, canes and walkers are put aside. For an hour and half, twice a week, you can feel the roof being raised in the little church in Brentwood, California.

The 5th Dementia documentary has completed principal photography and is now in full swing on editorial and post production. You can [view our trailer](#), see images from the film, and donate through our 501(c)3 Creative Visions [on our website](#). (All donations are tax deductible.)

If you or someone you know lives with a neurodegenerative disease and would like to be part of a band like The 5th Dementia, please contact [Carol Rosenstein](#). There are about twenty bands worldwide and more forming.

Raise a roof in your town.

To learn more about the film and view the filmmakers' bios, please [click here](#).